

## Answer to Professor Narveson's "God"

by Fr. Robert A. Sirico

Until now, I have thought of Professor Jan Narveson as a political philosopher of a libertarian bent, a defender of the idea of human freedom against the statist mythology of our age. We learn from his newest contribution that the skepticism that led him to reject government control of society has also led him to reject religion, the very idea of God, and to cast aspersions on those who disagree.

As academics go, there is nothing unusual in Narveson's atheism. Ninety five in one hundred non-academics may be believers, but polls show that the more degrees people accumulate, the less likely they are to embrace the existence of a transcendent force, omniscient and omnipotent. That is another way of saying that intellectuals are doubtful that someone may exist who is more knowledgeable and even more powerful than they are. Ask the typical academic if there is a God who is smarter than he is, and he will say no; ask the same person if any member of his department is smarter than he is, and he will issue another "no," even more vehemently.

So there is no mystery as to why, as Narveson reports, the "overwhelming majority" of philosophers do not believe in God; after all, a large number do not believe in reality or consciousness or reason or logic or ethics or truth or much else besides the non-revocability of the tenure contract. Such is the nature of our postmodern era where there can be no resolution to fundamental questions, and where there can be no resolution to the question of what should be the questions. The late-night, freshmen-year bull sessions of the 50s and 60s - where delirious youths speculated about the death of God, the permissibility of everything, and the existence of higher forms of life on other planets, and then eventually moved on to real learning - have merely been prolonged to be the stuff of college curricula.

It is difficult to explain why some do and some do not have the gift of faith, and even much more difficult to explain how it is that some of history's most convinced atheists have come to belief late in life. What is truly mystifying is why some intellectuals can adopt a kind of quiet agnosticism or atheism, and, rather than study much less write about it, they specialize in a field they are truly qualified in; at the same time, others throw themselves completely into the battle of theistic ideas, without bothering to lift a finger to turn a page on theology, ecclesiastical history, the history of religions, or the place of faith in the development of civilization.

I remember enjoying Professor Narveson's *The Libertarian Idea* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1988), which I recall as a political treatise. Having read "God," however, I have looked back to discover whether there were seeds of his present state of mind in this writing published ten years ago. Here we find on page 287 a mention of religions. Religions, he says, "come under the rubric of indoctrination rather than promotion of knowledge" - a point that is surprising since the Church founded the university and sustained it for a millennium until the secular university was invented a hundred or so years ago.

Undeterred, Narveson continues: religion's existence raises a problem for the libertarian: should society let religious people proselytize? His answer is that we should not use the "methods of the Moslems," which means forcing a person to choose "between accepting Allah or having his head cut off." But we probably should tolerate "the distribution of tracts" since they "can be easily thrown into the wastebaskets." And there we have the complete works of Narveson on the religious question until his most recent tract (which I sincerely hope will not be thrown in the wastebasket; it will serve as a perfect foil for the philosopher who takes the time to actually know something about the subject he is writing on).

Now Professor Narveson has undertaken a much more ambitious task, namely the refutation of some three thousand years of intellectual history, hundreds of libraries full of books, the greatest minds that have ever put pen to paper, and the basis of much of what we call civilization, all without a discussion of doctrinal complexities, footnotes, or even literature references. Quite simply, belief in God is unreasonable; those who disagree are merely "passing on the results of early inculcation" and are saying so "because it feels good" (though he does not intend to "denigrate the deep impulses" of religious people - on the contrary he wants to "sympathize" with people's desire for a "personal god" and other kinds of "emotional stuff"). Moreover, religion is contemptible because it turns "normally intelligent people into slaves, or dupes."

This is heady philosophizing indeed. Where to start? With one of Narveson's proofs for God's nonexistence. "What we are told is that things are the way they are because some very bright chap wanted them to be that way. But how do we know that? I mean, how do we know that this is the sort of thing an infinitely intelligent, infinitely powerful being would do, as it were, in his spare time? Well, when you think about it, it shortly becomes obvious that we have not the foggiest, remotest shred of a notion on this point."

As an aside, we must point out that he has conflated New Age speculations with history's two most dominant faiths, Judaism and Christianity, both of which rest on empirical, not speculative claims. They say that certain events happen which provide the evidence our philosopher is seeking: known prophesies were made and fulfilled in the former and, in the latter, God was incarnate. The central clauses of the Christian creed make empirically verifiable claims: Jesus was "born of the virgin Mary... He suffered, died, and was buried; on the third day, He rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures." Indeed, St. Paul said "If Christ has not been raised, then empty is our preaching; empty, too, your faith." But when you are refuting God's existence, no need to let such details get in the way of a good polemic.

A closer look at Professor Narveson's argument shows that it would apply to any statement of fact. Try this one for size: Professor Narveson wrote an essay on God. How do we know that? How do we know that it was not someone else? Sure some person claiming to be Professor Narveson claims credit for it, but do we know he is who he says he is? Are we just going to take his word for it? That is a leap of faith, which is impermissible in science. Or are we just going to accept others' word for it? No reasonable person would accept something as truth because it is the consensus of others. Might he be someone else? Or let us just grant, for the sake of argument, that this man indeed is

Professor Narveson. How do we know that he indeed did write this as versus discover an unsigned essay on God and put his name on it and claim credit? Are we merely going to accept his authorship because he expects us to bend our will to his assertions because he claims to be an authority?

Of course, we could fill pages and pages with this type of nonsense. At some point, the reader is going to ask: are there any conditions under which you would believe that Professor Narveson wrote an essay on God? If we want it not to be, the answer is of course no. At that point, the reasonable reader should say, well, there is not much point to listen to this hyper-skeptical babble at all, unless I wanted to obtain an academic degree at a German university. All this is what it seems to be: a waste of time. The question I have for Professor Narveson is one that G.K. Chesterton asked of the atheists in his time: if there are no conditions under which you would grant the truth of God's existence - and if there are, you do not share them - why should anyone take your reasons for nonbelief seriously?

I suggest the reader take a careful look back at the Narveson essay, and every time you see the word God, replace it with something more mundane, like a chair or wall or a philosopher. Then the reader should ask himself: is not Narveson really making a case far more extreme than merely that belief in God is nonsense, and is not he really arguing for the non-existence of anything real and non-provability of any truth claim? Half way through his essay, our author seems to catch himself in the act of falling into nihilism, and senses the need to deny that he is a radical skeptic. Even so, he fails to provide any reason to believe there is no evidence for God but all the evidence we should ever need for everything but God. Instead, he chooses to "assume that the skeptic is well off the mark." He does this for good reason. Let us say, he set up a rule such as: "all things we can see and touch are real; all things we cannot see or touch are not." That type of rule would introduce its own problems, since it would mean that virtually everyone would be duty bound to doubt the existence of most everything we do not directly experience with our physical senses. Indeed, many philosophers have tragically taken this path; and this style of skepticism has proven to be a black hole that good minds fall into and never come out of.

The Christian literature on the logical (as versus empirical) proofs of God's existence are massive and complex. I find them persuasive; others find that they are too difficult to follow; still others refuse to follow any logic that leads to conclusions contrary to that which they hold as an article of faith (such as "God does not exist"). An excellent short discussion of this matter can be found in Pope John Paul II's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), especially the chapter entitled "'Proof': Is It Still Valid?" in which this trained philosopher defends the existence of extrasensory and transempirical truths against a backdrop of positivism and postmodernism. As reasonable as theism is, and I believe it is from experience, we also know from experience to believe is to also have faith. It may be the case that the proofs of God's existence have never convinced anyone, but it is also true that no proof of reality's existence can convince a person dead set against believing it.

As a final note, I must take exception to Professor Narveson's suggestion that theistic ethics lead to fascism and dictatorship. It does this, he says, because religions "tell us what to do" and exalt "obedience as the cardinal virtue." Yet, is it not the purpose of all ethical inquiry to discover "what to do," and once having done so, should not obedience to ethical truth be considered a virtue? It is hard to see how that must lead to fascism and dictatorship. After all, Professor Narveson himself has written a treatise on political ethics, the upshot of which is that people should not invade each other's space as a general principle. Nobody is calling him a dictator for saying so, nor should they. Indeed, it is the purpose of methodology in all disciplines - whether mathematics, geometry, or physics - to tell us "what to do" and to expect "obedience." This is what knowledge and intellectual understanding is all about. Here is only one more example of where Professor Narveson has sought to discredit religion and has ended up denying the ability of anyone to know or understand anything at all. I will spare the reader any speculations on whether he is merely "passing on the results of early inculcation" or saying so only "because it feels good."