

Faith and Reason: Friends or Foes?

Introduction

What is the relationship between faith and reason? Does faith require that we have reasons to believe or is faith merely a blind leap in the dark? Is faith a product of rational inquiry where our minds investigate first before we commit to a belief? Or do we commit to a belief and then look for evidence to support it? Are our beliefs contrary to evidence or does evidence support the beliefs we hold? What exactly is faith? Just exactly how does a belief that God exists work together with evidence and reason?

First of all, it's important to distinguish between the belief that God exists and whether it's reasonable to believe God exists. Our goal in this first session is to demonstrate that a belief in the existence of God is reasonable by showing how faith and reason work together, as friends not foes. Our next session will lay out specific arguments showing evidence for the belief that God exists.

It appears that some believe in God but don't think about him. Others think about him but don't believe in him. My goal tonight is to demonstrate the value of being a thinking believer and a believing thinker. The way I plan to do this is discussing four things: 1) the nature of faith, 2) the nature of truth claims, and 3) the value of doubt, and 4) the myth of neutrality. In the final analysis I will show why it's necessary to believe that faith and reason work together and not against each other.

The Nature of Faith

What is faith? St. Augustine noted that faith is "resting in the evidence." Some think that faith is devoid of evidence or that the more faith one has the less evidence is required. But faith believes with the evidence, not against it. Faith is always "faith in" or "faith that". Faith is not the opposite of thinking or reasoning.

Faith is trust in someone or something. Faith is having more certainty than doubt. Faith is not some amorphous wish or hopeful desire that something might be the case. Faith believes *with* the evidence and never against it.

Three Elements to "Faith"

1. Faith begins with knowledge (*notitia*). Cognition (mental processes) is the primary faculty involved with *notitia*. Faith is not an empty container but is filled with content. Faith necessarily entails "faith in" something or someone. Simply because faith involves religious knowledge does not require us to be less certain about the content of our faith. When our religious convictions are logically sound and fit the facts, then we are justified in holding our beliefs with certainty.

2. Knowledge leads to mental assent (*assensus*). Assent moves *us from cognition to conviction*. When we assent to a belief we are admitting the truth of a claim or we are agreeing with the facts of a claim. Assent to facts is what makes belief possible. There is an emotional element involved with *assensus* wherein a personal element of assurance is present, but we must not confuse our subjective assurance with the objective facts of a belief. Mental assent is necessary in all our beliefs. Assent includes knowledge of (*notitia*) and acceptance that (*assensus*). One must not only know the truth but also accept it as fact before belief obtains. Mental assent, though necessary, is not sufficient. Mere acceptance of truth falls short of genuine faith.
3. Faith comes to completion with trust (*fiducia*). From cognition (= awareness), to conviction (= acceptance), to commitment (= appropriation). Whereas *notitia* is primarily intellectual, *assensus* emotional, *fiducia* is volitional. Faith is a trust that surrenders the soul to the facts. The seat of faith lies not in the intellect alone, nor in the emotions alone, or in the will alone. Rather, the seat of genuine faith lies in all three, which the Bible calls the human heart (Rom. 10:9-10).

The Nature of Truth Claims

Some claims are subjective, private, and personal. Other claims are objective, public, and factual. If I claim that the capital of Hungary is Budapest, and someone responds “That’s true,” then what others believe is irrelevant to the objective fact of the matter. Objective facts are either true or they’re not. On the other hand, if I claim that Budapest is the most beautiful city in the world and someone responds, “That’s true,” then what others believe is relevant with regard to matters of taste, preference of architecture, etc., since this is a subjective claim.

Likewise, there are some aspects of Christianity that are subjective and others that are objective. Since Christianity makes claims about all of reality and these claims are public and not merely private, then these claims are either objectively true or not and there must be evidence to support them. If there is evidence to support objective Christian claims, then that means we can know them to be true. Some things may still be true but not supported by reason alone, for example the Christian idea of Trinity. Reason cannot comprehend this mystery and prove it, but reason can demonstrate that it’s not irrational to believe. Not all beliefs are false because we lack full comprehension.

When Christians claim that Christianity is true, we are not simply claiming that it fulfills some function in our lives like providing peace of mind, purpose in life, etc. While it does provide these things, Christianity provides these things because they’re rooted in a larger claim about all of reality (e.g., “God exists and we need him.”). True religion must be grounded in reality and not merely in the psyche. If the claims of Christianity are true, then there is evidence to support them. Otherwise, there’s no reason to hold the claims.

What about Doubt?

Is commitment to a belief compatible with criticism of that belief? Put differently, is there any value in doubting my beliefs? How much doubt can I have in my beliefs and still hold them to be true?

- I can be justified in holding the belief that my wife loves me while still being aware of the logical possibility that she may not love me. To say that I can recognize what it would look like if my wife did not love me is not to say that she in fact does not love me.
- To say that my belief could be false is not to say that I'm unjustified in holding to my belief. It may be in fact false that God exists, but that possibility does not mean that I'm irrational for holding the belief that God does exist.
- Moreover, I can hold a belief with certainty and still have some doubt. A belief only requires 51 percent certainty or better.

Sometimes we hold a belief on the basis of someone's authority and then seek reasons to support our belief. We accept the testimony of a doctor when we're told we have cancer, but then we also look for the evidence or reasons to believe him. Many of you may not have seen New York City but you have reasons to believe it exists on the basis of reliable authorities (friends, newspapers, magazines, internet, media, etc.). Should you have an opportunity to visit New York City, then your belief in New York City would become a belief with understanding. Sometimes we know our beliefs are true without understanding all the reasons why they're true.

The Myth of Neutrality

Can we really be neutral about our beliefs and not commit? No. To sit on the fence is still to take a position, namely, "not to take a position." Neutrality simply does not exist. While some may be more open than others and honestly exploring the options before committing, few end up suspending beliefs on matters re: God, life after death, purpose, meaning, values and morality. Everyone eventually decides what they believe on these matters. For those who claim they have not thought about these things, they have at least decided it's not worth thinking about, which tells us a great deal about what they believe and certainly what they value! To claim there is no truth in religious matters is itself a truth claim about religion.

Everyone has a philosophy of life and has exclusive claims to truth. For example, what happens after death (resurrection, reincarnation, annihilation) is a question everyone asks and while we may wish we're exempt from drawing a conclusion on this matter, no one is exempt from doing so.

Moreover, to choose not to be neutral yet hold exclusive truth claims does not mean we cannot be open-minded about opposing beliefs. An open-minded person ...

- Identifies the assumptions and opinions that uphold their beliefs
- Draws conclusions but is willing to subject their assumptions and beliefs to critical inquiry.
- Recognizes that if there is a truth about a position, then opposing positions cannot be true

- Is willing to listen to good arguments from opposing beliefs that may help shape beliefs and get at the truth-value of them
- Is willing to alter or abandon their beliefs if they have little or no reasons to hold them
- Invites others to change your mind knowing that if what you believe is true then it will withstand the closest scrutiny. Conversely, if what you believe is false, then your opponent has done you a favor by pointing you to the truth.

Summary and Conclusion

To sum up, I've shown that faith and reason are friends and not foes. They work together in support of one another. We've looked at the nature of faith, the nature of truth claims, the value of doubt, and the myth of neutrality showing that faith *with* reason is the optimal formula for belief. Like a composer and conductor, faith and reason work together to create a beautiful symphony that performs on the human heart and inspires conviction, hope, and purpose.

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