FOREWORD

Godism — an empty promise

Let's begin with a game — we'll call it *the oligarch's game*. There are today dozens of men who single-handedly own large slices of industry and commerce — especially, for example, in Russia. They are generally called *the oligarchs*. Their fortunes are measured in billions and they frankly have more money than they can possibly spend. So the game we are about to describe is one that, who knows, an oligarch may one day decide to play for his personal amusement. Think of yourself as a potential player. You are down on your luck. Your mortgage is in arrears. Your bank manager wants to see you. Your job is looking a bit shaky — and it doesn't pay you very well, in any case. You have $250 in the bank. Your car is twelve years old and badly needs a service.

The game goes like this: before you sits an industrial oligarch, with a slight smirk on his face. He is a multi-billionaire. In front of him is a small table and on it are three identical, unmarked and sealed envelopes. One contains a bankers draft made out in the sum of $1M payable to you. The other two envelopes contain IOUs ('I owe you' in English parlance) made out from you to the oligarch in the sum of $5K. The game is simple; you choose between the three envelopes. If you pick the one containing the bankers draft, then you walk away enriched. If you pick one of the other two, then you simply owe the oligarch five thousand

dollars, a sum he will ensure you pay, eventually. What gives this game its real zest is that the offer of $1M must be tempting; it will certainly resolve your short term (and perhaps long term) financial problems. But the risk is high: you stand only a one in three chance of picking the right envelope. You don't have to play the game, the choice is yours. What do you do? Readers might want to pause and think through this for a few minutes!

What has the oligarch's game got to do with a religious book? In this world there are many religions. Some people think of God as being like an oligarch and that He plays an elaborate game of hide and seek with us. Most think of God, if they think of Him at all, as being generally both moral and good, and One Who would never place us into an oligarch's game and would not dream of treating us in that way. Unlike an oligarch, God certainly is not seen as One sitting with an imperturbable smirk on His face. Rather, most people seem to believe that God views humans with the love and concern of a good parent, indeed a loving Father Who desires the very best for his children.

The analogy we are making is that there are 'on offer' many religions—rather more, in fact, than the three envelopes sitting on the oligarch's table. It is the author's contention that the choice that a finite human makes about an infinite God will affect their life here in this world. Indeed such a decision must ultimately have a transformational effect both in this world, and for eternity. But getting to know and follow the God revealed in the Holy Bible requires effort on our part. Indeed it requires a choice to be made. Like *the oligarch's game* — if you want the reward, you will need to 'get off the fence' and make a positive decision. If you stay on the fence forever, then in a sense the decision is already made for you — you remain as you are, for better

or for worse. If you decide to make a choice, then there is a risk that you will make a wrong choice. Far from being blessed, you may find your condition worse than it was before you chose.

Will people get off the fence and make a choice? If they make the right choice then their future should be secure, although it is uniquely Christianity that candidly tells its followers that to be a true disciple of God will inevitably lead to problems, difficulties and uncertainties in this world. To be more precise, it tells us that to be a follower of Jesus Christ will bring opposition. As Jesus Himself said, in Matthew 10:22 "**all men will hate you because of me**". Although Jesus was speaking to disciples whom He was sending out to preach the simple message that 'the Kingdom is near', there is no doubt that He meant His words to be understood by His disciples down through history, as we will explore later in this book.

What do people most want in life? Peace; security; loving relationships; a future. These wants and needs will come near the top of the list for most people, irrespective of gender or culture. It may be an inexplicable and unwelcome fact to many people in the West that 'religion' is resurgent in this world. At the time of writing, the Western world is celebrating the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Just thirty years ago plenty of atheists believed that Darwin's theories had sounded the death knell of organised religion. Indeed Darwinism was seen as the prime philosophical engine to marginalise religion and make it irrelevant. The atheists were premature. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 marked the beginning of an assertive form of Islam not experienced for more than 200 years. The rising economies of the East gave their local religions greater confidence. The

recycling of petro-dollars from the West and the consequent phenomenal growth of the Arab economies led to 'Shariah compliant banking' becoming a semi-mainstream financial tool. Political correctness led to protections in the Western world for the 'new' religions that had been brought with them by immigrant communities — protections from what had once been considered normal civil discourse, in other words discussion about what people actually believe and the reasons why they believe those things. Only in the West did religion — in the shape of traditional Christianity — suffer broad setback during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for reasons largely beyond the scope of this book.

The unexpected resurgence of *the religions* coincided with the social and economic factor known as Globalisation. Suddenly religion had taken on a global dynamic never before experienced. Borders seemed to matter for little as migration surged to become a significant economic and political reality. The Western world, in particular, which had for the previous fifty years welcomed immigrant communities (though with varying degrees of warmth) experienced in the 1990s an invasion of new cultures complete with their religions and with no real desire to integrate with their host communities. Western people generally were — and still are — reluctant to confront the sober reality of what all this meant. The West lacked any clear religious certainty of its own but was being forced to make way for, and to make concessions to, a range of non-western religions. Suddenly 'god' mattered in a way that had not been apparent for 100 years or more.

And now today: the fact that *the religions* can be a catalyst for social tension and even for warfare is well understood. Indeed for many people in the West this religious potential

for tensions is a prime reason (or excuse?) in their rapid retreat from traditional Christianity. For a long time there has been a gathering hope: a hope that all *the religions*, which many people — even seriously irreligious people — understand can be equally a catalyst for good as much as for harm, will in some way come together in human unity; will put aside their differences and 'see' that they all worship the same deity who loves and values them all. People often hold this rather vague view whether or not they are personally observant of any religion. As noted above, many people have in the Western world retreated from organised Christianity. Predominantly they have opted instead for a halfway-house of religious semi-belief, usually called 'agnosticism' — an agnostic being someone who essentially will not, or cannot, make up their mind about God. From empirical evidence (based largely on surveys) agnostics tend towards a half belief that somehow 'god' if 'he' or 'it' exists at all, will look after them personally — and indeed has an obligation to do so. The traditional understanding of Christianity, that those who knowingly refuse Jesus the Son of God and refuse His substitutionary and propitiatory death on the cross, will find themselves on the wrong side of eternal judgement is, in any case, a notion broadly rejected in the West with its relativist moral framework. It is widely seen as God's 'fault' that competing religions are so different, and so it is His responsibility either to get His message straightened-out so that everyone can see which path is right or, more popularly, to provide for mankind a sort of *package deal* leading to eternal happiness. Providing people are not proactively sinful (although there is little common consensus about what 'sinfulness' actually is) then it is God's responsibility to 'see people alright in the end' — in other words to 'save' them and provide an

eternal home for them. In a very real sense people expect God, to use a technical Christian word, to 'justify' them before Himself.

The Evolutionary Theory of Religion

That many ordinary people who would be happy to call themselves irreligious should hold such views is not altogether surprising. These views are in some vague way comforting and put the onus upon 'god' to sort things out. That people who are 'religious' should hold these views is also not altogether surprising, as religious people can often hold quite vague notions about 'god' and their relationship with 'him' – or 'it'. For example, Hindus can quite comfortably hold these underlying assumptions as they believe in many gods, although their views on 'the hereafter' are a long way from the hopes and aspirations of most Western people. It is when we come to people who are church-attending Christians, who hold the view that all religions are essentially the same and that 'we all worship one God', that we frankly should be surprised. The idea or proposition of the gradual confluence and mingling of religions — the evolutionary theory of religions, if you will — is one that is indisputably a departure from broadly 2,000 years of Christian belief and understanding. A question then must be faced, if people have any integrity about this new religious belief. It is simply this: *is this god-focus or god-centric, god-positive and (selectively) religion-negative view of the deity correct*? A subsidiary question might be, can you hold this view and still be a mainstream Christian? And perhaps most pertinently of all, is this view about *the religions* one that God Himself has revealed? That, broadly, is the subject of this book.

The one thing that encompasses the Hindu religion,

certain other eastern religions, 'syncretistic Christianity', and more generally relativist Western thought on the subject of religion, is this notion of 'god'. I use a small 'g' in describing this idea of deity because at the very best, it is simply a collection of ideas about the Eternal. At its worst it is little more than woolly thinking. A Godist, then, is someone who believes that there are many paths to 'god' and that no one religion holds all the answers. In this politically correct age, in any case, to suggest that one religion is right implies that the others are wrong and this could offend some people. Causing offence — in the Western world, at any rate — is becoming *the* unpardonable sin! Polite people will no longer make any suggestion that there can be serious differences between *the religions*, for fear of causing offence. And nice people generally will make it their business to 'work together' for mutual respect, mutual tolerance, mutual understanding and 'peace'. The words 'respect', 'tolerance', 'understanding' and 'peace' have become almost modern theological terms, to rival the older Christian ones of grace, justification, faith, propitiation and so on.

It must be a profoundly debatable point as to whether our ideas about God can ever be right, especially when they clash with His disclosure of Himself. For those sold on the idea of Godism as a theological belief system, or even flirting with Godism, there are some uncomfortable and difficult questions that, once again, must be faced by anyone with real integrity in this debate. Just what sort of a God do we believe in? Is He good, or bad? And can we logically hold to the notion that all religions, providing they are not 'extreme' (another word that seems to have taken on almost religious overtones!) are sent by God. It is this subject area that we will explore together in this book.

This is not a book about religion in the West. Nor is it a book about comparative religions — although some inevitable comparison must be made if we are honestly and thoroughly to investigate the phenomenon of Godism. It is however a book that is written from a traditional Christian perspective. Accordingly, considerable use is made of the Holy Bible to draw out what Christians generally believe to be what God has revealed about Himself. If the reader is a Christian then hopefully this will be considered a useful place to begin our investigations. If the reader is a non-Christian or a doubter/agnostic, then it may be objected that the Holy Bible must *ipso facto* be biased and to that extent must be an 'unreliable witness'. Such readers are invited not to forget their objection, but simply to lay it to one side whilst reviewing the subject of Godism from a traditional Christian perspective. You can always come back to your objection at a later stage and reconsider the arguments contained in this book from that perspective of objection.

Does all this matter? *So what* if people do have differing notions of 'god' in a modern (or postmodern!) pluralistic, open society? If you don't believe in God, surely it is good that those people who actually do believe should also believe that all *the religions* are essentially the same. At the very least, it's a comfort to them. At the very best, it may help to make the world a nicer place in which to live. This book, however seeks to demonstrate that it *does* matter what people believe about Godism, because there is real evidence that the whole idea is actually repugnant to God Himself, and that belief in Godism takes people further away from God, not closer to Him. And, indeed, that if Godism is as wrong as the author believes it to be, then those who put their faith in this Godist 'god' cannot and will not find true peace in this world. Rather they risk facing an eternity without

God, Who is described in so many magnificent ways in the Holy Bible, but perhaps most profoundly as a God who is love. Is it worth risking eternal injury simply to placate the notions of a culturally acceptable, politically correct, relativist, post modern theological *theory of religions*? And, moreover, a belief system that may itself become outmoded in a few years and be replaced by some other belief system yet to be devised — and indeed replaced by something far, far worse?

Readers will, it is hoped, forgive frequent reference to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a sort of shorthand or metaphor for basic Godist beliefs. The Corporation, which was set up in 1922 under the chairmanship of an avowed Christian (John Charles Walsham Reith, later Lord Reith) has morphed over the years to become an organisation dominated by what may be considered as 'liberal left' social values which include a strong disdain for organised, traditional Christianity. Surprisingly, even the BBC itself has expressed concern about its skewed political and cultural leanings. This is demonstrated by the fact that an internal BBC summit attended by senior executives and broadcasters was held in September 2006 to review the whole subject. This summit was reported, on the basis of leaked documents, by a range of UK newspapers, notably in the London *Evening Standard* and in its online version *This is London* (October 2006) from which these extracts are taken:

WE ARE BIASED, ADMIT THE STARS OF BBC NEWS

It was the day that a host of BBC executives and star presenters admitted what critics have been telling them for years: the BBC is dominated by trendy, Left-leaning liberals who are biased against Christianity and in favour of multiculturalism.

A leaked account of an 'impartiality summit' called by BBC chairman Michael Grade, …….. reveals that executives would let the Bible be thrown into a dustbin on a TV comedy show, but not the Koran, and that they would broadcast an interview with Osama Bin Laden if given the opportunity. Further, it discloses that the BBC's 'diversity tsar', wants Muslim women newsreaders to be allowed to wear veils when on air.

At the secret meeting in London last month …… BBC executives admitted the corporation is dominated by homosexuals and people from ethnic minorities, deliberately promotes multiculturalism, is anti-American, anti-countryside and more sensitive to the feelings of Muslims than Christians. One veteran BBC executive said: 'There was widespread acknowledgement that we may have gone too far in the direction of political correctness. Unfortunately, much of it is so deeply embedded in the BBC's culture, that it is very hard to change it.'

In one of a series of discussions, executives were asked to rule on how they would react if the controversial comedian Sacha Baron Cohen — known for his offensive characters Ali G and Borat — was a guest on the programme *Room 101*. On the show, celebrities are invited to throw their pet hates into a dustbin and it was imagined that Baron Cohen chose

some kosher food, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a Bible and the Koran. Nearly everyone at the summit, including the show's actual producer and the BBC's head of drama, Alan Yentob, agreed they could all be thrown into the bin, except the Koran for fear of offending Muslims.

The full account of the meeting shows how senior BBC figures queued up to lambast their employer. Political pundit Andrew Marr said: 'The BBC is not impartial or neutral. It's a publicly funded, urban organisation with an abnormally large number of young people, ethnic minorities and gay people. It has a liberal bias — not so much a party-political bias. It is better expressed as a *cultural liberal* bias.'

Former BBC business editor Jeff Randall said he complained to a 'very senior news executive', about the BBC's pro-multicultural stance but was given the reply: 'The BBC is not neutral in multiculturalism: it believes in it and promotes it.'

Andrew Marr told The Mail on Sunday last night: 'The BBC must always try to reflect Britain, which is mostly a provincial, middle-of-the-road country. Britain is not a mirror image of the BBC or the people who work for it.'[1]

Its easy to bash the BBC and there can be no doubt that it does try to exercise at least a measure of fairness and impartiality in its output. Yet it does at the same time articulate a worldview that, where it intersects with religion, is Godist in its overall complexion. True, the BBC at the time

[1] www.thisislondon.co.uk/news/article-23371617-details/We are biased, admits the stars BBC News/article.do

of writing continues to provide a *daily service* broadcast on Radio 4, as well as occasional TV presentations such as the broadly Christian *Songs of Praise*. But beyond these nods to religious conventionality, its light entertainment output reflects its true ethos in being very often blasphemous and dismissive as regards Christianity — and sadly this is no exaggeration. The Rev. David Holloway wrote a useful book first published in 2000 called *Church and State in the New Millennium* and sub-titled 'Issues of Belief and Morality for the 21st Century'. In it he makes the point that Britain, most of Europe and the US are in practice secular *theistic* societies — not secular *atheistic* societies. He notes that, if 'secular' is defined by an absence of public reference to God, then we are secular. There is, he notes, little said about God, Jesus Christ and His purposes for the world (apart from blasphemously) in the mainstream media or in education. But Holloway notes that social surveys continue to show that approx 70% of people regard themselves as Christian, while roughly 4% regard themselves as belonging to another faith, whilst only 20% are of 'no faith'.

That the BBC (as a case in point, but the same comment can be made of the media generally) can heavily promote such a one-sided, secular and Godist agenda means that it is simply non-representative of its core constituency. Indeed it could now be considered, without much exaggeration, as the propaganda arm of the secularist movement! So readers will find a number of references to the BBC in this book as illustrative of a broadly Godist media agenda, and often as a sort of metaphor for heavily secularised belief systems.

David Holloway makes one other key point in the Foreword to his book: although it concerns *political* developments in the UK, Holloway's observation actually helps to articulate a general reality within British society at

large (which will inevitably be reflected in other Western societies — though often in a less exaggerated form). Holloway notes that in the UK Labour Party there are, on the one hand 'ethical socialists'. Sadly, notes Holloway, their numbers are in decline, but they used to reflect a strong sense of personal responsibility, strong social conscience and strong working class roots. They would often include traditional Roman Catholics and Methodists in their number. But these are being replaced on the other hand by 'egoistic socialists'. These are often university educated, middle class, former student protesters. Many will have tried drugs, most support cohabitation and seem to vote in favour of relaxation of curbs on homosexual practice. They are socialist only in the sense that they call for the state — which in practice means other people — to pick up the bill for their folly.

This is matched, continues Holloway, on the right wing of politics by, on the one hand 'ethical capitalists' or classic liberals. The heart of a free society for these is personal responsibility guided by conscience. With a strong attachment to marriage and the family, a good number traditionally held allegiance to the orthodox Church of England. But on the other hand there are 'egoistic capitalists', or libertarians. Some of these, notes Holloway, can be brutal, playing little attention to human need, and morally decadent, therefore supporting the broad immoral agenda as much as the 'egoistic socialists'. Although Holloway does not so comment, it is a fact that 'egoistic capitalists' also expect the state to pick up the bill for the casualties of their policies as, for example, some right-wing media argue for a complete relaxation of anti narcotics legislation and accept, with a shrug, that there will be an increase in the numbers of serious drug abusers. But they

simultaneously argue that state sponsored health services should simply be geared-up to deal with these additional drug victims.

With the media and political classes increasingly of a like-minded approach to moral issues, there seems to be a growing willingness to promote a Godist agenda in the interests of social cohesion. Or perhaps more pertinently, to co-opt *the religions* to become an extension of the state's apparatus to manage society's casualties. If *the religions* can be persuaded to partner with the state in this way, then the state increasingly offers them financing to undertake 'good works'.

This book will explore, then, the promise that Godism appears to hold out. To politicians Godism is seen as a useful prop to their plans for social cohesion in a world of rapid and potentially vast future population migrations. To some religiously minded people, Godism seems to promise a new 'understanding' between *the religions*, enabling them to worship 'god' in their various ways whilst discovering a joy in each other's diverse and differing beliefs — and indeed celebrating those beliefs. In this way mankind will build and discover an elusive peace that this world has never before enjoyed. We may indeed not only improve the world immeasurably, but save it from the self destruction that is today re-emerging as a real existential threat. These are lofty visions indeed to build on what is actually a perilously narrow theological base. Further, there remains the awkward reality of God and what are His plans for this World. Are His plans in any way furthered by Godism? It is all these questions that we are about to explore together as we discover whether Godism is a pregnant promise, with much to deliver to the world, or an empty promise, that merely confuses and distracts.

One word used in this book that may require explanation is the word *identikit*. Most British readers will know that this is a device used by police services that need to speedily build a picture of a wanted suspect based upon one or more eye witness accounts of his or her facial features. To quote from the Oxford dictionary, an identikit picture is 'a constructed picture of a person assembled from transparent strips showing typical facial features according to witnesses' descriptions.' *Identikit* is used as a metaphor in this book for the idea that people think very little of assembling bits and pieces from *the religions* and from their own assumptions to build a picture of the sort of deity that they would like to see — and then call this 'god'. It might also be referred to as a sort of 'DIY god' (from 'do it yourself'). Whether these same people truly understand the various beliefs and shibboleths that they so casually borrow from *the religions* is a moot point — generally, it would appear, they do not. But the word *identikit* does seem to capture some of the flavour of the way that many, particularly in the relativistic Western world, seem to approach religion. For the record, identikit pictures more often than not fail to provide a good, recognisable, likeness of a wanted criminal — the success rate is put as low as 20% in some studies. It is perhaps superfluous to query: is the Godists' 'DIY god' likewise one with an 80% probability of being an incorrect image of the Divine?

Throughout this book we quote from the Holy Scriptures. Readers are invited to judge this book and in a sense its author, on the basis of whether the extracts taken are true to the spirit of the Bible as a whole, and true to the context in which the verses taken were originally given. It has been rightly said that *a verse taken out of context is a pretext*.

In other words there are people who will take parts of the Bible and use them in ways never intended by God, Whom the Scriptures tell us, is their ultimate author. People may take verses right out of context and use them as a pretext to support some factional viewpoint. In this regard then, the author of this book does wherever possible and where it does not interrupt the flow of the argument being developed, try to give a sense of the context in which the Scripture portion as used in this book was originally understood by its first readers, back in biblical times. The nomenclature of Bible references — book, chapter and verse — will be in the following format: *Psalm 34, verse 8* is rendered *Psalm 34:8*. In this book, direct quotations from the Holy Bible are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise stated. Reference to the GNB in parentheses is to the Good News Bible ©American Bible Society 1966. Reference to the RSV means the Revised Standard Version. Reference to NRSV means the New Revised Standard Version (pub. Zondervan 1993). Reference to NKJV means the New King James Version Version©. Where no version is acknowledged in the text in this book, it is generally because the wording is identical in more than one English translation. Bible version acknowledgements appear on the title verso page, opposite the Contents page.