Sometimes while listening to two parties arguing intensely, one begins to realize that they are not exactly talking about the same thing. The differences may be subtle, but the points they raise, things they emphasize, the nuances in their reasoning, or the way they use certain words seem a bit off from each other. Then, the disconcerting thought eventually dawns that their argument will not end; it cannot end, because in a sense it never really began. This is what I increasingly sensed when I delved into the intellectual debate regarding religious beliefs years ago. This book slowly took its shape as I examined where this sense was coming from.

Our world is increasingly gripped with questions about God, or to be precise, about religious beliefs in God. As I write this preface, the world is abuzz with the question regarding the role of religious beliefs—and in particular the beliefs of the monotheistic religions of the West—in wars, violence, and intolerance against minorities of every kind, and pulsing underneath that cacophony is the question of the irrationality of such beliefs. Yet what I have experienced in my life was not an easy dichotomy of, on the one hand, irrationality and intolerance of the “religious”—a term which itself is notoriously difficult to define and, I think, too often used in whatever way best fits one’s polemic—and, on the other, the rationality and liberation of the “secular.” Nor vice versa, I would wryly add. Rather, I encountered a bewildering spectrum of both rationality and irrationality, both intolerance and liberation, from both sides. This may be the main reason why we still engage and struggle in intellectual debates regarding religious beliefs; after all, it would be difficult to do so, at least sincerely, when one simply assumes the rationality of oneself, and the irrationality of the other.
In this book, I begin with one of the axiomatic questions in these debates, “Does God exist?,” and the different reasons for the answers to that question. There are other questions—those more closely wedded to the more “urgent” social issues—that I want to explore eventually in subsequent books, but the journey begins here, and the rest of the story will unfold from this point. What I will propose in this book is that our conception of how we ought to proceed in the debate about the existence of God needs to change. Or, to put it more provocatively, though perhaps imprecisely, we are asking the wrong question when we ask, “Does God exist?,” or at least, we are posing it in ways that prevent fruitful discussion and obscure the ways of reaching further answers. That is, what it is we are really asking by the question, “Does God exist?,” in an intellectual debate is not actually “Does God exist?” What then is the question?

So I return to the same disconcerting thought with which we began. In our questions rest the seeds of our answers, yet we cannot ask the right question, let alone answer it, if those involved are in significant ways talking past each other. To begin, we must find crossroads. This is the “different debate” about God I eventually envisioned in this book—a different way of thinking about, and arguing for or against, the existence of God. However, it turned out, rather surprisingly, that such crossroads will not be common “standards of reasoning,” or “bodies of facts,” on the basis of which different sides may argue. Rather, in the debate I envision, the argument for the existence of God is the endeavor to find and stand at the crossroad of particular worldviews involved in the debate, in order to forge a way forward. Yet God at the crossroad is not yet “God” of the theist; rather, this “God” extends beyond the horizon seen from the crossroad—a horizon toward which those who met at the crossroad in this debate must journey together, and what this horizon will turn out to be will remain unanswered until much, much further on.

This may seem a very strange suggestion. This book traverses through a wide range of topics—from contemporary debate about the existence of God, to conceptions of rationality and intellectual inquiry, to the concept of worldviews, to Thomistic theology, to the historical emergence of modern atheism—in order to arrive at that point. Some books contain one or more chapters one can skip; this is not such a book. Each chapter leads to the next, and the conclusion remains but a proposal, a hope, at a point in a story that is still being told.
I owe thanks to many. I thank the director, editors, and the staff of the University of Notre Dame Press. I thank Nancey Murphy and Richard Mouw, who first read the manuscript that would become this book and were the first to recommend its publication, as well as Bob Sweetman, who introduced the readings in Thomas Aquinas when I was a student. The advice and encouragement of Yujin Nagasawa and Douglas Loney kept my effort for publication going. Then, there are a number of friends, family—especially my brother—and members of the community in which I belong, too numerous to list here, all of whom were an integral part of my journey that led to this point, in particular those that were with me these last three years. I am grateful to my grandfather, who taught reason, imagination, fairness, and virtue to my mother, who in turn sought to instill them—hopefully with some success—in me. I owe my greatest thanks to my father and my mother, who taught me the most important things in my life, including the motivation and values that went into this work. Most of all, the one who continues to inspire and move me in all things—to you I give my thanks.

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There is something odd in the way we argue about the existence of God. Let us, however, begin with a parable. Suppose two explorers came upon some natives in the New World, performing an esoteric ritual in which each adult male enters a secluded enclosure to offer a token of petition. One explorer says that a “benevolent ruler” must govern these natives and grant their wishes. Furthermore, this ruler must be benevolent by the very definition of what he is, not because he merely happens to be charitable or kind. The other explorer is skeptical and says that such a ruler does not exist. He then asks to meet this ruler in person, but no one seems able to arrange a meeting. He also finds that the petitions are not always granted, and often remain unanswered. He even learns that though—and at times even because—this ruler supposedly governs their world, they experience poverty, disasters, and wars. How, then, the skeptic finally asks his colleague, can he still say that the “benevolent ruler” of these natives exists?

How can our explorers resolve this disagreement? Perhaps they can talk to more natives to examine their claims, or set up some tests. It may be that although not all petitions are granted, a “significant” number are.
Perhaps other compelling evidences or arguments support the existence of the “benevolent ruler.” What if there are no such proofs or arguments? Then, perhaps the “believer” ought to acknowledge that the “benevolent ruler” of the natives does not exist. Or, perhaps he may argue instead that this belief is somehow not a matter of “rational” discourse, but of “feeling,” or “picture preference.” He may even insist that this belief can be understood only within the context of a particular mode of living practiced by the natives, a mode to which his colleague is an outsider. This is largely the way we have gone about arguing about the existence of God.

However, let us shift our perception of this parable. Suppose the context of this debate is actually as follows. The “skeptic” comes from a feudal society, rather like medieval Europe or the feudal Japanese shogunate, and the “believer” is from a representative democracy, similar to that of, say, early nineteenth-century United States. Moreover—and this is important—neither explorer has any notion of other forms of sociopolitical organization. What the “believer” believes he saw in the “esoteric ritual” was the natives participating in an election or a referendum. The “benevolent ruler” he speaks of is the “president,” or rather, the holder of the “highest democratically elected office,” whose government is, by definition, “of the people, by the people, for the people,” representing and upholding the will—or the “wishes”—of those who vote for him. The “benevolence” of the “ruler,” for the believer, is defined solely in these terms. What he is saying, then, is that the natives live in such a sociopolitical system.

However, the skeptic, who has lived within a radically different form of sociopolitical organization—a feudal hierarchy—has no conceptual basis with which to properly understand these claims of the believer. He has no concept of elections, referendums, or democracy, nor the related notions of individual rights, equality, liberty, or self-government. He assumes, and cannot imagine otherwise, that the natives belong to a feudal society. The description of a democratically elected office is baffling to him, since he understands this to describe a peculiar kind of feudal rulership, which somehow places upon the ruler the obligation to “grant wishes” of peasants, which is unlike the governance of any “ruler” he knows. Therefore, when he hears about the “president,” the holder of the highest office, it seems to him that the believer is positing the existence of a very peculiar sort of ruler, above, and in addition to, the existing...
feudal hierarchy of lords and even monarchs—a ruler whose court “grants wishes” of the lowliest peasants. It is also important to note that the very wording of our parable in the beginning would differ depending on who is telling the tale—the skeptic, the believer, or even the natives.²

I have not stated, quite deliberately, what it is that the natives are really doing. Perhaps the “natives” are really some rural nineteenth-century Americans, voting on a proposition or an election. If so, the believer is correct. Or, perhaps they are participating in some elaborate ritual to send their petitions to a distant, wish-granting ruler. It may even be that this ruler does not exist, except as a fanciful tale told by their village elders. If so, the believer is wrong. Not only does the “president” not exist, but the believer misunderstood what was happening, because of his sociopolitical background. Even if the natives themselves believe they live in a democracy as the believer understands it, they too might be mistaken. Consider the society of David Brin’s The Postman, or George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four.³ Or consider real-life totalitarian states that pose as democracies, with dictators who commit atrocities while being adored by their people. Thus, the skeptic is not necessarily wrong in saying that the “benevolent ruler” does not exist, just because he fails to understand what the believer is saying. What I am separating here is the question of whether the “benevolent ruler exists” from the question of how we would go about answering this. Our concern is the latter.

How then can the explorers go about resolving their disagreement in our expanded parable? A simple answer may be that unlike God, the “president” would be someone they could just meet. However, the explorers are seeking an answer now, and even if the “president” exists, it will likely be a long while, if ever, before they are granted a personal audience with a head of state. On the other hand, numerous religions do claim that many people have met God, and we may even quip here that everyone may yet meet him after death! The more significant problem is that simply meeting the “president” would not by itself resolve their disagreement, any more than meeting someone who is supposedly divine, such as a Hindu Guru, or, say, Jesus Christ himself, would compel a skeptic to affirm that God exists. How else can the explorers resolve their disagreement?

Consider our problem. The two explorers hold radically different understandings of state, society, governance, and so forth, and thus have
different reasons for their positions, and even employ different sets of vocabulary. Each explorer, for example, understands differently what it is that defines a “benevolent ruler” as such a ruler. For the “believer,” such a ruler is the one elected by the nation to represent the will of its people, whereas for the “skeptic,” such a ruler is the one who “grants wishes” of the peasantry and to whom all other feudal lords, and even monarchs, swear fealty. For the “believer,” the evidence that this ruler exists would simply be an election for such office. To him, this is what it means to have any government, and what the natives did—which he assumes is a referendum or an election, for what else could it be?—confirms his claims. The evidence for the “skeptic,” in contrast, would be a feudal lord, such as a baron, earl, or a daimyo, who swears fealty to this ruler and attests to the ruler’s “benevolence” toward the peasants by granting their wishes in the ruler’s stead. He assumes that what he saw is the native “peasants offering petitions,” for what else could it be?

Thus, unless both explorers adequately understand the sociopolitical system of the other side, any evidence each raises for his position, or against the other, will not be acknowledged nor understood as an “evidence” by the other. Furthermore, each will insist that it is the belief of the other that must be justified by sufficient evidence. The “skeptic” will demand evidence because he sees no reason—one that befits his understanding of government—to posit this ruler in addition to the existing feudal hierarchy. It seems to him that since the petitions of these natives are not granted, what he sees before him is obviously a superstitious ritual born from their “wishful thinking.” The “believer” will demand evidence that the “president” does not exist, because with an election going on, the “skeptic” is incomprehensibly denying what is even now happening before them.

Still, would there not be some form of evidence about the ruler that both would recognize? What about signs of law, order, and infrastructure, such as courts, police, schools, hospitals, or roads? Or perhaps, centralized currency, taxation, or a military? However, the skeptic may easily concede that these are signs of some sort of governance, but deny that these point to the existence of the “benevolent ruler.” Such evidences are insufficient because the skeptic can explain these features in other terms, namely as the economic and social infrastructure within a feudal hier-
archy, without the benevolent ruler. Thus, the skeptic would still “have no need to posit the existence” of the benevolent ruler. On the other hand, a similar problem occurs when the skeptic raises evidences against the believer. Places ruled by military occupation, occasions when votes—or wishes—from one region fail to sway national policies, times of poverty and suffering among the general populace, and even slavery are consistent with a society governed by a democratically elected government. Thus, again the explorers cannot evaluate which “shared” evidence is valid, in what ways, and to what extent, without understanding first how each fits in the sociopolitical system of the other, as a whole.

However, is not this account so far unrealistic, or even contrived? It begins by supposing that our two explorers would be unable to understand, or even notice, the differences in their sociopolitical backgrounds from which they have formed their positions about the natives’ society. Does it not seem unreasonable to suppose that the explorers who are otherwise able to communicate with each other to the extent of having this disagreement, would repeatedly fail to realize the rather obvious fact that they are arguing from, and about, very different sociopolitical systems, using manifestly different sets of definitions and arguments? This is true; the point of this parable actually lies elsewhere. That is, if such differences were recognized, it would change the way they view their debate and proceed in it.

First, the question of whether the “benevolent ruler,” or the “president,” of the natives exists would become an odd question to ask. That is, it would be odd if, even when the two explorers understood their fundamental differences, their debate still proceeded primarily in terms and questions that consist of whether or not to posit the existence of the “benevolent ruler.” What the skeptic from a feudal society would more likely question is whether the believer’s description of the society the two of them have encountered—with that account’s strange notions of individuality, liberty, equality, self-government, and so on—which this “benevolent ruler” supposedly governs, is an accurate description of the society that the natives live in. He would ask, for example, if the natives really live as equals, liberated from the constraints of feudal classes. To once again argue mainly over whether the “benevolent ruler” exists would be a very awkward way to proceed in their debate.
This is not to say that the question “whether the benevolent ruler exists” is itself incoherent or illegitimate. For example, one may understand such a question to be a rather simplistic way of asking which system of government exists for a particular society. It is quite legitimate to inquire in a first contact, or in the context of, say, social anthropology, whether a particular society has chieftains, oligarchs, monarchs, clerics, presidents, or some other, as its head. One may, given the relevant sociological or anthropological data, even coherently present a case that postulates the existence of a particular kind of ruler who likely governs a society. Also, an outsider may know better what sort of society exists than do those on the inside, provided that his or her understanding of such a society is comparable to the understanding its native members have of it. For example, a modern Western sociologist may be better situated to know what kind of sociopolitical system a particular Amazonian tribe has, or if a south Asian feudal monarchy is going through the process of becoming a constitutional monarchy, or if an autocracy in the Middle East is becoming a democracy, than are the members or citizens of those groups.

The problem, rather, is that the question of “whether the benevolent ruler exists” is situated within, and inseparable from, the larger question of “what sort of society exists.” That is, what is being asked is a more comprehensive question that involves numerous, inseparably interconnected issues regarding what sort of social concepts, values, organizations, systems of government, jurisprudence, and so forth operate in the natives’ society. Therefore, a likewise comprehensive answer is required for the question whether the “president,” or some sufficiently similar office, truly exists in their society. Furthermore, precisely because of this, the final answer need not be limited to whether the office does or does not exist, since the society may have an office that is similar in some respects to the “president,” yet differs greatly in others. What would be odd then would be if the existence of the “benevolent ruler” became the primary issue of contention in the debate—that is, if this were where the debate became “stuck,” so to speak. We may even say that the debate would be stuck here only if the two explorers had somehow failed to grasp, in significant ways, this difference in their sociopolitical positions.

This brings us to a second point. It would be odd if both explorers, given their sociopolitical background, did not agree—at least
provisionally—that a ruler of some kind that governs the natives exists. What they would disagree about is not the existence of the ruler per se, but his “benevolence,” or rather, the nature of his office. The question of contention is about the society in which the ruler governs—whether the native society is closer to a feudal monarchy or a liberal democracy, which is a *comparative* question. Thus, rather than the existence of the ruler being the primary point of disagreement, it would likely be the starting point of agreement, from which further questions could be asked. Moreover, it would again be odd to expect that only one position, as stated initially, must be right regarding everything about the native society, and the other, entirely wrong. It may be that in some respects, the believer is right, and in others, the skeptic, and yet in some others, both, or neither. Indeed, we would not be too surprised if we found that the final answer was developed, at least partially, from both positions.

Third, if all this were to be so, it would be odd if the skeptic continued to consider this debate largely in terms of the believer presenting evidence for his position, which was then to be defended or refuted. That is, it would be odd for the skeptic to claim that without evidence for liberal democracy, the debate is resolved in his favor by default. Both explorers are proposing that the natives belong to their particular form of sociopolitical organization. The question is not whether to posit the existence of the “benevolent ruler,” or even whether the native society is a liberal democracy per se. Rather, it is a comparative question about which of the two views—liberal democracy, or feudal monarchy—as a whole, is closer to how the native society functions, and both sides must present their cases. However, the difficulty is that an adequate answer to this comparative question can be given only by someone who is “fluent,” so to speak, in both sociopolitical forms, and can therefore assess the “correctness” of each position regarding a particular aspect of native society by its own standards. For example, if the believer’s position regarding the native society on the subject of, say, equality of individuals is wrong, it must be shown to have failed by his own terms of what such “equality” is and what constitutes evidence for it, and not by the skeptic’s terms—that is, the standard of a feudal monarchy.

Let us finally return to my first remark: what I am proposing is that the way we argue about the existence of God is odd, and for the same
reasons that the way the skeptic and the believer in the parable argue is odd.9

Immediately, one may object that in our parable, it is only because the two explorers argued from different sociopolitical systems that they failed not only to resolve their disagreement but even to adequately understand their rival positions. Moreover, when the nature of this disagreement is understood, the debate may move on to other questions precisely because for both sociopolitical systems there are parallel concepts of a “ruler,” such as the monarch and the president. However, the crucial difference between the theist and the atheist, in contrast, is simple: the theist says that God exists, and the atheist does not. But is this the case? There are reasons to believe that their difference is much more complex. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre comments in his account of the historical development of philosophy and the university in relation to the discourse on God:

It may be retorted that the answer [to what the theist and the atheist disagree about] is obvious. The disagreement is as to whether God does or does not exist. But this retort misses the point, for the disagreement between atheists and theists is one of those fundamental disagreements that extends to how the disagreement is to be characterized. Atheists characteristically take theists to believe in one item too many. . . . This is not however how the theists characteristically understand their disagreement with atheists. From the theistic point of view this is a disagreement about everything, about what it is to find anything whatsoever intelligible rather than unintelligible.10

That is, at least according to MacIntyre, the nature of their differences may be more similar to that which characterized the explorers from a feudal hierarchy and the liberal democracy; it is a disagreement about “everything.”

By remarking that there is something odd in how we argue, I am proposing a shift in our understanding of what we are doing when we argue about the existence of God. Recall the example of the ambiguous duck-rabbit image used by, among others, Thomas Kuhn in The Struc-