New Blackfriars

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Comment: Faith And Evidence

People who claim to have religious faith are often challenged to provide their rational grounds for it — the idea being that there is something wrong in believing that such and such is the case if one cannot back up the belief by 'evidence'. Here I am taking 'evidence' to include a deductive proof or an argument of some other kind, such as a calculation of *probability* (as in 'Smoking is likely to harm you') or an appeal to *direct experience* (as in 'Mount Everest exists; I have climbed it').

In that case, however, how are Catholics to think of what are often referred to as 'the articles of faith' — by which I mean the contents of the Nicene Creed (with its affirmation of the divinity of Jesus) and the teachings of the First Council of Constantinople (with its reiteration of the Nicene Creed and its elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity). How are these 'articles' to be thought of as grounded in 'evidence'?

It has been suggested that, given what God is, God would be *a priori* likely to become incarnate or to be triune in some sense. Professor Richard Swinburne argues along these lines in *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1994). But his arguments do not seem to have commended themselves to many contemporary philosophers of religion. Some of these philosophers maintain that we are in no position to say *a priori* what God is *likely* to be or to do. Others, favoring the thinking of Saint Thomas Aquinas, add to this critique the conclusion that the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity are demonstrably undemonstrable (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,32,1 and *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 1, 4 and 5). The idea here (briefly stated) is that while we might be able demonstrably to prove that God exists, such limited knowledge as we have of God is only obtainable from reflection on what God has created and cannot be fleshed out so as to conclude with certainty that, for example, Jesus was God or that God is triune (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these not being three gods).

Suppose we accept (as some will not) that these responses to Swinburne's view of God, or something very like it, are correct. Where does that leave belief in the 'articles of faith'?

Some will say that there is no problem when assenting to the articles of faith since we can sometimes choose to believe and there is nothing more to be said. This view is sometimes referred to by philosophers as 'Direct Doxastic Voluntarism' (see, for example, Rico Ritz, 'Doxastic Voluntarism' in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). But does it make sense to say that one can ever *choose* to believe?

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This question has been much discussed, but it is hard to see how anyone can choose themselves into believing even with options presented to them which strike them as significant for them. We can voluntarily take steps to acquire (hopefully true) beliefs. We can, for example, choose to read maps or consult certain books. Or we can choose to engage in research that might (hopefully) lead us to form true beliefs. But this is not to say that we can choose to believe by flicking on a 'Believe' switch, so to speak. Can *you* (the reader of this Comment) decide to believe that Paris is the capital of France, or that Julius Caesar existed, or that China has many inhabitants? Can *you* choose to believe that you are or are not now reading something that appears in *New Blackfriars*?

Perhaps not, which might be taken to suggest that our beliefs (even considered as dispositions rather than as particular or discrete 'occurrences') are not things we choose as we might choose to eat an apple or cook bacon and eggs for breakfast. Someone might *wish* to believe that such and such is the case (for example, some atheists say that they would like to believe that God exists). But that is not to choose to believe that God exists. One might *choose to act* as if some proposition or other *were* true. But that would not be a case of *choosing to believe*. Parents might tell their child that they are going to believe what the (possibly naughty) child says. But that would seem only to amount to choosing to proceed on the assumption that what the child says is true.

Now, if one cannot choose to believe a given proposition, there is a serious sense in which one's believing it is something that one just comes to do without reasons. This invites the question, 'Is it irrational or ridiculous to believe without evidence?'

Here it helps to consider what is going on as teachers instruct young children. One of the things they are doing is trying to help their students when it comes to recognizing what should and what should not be taken to be 'evidence'. In the child-teaching context much information is imparted and received without the receivers engaging in an analysis and evaluation of 'evidence'. And much that many of us would take to be knowledge rests in no small amount on what we believe without question by virtue of testimony.

This is something that Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) draws attention to in *On Certainty* (published in 1974), in which he notes that our coming to know what is the case often (and more often than we might realize) seems to depend on what we take to be the case because we have been trained to assume that such and such is true. He writes, for example: 'Think of chemical investigations. Lavoisier [Antoine Lavoisier, a famous and influential chemist who died in 1794] makes experiments with substances in his laboratory and now he concludes that this and that takes place when there is burning. He does not say that it might happen otherwise another time. He has got hold of a definite world-picture — not of course one that he invented. I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is a matter-of-course

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foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned' (*On Certainty*, 167).

In a 1979 paper, Elizabeth Anscombe (a friend of Wittgenstein and one of his literary executors) draws on this idea while alluding to the notion that faith is a matter of 'believing God'. She emphasizes the importance of what she calls 'believing the person'. By this phrase she does not mean 'believing that what the person says is true', because one might, for example, accept what someone says because one *already* has reasons to suppose that what the person says is true or is likely to be true. Anscombe is homing in on, as she puts it, 'believing x that p' (where x is a person and p is an assertion). She is thinking of texts such as Genesis 15:6, quoted by St Paul in Romans 4:3 when he writes 'For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"' (NSRV translation).

This 'believing x that p', Anscombe goes on to observe, is common and (more importantly) unavoidable and not obviously open to legitimate censure as always offending against 'reason' or 'the value of evidence' in some general sense. She writes: 'The greater part of our knowledge of reality rests upon the belief that we repose in things we have been taught and told … Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. You have received letters; how did you ever learn what a letter was and how it came to you? You will take up a book and look in a certain place and see "New York, Dodd Mead and Company, 1910". So do you know from personal observation that *that* book was published by that company, and then, and in New York? Well, hardly. But you do know that it *purports* to have been so. How? Well, you know that is where the publisher's name is always put, and the name of the place where his office belongs. How do you know that? You were taught it. What you were taught was your tool in acquiring the new knowledge. "There was an American edition" you will say, "I've seen it". Think how much reliance on believing what you have been told lies behind being able to say that'.

Anscombe is rightly challenging the view that one must always be 'rationally suspect' for believing without 'evidence'. She is noting that people asking for evidence, or relying on what they take to be evidence, have to be ultimately doing so in light of what they were taught to treat as evidence and have taken on board without evidence. For this reason, she can be taken as successfully challenging a strong claim of W.K. Clifford (1845-1879). In his much reprinted essay 'The Ethics of Belief', he concludes by affirming 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'. Anscombe has shown why there is something wrong with this assertion.

Once again, though, where does this leave us on 'the articles of faith'? For a view on this question we might consider taking a look at some things that Aquinas holds when it comes to faith and the articles of faith (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 1–7).

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Aquinas teaches that the articles of faith are revealed or taught by God since they come from the Word Incarnate. So, his understanding of assenting to the articles of faith looks like an instance of what Anscombe calls 'believing the person'. In *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 2,3 Aquinas even quotes Aristotle to this effect: 'Aristotle says that every learner must first be a believer in order that he may come to full knowledge'. This understanding of the articles of faith also coheres with Anscombe's idea that 'believing x that p' is not to perform an inference or to assent on the basis of prior knowledge, for Aquinas explicitly distinguishes between faith and knowledge. Faith, he says, is not in what is 'seen' (in this connection he likes to quote Hebrews 11:1: 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'). Aquinas is clear that we cannot but assent to what is 'seen'. He thinks, for example, that (barring illness or intoxication) we cannot but believe that the wolf standing in front of us is there, or that a proposition cannot be both true and false. So, he concludes that those who firmly assent to the articles of faith are doing so voluntarily (as children can be said to assent voluntarily to what their teachers are telling them, or as I, knowing little about medicine, can be said to assent voluntarily when accepting what a doctor tells me about my condition). The idea here is not that we can simply *choose to believe* in a vacuum, as it were. The claim is that assent to what someone tells us can rightly come about without us being forced to assent by what is evident in some absolute sense.

Aquinas and Anscombe seem to be on the same page when it comes to believing the person. Aquinas cashes this notion in by turning directly to the articles of faith ('divine faith' as we might call it) while Anscombe focuses on the fact that much that we take to be true rests on believing people ('human faith' as we might call it). Unlike Anscombe, though, Aquinas also talks about the evidential status of miracles (cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 6 and *Summa Theologiae*, 3a,43). He argues, for example, that, given certain miracles, it is not foolish ('*levitas*') to assent to the truths of faith even though they are above reason. But for Aquinas it would be wrong to suppose that belief can never be properly reposed in what we have been taught and have not investigated or inferred or verified with probability or certainty for ourselves. And that, if true, is a significant conclusion to have reached. Anscombe makes a good philosophical case for it. Aquinas develops it in a more theological direction with a focus on Jesus, whom Aquinas takes to be God, the first and primary teacher of the Christian faith.

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