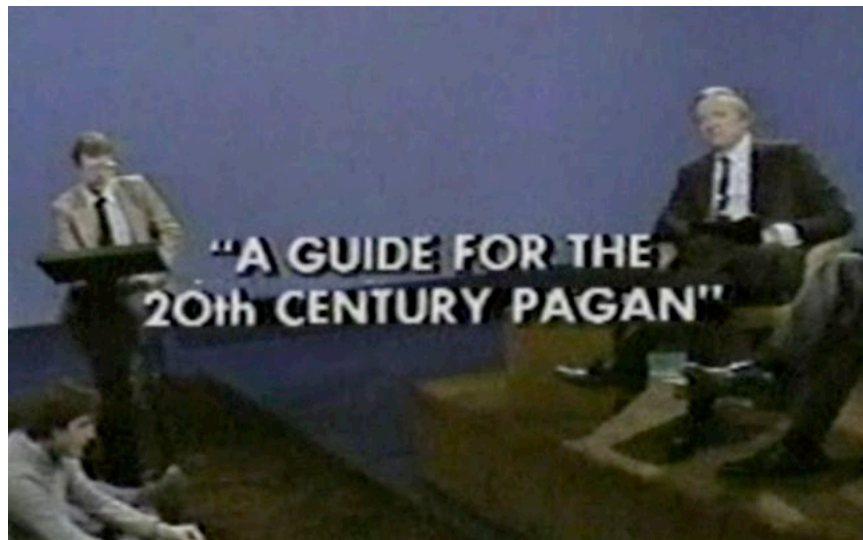


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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FIRING LINE: **A GUIDE FOR THE 20TH CENTURY PAGAN**

Host: **William F. Buckley, Jr.**

Guest: **Mortimer J. Adler**

Examiner: **Jeff Greenfield**

Part 1 of 2

MR. BUCKLEY: Mortimer Adler is a great many things, but indisputably the world's most dogged philosopher and probably that discipline's most exuberant philosopher. He cannot stand it that philosophers spend so much time talking to each other, and for that reason, early on in his career when he teamed up with President Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago, he undertook no less a task than instructing the entire community disposed to read and to think, how to read and how to think.

He took his doctorate in psychology from the University of Columbia, notwithstanding that he never earned an undergraduate degree because he refused to take a test in swimming. He was

attracted to the study of law, but before long he became in effect a student of everything, undertaking in due course the heroic task of editing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* version of the *Great Books* with its famous *Syntopicon*, often described as a Baedeker through the world of thought.

Throughout his hectic lifetime he has written books, and we are here to discuss his most recent book, *How to Think about God: A Guide for the 20th Century Pagan*. It is a book that reaches a conclusion I shan't, out of perversity, divulge until the end of the program. I give you this hint, that he gives the lazy agnostic a rough time.

Our examiner today will be Mr. Jeff Greenfield, whom I'll introduce in due course.

I think we will begin by asking Dr. Adler to distinguish between sacred theology and philosophical theology.

DR. ADLER: Sacred theology has its basic principles and articles of religious faith. It is reason undertaking to understand what faith instructs the mind with. Philosophical theology proceeds to think about God without any aid, direction or light from faith, using reason alone and the evidences of one's experience. It's a very much more difficult subject than sacred theology where one has given at the very beginning the basic articles of faith. Yet the question about God's existence: St. Thomas teaches us that the proposition that God exists is strictly not an article of faith alone, but a preamble to faith, that the first article of—at least of Christian faith—is that God has revealed himself to us. And that, philosophical theology, of course, proceeds without entirely.

BUCKLEY: Well, to accept revelation, Thomas says, is or is not an act of faith:

ADLER: It is.

BUCKLEY: It's not an act of reason?

ADLER: No, no. Entirely an act of faith.

BUCKLEY: In other words, sheer ratiocination would not do it.

ADLER: Would not do it.

BUCKLEY: Okay. Now, in your book you, while recognizing St. Thomas and the sacred theologians of several religions, you point out to the reader that you are going to start on the premise that, in effect, nothing is known, but things are knowable.

ADLER: That's correct.

BUCKLEY: Yes, so in that sense you're in an, epistemological optimist. Now, you begin by reaching a very interesting conclusion which I would like to hear you dilate on, namely that it doesn't really matter whether there was a prime mover.



ADLER: That it seems to me is terribly important. That is, if one begins by assuming that the world started at sometime—there was a time when there was nothing and the world began—

BUCKLEY: You're making a temporal point.

ADLER: That's right. A temporal point. Then one has begged the question because one has assumed God's existence.

BUCKLEY: Why?

ADLER: Because if anything comes into existence out of nothing it needs a cause, and that cause has to be the—my phrase for that cause—

BUCKLEY: Exnihilation.

ADLER:—Exnihilation. And the word “creation” means exnihilation. Hence—and St. Thomas is very clear about this—

BUCKLEY: Why can't that cause be chemical?

ADLER: Because all of our natural science, which I think is reliable, teaches us that the causes in nature do nothing but cause change. No, there is no natural cause that is the cause, of existence or being. One of the great—I think I learned the fundamental truth that helped me write this book in one sentence in St. Thomas,—not in the treatises on God but in the treatises on the divine government—which St. Thomas says, “God is the proper cause of being.” Only God causes being—not motion, not change, not the pattern of things. God—The only thing that God is exclusively the cause of is existence or being. Therefore—and the other thing I learned from St. Thomas, which again helped me, curiously enough, though I'm proceeding without the light of faith—there is in the sacred theology of St. Thomas two great insights. One this point about God being the exclusive cause of being. The other is that St. Thomas himself argues that only by faith does one hold that the world began. That is, you—Obviously, faith takes the opening sentence of Genesis: “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth.” Reason can neither prove that the world began nor that it didn't begin. I mean, with respect to the question—the cosmological question—of the world's having beginning, St. Thomas is completely agnostic, and I think quite rightly so.

BUCKLEY: Well, you say that on the one hand that reason is not entitled to prefer one position over the other—

ADLER: Correct.

BUCKLEY:—but you say that science is tending to the big bang—

ADLER: But the big bang—The scientist is, of course, very—

BUCKLEY: But it's still a hypothesis.

ADLER: Well, the big bang theory is not a theory of the world's exnihilation. After all, something exploded. Something existed

before the big bang happened. All that the big bang accounts for is the present shape of the universe, not its origin. So that I think the scientist—I think—is very loose in saying that was the beginning. That’s not a beginning in any real sense of beginning. That’s merely the emergence of the present shape of the cosmos. So that one must—in order to prove God’s existence without begging any questions—one must prove God’s existence in terms of a world that is everlasting, without beginning and end—

BUCKLEY: Prove or deduce?

ADLER: I would prefer to say—I guess the word “prove” is too strong. I think it is really a more modest claim than that. To establish the reasonableness of the belief in God’s existence—

BUCKLEY: And the converse: the unreasonableness of disbelief.

ADLER: Yes, the opposite.—and do it with, in a sense, the jury’s verdict of beyond a reasonable doubt—not beyond the shadow of a doubt, but beyond a reasonable doubt.

BUCKLEY: Well now, develop if you will, Dr. Adler, the importance in your analysis of leaving in abeyance the question of whether there was a beginning.

ADLER: The importance of it is to avoid doing something which is a logical error and would be begging the question. If one assumes, without proof, that the world had a beginning, one is in effect assuming God’s existence. Therefore, in order not to make that illicit assumption, one must assume the contrary—make the hard problem for oneself of assuming an everlasting universe, a cosmos that had no beginning or end—and then say, given that cosmos, can we prove—can we infer—can we show the reasonableness of believing in God.

BUCKLEY: So in other words, what you do is take the more difficult of the two alternatives.

ADLER: That’s right. The one against yourself.

BUCKLEY: That’s right. And then proceed to argue from there.

ADLER: Precisely.

BUCKLEY: Okay. Now, having done that, you take us on in to the uniqueness of the word “God,” and I wonder whether in that particular section of your book you might be accused of a formal subjectivity.

ADLER: I think not. Here, by the way, I am most greatly indebted to that marvelous, extraordinary 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm. Anselm said if you’re going to think about God, your mind obliges you to think about a being than which no greater can be thought of. That’s binding on the mind.



BUCKLEY: The ontological.

ADLER: No—we’re not arguing for God’s existence. This is an argument about what you must think when you think about God. It’s called the ontological argument. What is fallacious is when we suppose that it proves God’s existence. What Anselm is saying is you must think of God as that than which nothing greater can be thought of, namely the Supreme Being, and if you are thinking of a Supreme Being, you must think of that being as really existing, for if that being you’re thinking of is only in your mind, it is not the Supreme Being because it is more and greater being to exist in reality as well as in the mind. Therefore, you must think of God as really existing. Furthermore, you must think of God as having an everlasting or enduring existence, not a transient existence—it doesn’t come into being and pass away.

BUCKLEY: Are we talking about an attribute now, or something that's—

ADLER: Not an attribute—We are saying how we must think about—what notion it is we form—about God. If you think about God as the Supreme Being—as that than which nothing greater can be thought of—you must think of God as really existing, permanently or everlastingly in existence, and also as having an independent and unconditioned existence depending on nothing else for his existence and unconditioned by anything else. When you've done that, you've thought about the Supreme Being who is omnipotent and omniscient, unconditioned and independent. That is the notion of God that—

BUCKLEY: Now, would two people's notions of God if they followed your specifications differ, or must they, by definition, be identical?

ADLER: I think they—That is, what Anselm—at least I take him to be saying—if one uses one's reason in thinking about God, one is obliged—one is necessitated—to affirm in one's notion of God these attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, real existence, everlasting, existence, unconditioned existence, independent existence.

BUCKLEY: Now—

ADLER: May I say, the error that is—You mentioned the ontological argument—

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: Anselm himself—I think he made an extraordinary discovery when he did that—then made the mistake of saying that because I must think of God as really existing, therefore God exists. That does not follow. That does not follow. But the ontological—so-called ontological—argument which is not a reasonable basis for believing in God's existence is absolutely controlling in how one must think about God's nature. And I think this reverses the order of sacred theology, because in sacred theology, St. Thomas proceeds from God's existence to God's nature, whereas in philosophical theology one proceeds from one's understanding of God's nature, as Anselm has done it, to the

question of God's existence. Unless one has this clear notion of God's nature—or a sufficiently clear notion—one can't even begin to ask whether in the world of reality there exists something that corresponds to that notion.

BUCKLEY: Well, but is the skeptic, even after reading Anselm, not left with the suspicion that the perception of such a creature as God—

ADLER: I have to stop you.

BUCKLEY: Yes, I can't use "creature." You don't like the word "creature."

ADLER: Well, the creator can't be a creature.

BUCKLEY: That's right, that's right, that's right.—the perception of such an idea as God is an act of philosophical exertion that simply attempts to deal with infinity without defining it?

ADLER: Well, I'm glad you mentioned infinity because an unconditioned and independent existence is an unlimited existence and an infinite existence. I would again—I did mention—

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER:—if one thinks about God as the Supreme Being that than which nothing greater can be thought of, one must think of an infinite being.

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: But this is simply saying—You see, what Anselm did by that extraordinary phrase—it's one of the most extraordinary acts of the mind: "God is that than which nothing greater can be thought of"—when you say that, what follows—an infinite existence, real existence, everlasting existence, omnipotence, omniscience, independent existence, unconditioned existence—that is the notion of God. Now the question remains, is there in reality a being corresponding to that notion? That's where the crux—where the argument begins.

BUCKLEY: Yes, and the ontological argument doesn't necessarily follow from the insight of Anselm.



ADLER: No.

BUCKLEY: There is no nexus. So this is your criticism of sacred theology: Reasoning from Anselm's insight on over to the ontological existence—

ADLER: Aquinas criticizes Anselm, not for doing what I said, but for doing the invalid thing of saying because I must think of God as really and necessarily existing, God does exist that way. Curiously enough, Aquinas was acquainted with Anselm's argument as an argument for God's existence and rejected it as invalid, but he didn't do what I've just done. He didn't see what a remarkable contribution Anselm made to the necessity of how we must think about God, not to the necessity of God's existence. And with that notion in mind, then the question opens up. And the next step is a very simple one. It's almost like there's—Ask yourself, what question is there to which there is only one answer, namely God? What question can you ask to which no other answer can be given except God? For example, why does the world—the cosmos—have the shape it has at present? God is not the answer to that question because there are other answers possible. Maybe God is—but maybe, not necessarily. Why do things happen as they do? God is not the answer to that question, though God may be the answer, but not necessarily. Why do some men in life reap rich rewards and others suffer calamity? God is not the answer to that question.

BUCKLEY: Not necessarily.

ADLER: Not necessarily. There is only one question to which no other answer is possible, and that is, why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there something rather than nothing? Now, that at first looks simple, but—

BUCKLEY: Because someone is capable of exnihilation.

ADLER: The answer is, if the present world—the cosmos as it exists now, right now—is a merely possible cosmos, and everyone—I don't think anyone would say that the world could not be otherwise than it is—and what can be otherwise than it is also is capable of not being at all; and if the present cosmos, being capable of being otherwise than it is, is also capable of not being at all, then at this very moment, Unless something caused its existence in the sense of preventing it from being reduced to nothingness, nothingness would take its place. And so at this very instant and at every instant in time which the cosmos exists, without beginning or end, an exnihilating cause is operative. The act of God is required. Exnihilating, not in the sense of initiating the existence of the world, but preserving it in existence. I think I learn more from Question 104 of the *Summa Theologica* than any other, in which Thomas explains that God's preservation of the cosmos is creative.

BUCKLEY: Well now, explain why, inasmuch as it is a workaday piece of scientific knowledge, that matter cannot be destroyed; it merely changes its form.

ADLER: That's right.

BUCKLEY: So under the circumstances, annihilation is as difficult as exnihilation.

ADLER: Precisely. In that—

BUCKLEY: You can have entropy, but you still have matter.

ADLER: Right. Again, the third most remarkable sentence in the whole of the *Summa*—One was that God is the proper cause of being, the only cause of being. Two, that there is no way of proving that the world had either beginning or end. The third is—I was stunned by it when I first read it—God annihilates nothing.

BUCKLEY: Because He cannot?

ADLER: No. No. That's an act of will. That's free. But the point about that is in the whole of our science we've never seen anything annihilated. All change, I mean, is transformation. We talk about destruction. We talk about things being—We use the word “annihilated” loosely. We say, “That city was annihilated by a war.” Not at all. It just reduced to rubble and ashes and dust. Nothing is annihilated, and so that since we have no experience of annihilation, we have no experience of exnihilation either. But at this very moment, since what is could be not—or not be—it needs a cause for its existence that it doesn't have in itself—

BUCKLEY: In other words, there has to be an agent of its being—

ADLER: Being.

BUCKLEY:—as also of its continuing to be.

ADLER: Well, it'd have to be—At every moment, there has to be an agent of its continuing to be—and its continuing to be is its existence—moment from, moment it exists.

BUCKLEY: Now, does that agent have to be intelligent?

ADLER: Well, I would say that this is probably the least, shall I say, rigorous part of the argument. If one says we must think of God as that than which nothing greater can be thought of, must we think of God as living as opposed to inert? This may be anthropomorphic reasoning, but it would seem to me to say that that which exists as a living organism has more being than that which is merely an inert piece of matter. Therefore, if God is that than which nothing greater can be thought of, we must think of God as being alive. Is an intelligent living organism—Does an intelligent being have more power and more being than a non-intelligent? The answer is yes. So I think the attribution of both life—ontologically understood, not unifically understood—the attribution of both life and intelligence to God follows, though not as easily as the attribution of existence.

BUCKLEY: Is it something that Anselm insisted on, or not?

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: It is.

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: But his insistence on that was, you would classify, as a theological deduction—

ADLER: No, I would, as a philosopher, without any aid from the light of faith, would say that what I've just said holds my mind. I am thinking as strictly as I can.



BUCKLEY: But you said it was less rigorous—

ADLER: Because it's—Someone may say, “Well, when you say that to be alive and to be rational or be intelligent is better than not to be, aren't you being, shall I say, prejudicially human?” I think not. I say that about existence and infinity and unconditioned I have no doubt. No one can possibly challenge me on that. I think I can defend—I say that a little more modestly—the proposition that to think of God as that than which nothing greater can be thought of, one must think of God as living and intelligent.

BUCKLEY: Now, the scrutiny given to the thought thus far by Immanuel Kant revealed what misgivings?

ADLER: Kant made a simple mistake. He said, dismissing Anselm's argument, that \$100 in my pocket is no greater than \$100 in my mind. I think that's just nonsense. A hundred dollars in my pocket will do things that \$100 in my mind will not do. (laughter) I can understand the error that he made. Existence is not an ordinary predicate—not an ordinary attribute. It's not like red or green or large or heavy or here or there. And he therefore thought that existence did not characterize anything. Perhaps it doesn't. Existence is not a characterizing term. But to say that that which exists in reality does not have more existence and more power than that which exists only in the mind is nonsense. And that's the error Kant made.

BUCKLEY: And what was the impact of that error on—

ADLER: It dismissed ontological argument, and then Kant made another error that was understandable in his day and not today. One of the reasons why I thought that I could do something in this book in the 20th century that could not be done by a philosophical theologian in any earlier century is I can overcome Kant's chief objection to philosophical theology, which was that one cannot use concepts drawn from experience to deal with that which transcends experience. Now obviously, God transcends experience. And if you have to use only concepts drawn from experience, you can't, he said, legitimately, use them about God. In 20th century physics when we talk about certain elementary particles, we talk about the black holes. We are not using concepts drawn from experience. Those transcend experience.

BUCKLEY: And they're deduced.

ADLER: No. The modern logic of contemporary science calls those—it's very important—theoretical constructs, rather than empirical concepts. Now I say that God is not an empirical concept. We do not, shall I say, abstract it from any experiences. We abstract horse or chair or cow. But since we now know from the thinking in theoretical physics that one can take a theoretical concept and then, using—

BUCKLEY: And rely on it.

ADLER: Rely on it.—and show that there exists in reality something that corresponds to that theoretical concept using

Ockham's very fundamental—Ockham is again very helpful here—he says you are entitled to infer—to establish the existence of a theoretical construct if nothing else will explain the phenomenon. Now when scientists say a meson exists—a meson is never perceptible—they're saying that theoretical construct of a meson or a neutrino or a black hole, which is not a concept drawn from experience, "I infer the existence of that because without that theoretical construct I cannot explain the phenomenon that I do observe in the laboratory—the traces on the screen." So that what I'm saying is I've avoided Kant's objection, because I think if I'd thought of God as a—I don't have any—The point is, I have no definition of God. What I've done with Anselm is not a definition of God. What I've done is to construct a theoretical construct that my mind is compelled to make and then say—

BUCKLEY: There is no other explanation.

ADLER: That's right. Precisely it.

BUCKLEY: And now, did Kant linger over the notion of the theoretical construct or was physics not sufficiently advanced?

ADLER: That's precisely the point. He didn't have any conception of that. Kant was living in the age of Newtonian physics. Newtonian physics didn't need theoretical constructs. It is really modern cosmology and modern nuclear physics that I think emancipates us from Kant's strictures and makes it—I take courage in thinking about God from the kind of thinking physicists do about black holes.

BUCKLEY: Yes. Yes.

ADLER: If they can do it, I can do it.

BUCKLEY: Right. Now, when time comes to infuse your concept with attributes, what do you do?

ADLER: You have now touched the nerve of the—I think—the most difficult point in the book, which is in the epilogue, in which I talk about the chasm and the bridge. Again, let me rely on a great Christian thinker, Blaise Pascal, who said, "I am not interested in the God of the philosophers. I'm interested only in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and Jesus Christ." And he's right. The God of the philosophers is not a God to worship. What

I've said so far, though I think I have given reason—good sound reason—to believe in God's existence, the God whose existence I've given reason for belief in has attributes that fall short of the attributes required of a God to worship and rely upon and love. I haven't proved that God is benevolent. That is not part of my reasoning and thinking about God. I have not shown that God cares for us and is concerned with us. I haven't shown that God's providence arranges things wisely and well. And all the things that I think are required for the life of the religious person—well, certainly charity, the love of God, being loved, love—Let's take just love for a moment—benevolence. There's nothing in, I think—

BUCKLEY: What about ensoulment?



ADLER: Well, ensoulment is life.

BUCKLEY: But since nothing can be annihilated, is there a commitment within the confines of your architecture to the endurance of the soul?

ADLER: Well, yes, but you've now—When you talk about the human soul and its immortality, you've gone way beyond my original premises now. Let me see if I can say it another way, Bill. What is the leap of faith which is required for religious life? Well, I think—In my judgment, one of the main contributions I've made in this book is to say it is not going from insufficient grounds for believing in God to belief in God. That's what most people think

the leap of faith is—that you don't have enough grounds, so you have to add faith. I say—

BUCKLEY: You're saying there are plenty of grounds.

ADLER: There are plenty of grounds for believing in God's existence. The leap of faith is from believing in God's existence to believing in a benevolent God. That's the leap of faith, because there, I think, one goes beyond reason.

BUCKLEY: Let alone an anthropomorphic God.

ADLER: That's right. Well, I think that phrase is a misunderstanding of the meaning of "person." We are persons—Because the meaning of the word "person" in both theology and philosophy and in Roman jurisprudence is a rational being with free will, and if one attributes mind and freedom to God—as I think one does when one talks about God's having intelligence being unconditioned independent—one is saying that God is a person—a person in that fundamental metaphysical meaning of person. If that's anthropomorphic, that's all right. I mean—

BUCKLEY: Well, of course, that's a great Christian assertion.

ADLER: Sure. Sure.

BUCKLEY: So now we're—I don't want to lose our train of thought here. Here you are adducing Pascal who said, "I am really uninterested"—

ADLER:—"in the God of the philosophers."

BUCKLEY: Yes. I'm uninterested in any proof that there is a God in the denatured sense in which Professor Adler deduces him. (laughter) I want to know what role that God should play in my life, if any, and this depends on giving him a profile—

ADLER: Which requires that act of faith, that leap of faith that I said.

BUCKLEY: Now, is it a matter of—Is your refusal to discuss the Christian God in terms of—

ADLER: Or the Jewish God or the Muslim God—any one of those three.

BUCKLEY:—is that a terminological decision based on a decision not to mix empirical and speculative thought, or is it because you simply haven't gotten around to it?

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