

Phil 2301 Intro to Philosophy  
FAITH AND REASON

"More consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other basic question. They follow for those who regard the question as answerable only by faith or only by reason, and even for those who insist upon suspending judgment entirely."

—*Great Books of the Western World*, volume 2, p. 543.

Introduction:

Why do you believe in God?

## I. The Relationship Between Faith and Reason

### A. Introductory questions on the relationship between faith and reason

- Is religious belief and Christian faith rational?
- Is Christian faith an essentially irrational activity?
- Is Christian faith an arational activity?
- If the claims of religious belief cannot be proven, is it still reasonable to prove these claims?
- How many things are there in life that we cannot prove, and yet we believe them any way?
- In this sense, could belief in God, and other religious beliefs be properly basic?
- Is it sometimes morally permissible purposefully to get one self to believe what the evidence alone does not warrant, and this for pragmatic or existential reasons?
- Is faith a separate form of life wherein external judgments are precluded and objective reason plays a very limited role?

"For till it be resolved how far we are to be guided by reason, and how far by faith, we shall in vain dispute, and endeavor to convince one another in matters of religion."

—John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by A. C. Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), II, 415.

### B. The precise issue

What role should reason play in the validation or invalidation of religious belief systems and practices?

## I. Three Positions or Viewpoints on the Relationship Between Faith and Reason

### A. Strong rationalism: faith must be confirmed by reason

1. Position: "I understand in order that I might believe."

In order for a religious belief system to be properly and rationally accepted, it must be possible to prove that the belief system is true by means of reason and evidence.

2. Illustration of this position: the parable of the invisible gardener (Antony Flew)

Two explorers come across a clearing in the woods with many flowers and weeds. One believes there is a gardener; the skeptic does not. Their night watches and their electrified barbed wire fences and bloodhounds are unable to detect the presence of a gardener. The skeptic concludes there is no gardener, but the believer will not allow lack of evidence to count against his belief that there is a gardener.

3. Representatives of this position

a. John Locke (1623-1704)

b. W. K. Clifford

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

D. Critique of the strong rationalist position

1. Is it actually possible to do what the strong rationalist demands and show that a particular religious belief system is true in a way that should be convincing to any rational person?

2. Strong rationalism seems to imply the neutrality of the use of reason as a means of adjudicating conflicts between competing world views and religious belief systems.

B. Fideism: faith alone is sufficient, and must not be subjected to rational evaluation

1. Position: "I believe and that settles it forever."

Religious belief systems are not subject to rational evaluation. Religious belief is a matter of absolute faith and trust in authority, especially the Bible as the Word of God.

2. Illustration of this position: parable of the Oxford don (R. M. Hare)

His parable is that of the lunatic who is convinced that all Oxford dons (professors) want to murder him. No amount of evidence to the contrary will convince him that the dons are not after him. Since he will allow nothing to count against his theory, it asserts nothing really about the dons. There is a major difference between what he thinks about the dons, and what most people think about them. His blik is insane; other's sane. There are differences between bliks, but all have them (400a).

3. Representative of this position

a. Tertullian (160-225)

“What has Jerusalem (faith) to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy [Plato's]?”

b. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

“If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe.”

4. Critiques of the strong fideist perspective

1. Ask a fideist: do you have any reasons for your faith: If he says yes, he is not a fideist; if he says no, you have no reason to believe his perspective!

2. Given that faith is a leap, how does one know which faith to leap for? Why not Jim Jones' Peoples Temple or the Branch Davidians?

3. Common sense suggest that our human capacity for reasoning can and must be used to test competing truth claims.

C. Critical rationalism or critical fideism: blending faith and reason

1. Position: “faith seeking understanding”

Critical rationalism or critical fideism is the view that religious belief systems can and must be rationally criticized and evaluated although conclusive proof of such a system is impossible.

2. Illustration of the position: the parable of the stranger (Basil Mitchell)

His parable is that of the Stranger who promises to aid a soldier in battle in the resistance. The soldier is to have total faith in the Stranger who will fight for them. Some times he appears to help the resistance; at other times he seems to aid the opposition. Sometimes he hands soldiers over to the enemy; sometimes he answers prayer, sometimes not. Certainly the soldier questions whether or not the Stranger is on his side and examines his trust in him frequently. Through it all, however, the soldier believes and comforts himself: "The Stranger knows best." (402a).

3. Representatives of this position

a. St. Augustine (354-430)

"...understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand." Homilies on the Gospel of St. John XXIX.

b. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason, have proved such truths about God demonstratively. from *Summa Contra Gentiles*, chp. 3.

c. Blaise Pascal (1632-1662)

"Two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only." 253. "If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mysterious and supernatural element. If we offend the principles of reason, our

religion will be absurd and ridiculous.” 273. “It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason. Faith is the gift of God; do not believe that we said it was a gift of reasoning.” 278.

#### 4. Critiques

a. The critical rationalist, since he/she is forever open to discussion and dialogue about the rational justification of belief, is never in the position of being able to decide, finally and for good, that the discussion concerning beliefs is over and has reached the final conclusion.

b. Since, this is the case, certainty is a myth, at least when belief is being considered rationally.

#### D. Scriptures balancing faith and reason

1. Scriptures encouraging reason and the use of the mind
2. Scriptures encouraging faith and unquestioned trust in God