

APOLOGETICS 101

What is the truth about God?

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*In this series, the author lays out a common sense approach to understanding and defending the Catholic faith. Part 1 appeared in the Advent 2007 issue of **Ecclesia**.*

In my last article we examined the idea that there is objective truth – that there are truths that are true because they are true, independent of what people think about them. We came to this conclusion by carefully looking at alternative theories of truth (namely forms of skepticism and subjectivism), seeing that they cannot stand on their own. The question is now posed, “What is the truth about God?” In other words, is there a God and can you know him or can you ‘prove’ his existence? But before we can talk about “proving God” the question begs to be asked, “do we even need to?” In other words, is there a relationship between faith and reason?

A few weeks ago a story came across my desk written by a Catholic priest who left the priesthood and faith to become a humanistic (read atheistic) psychologist. By his own admission, the author was led ultimately to disbelief in God by concluding that it was impossible to prove God by pure reason unaided by faith. In short, the author came to believe that his faith was no longer reasonable, leading him to leave it. This idea that faith is unreasonable is widespread in our modern age.

What is “faith”? St. Paul writes that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Faith is also knowledge based on authority. By this definition, it becomes evident that everyone has some kind of faith because almost everything we know comes from what others tell us. It is not likely that many of us were alive in 1914 when World War 1 started, yet we place faith in authority - our teachers, history books, etc., that tell us about this event. It is not so much a question of do you have faith or not, but in what or in whom do you have faith? Even atheism, which claims there is no God, is in a sense a type of religion with its adherents professing a certain ‘faith’ – that there is no God. The realization that everyone has faith allows for a commonality between believers in God and the believers in ‘other things’ and thus the question for both groups becomes one of “what is most reasonable to believe in?”

Reason can be understood as the power by which we know natural truth - all truths that can be understood, discovered or proven by our own intellect. The modern understanding of reason has become narrowed to mean only scientific reason – all those truths that can be measured quantitatively or corroborated directly by experience. That God falls outside of this realm is evident, and this perhaps explains the difficulty that people formed by modernist Enlightenment influences have in approaching belief in God. After all, you can’t exactly weigh or measure a being who is outside of time, space and matter! Believers in God are labeled as unscientific, unrealistic and even fanatical, and their “blind” religious faith as completely unreasonable. But, if we understand reason as being more than scientific reason then it is possible to consider the reasonableness of faith. If there is truth, then both faith and reason have a relationship to it – they are both ways of coming to know truth, and thus can never contradict each other. They are, in fact, allies. Pope John Paul II wrote that: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.” (Fides et Ratio)

Pope Benedict alluded to this relationship between faith and reason in his now famous “Regensburg Address” which was given in the fall of 2006 in Germany. Although the secular media attacked the Pope

for what they saw as a condemnation of Islam as a violent religion, they missed the point entirely. A close reading of this talk reveals that our Holy Father really is trying to begin anew the dialogue about the relation of faith and reason in the modern world. That this dialogue is urgently needed is evident in present culture, which is beset by a moral relativism that threatens to undermine the very foundation on which our civilization is built – Christianity.

Do we need to give reasons for faith? Yes! Scripture commands: “Always be ready to give a defense for the hope that is within you” (1 Pet 3:15). Deep down, we all want to know why we believe what we believe. God created us in his image, giving us among other things the gift of intellect by which we can come to know him. True faith can never contradict reason although at times it may be above or beyond reason. Reason can never prove all the truths of faith, but it can refute all objections brought against faith. It is one of the supreme beauties of the Catholic Faith that it is completely reasonable.

Perhaps one of the most crucial reasons for giving reasons is to build common ground with those who do not know God. Yes, one can try to win others to the faith by ‘beating bibles over their heads’, telling them that they are going to hell, but this is not attractive or effective apologetics. On the other hand, dialoguing in a calm, rational way about truths of the faith can be very effective – especially when this is backed up by a lived example. There is much common ground between the believer and the unbeliever, when they are united in a search for truth.

When looking at the relationship between faith and reason, several objections come to mind. What about brilliant thinkers who have held that belief in God is irrational? Granted, there have been intellectuals who have rejected the message of Christianity (Nietzsche, Marx, etc.), but there are also many gifted thinkers who have embraced the faith, sometimes after a heroic struggle against it (Augustine, Aquinas, Galileo, Newton, Chesterton, Lewis, etc.). The charge that reasons for the faith are only after-the-fact rationalizations, does not invalidate the logical validity of the arguments. Also, does it take away from the merit of faith if one has rational reasons for it? No. God gave us the gift of reason, and we are to grow in it in all areas of our life, including our faith.

The issue that was posed by the priest turned atheist has still not been acceptably addressed: “Can you prove God by pure reason unaided by the light of faith?” The simple answer is yes, you can prove that there must be a God using logical reasoning and you can even come to know certain things about this God but this knowledge will necessarily be limited without divine revelation. We can know that there needs to be a ‘first cause’ or an ‘unmoved mover’ but we cannot know anything about this God – that He is our loving Father and we His children. We need God to tell us these things Himself. The medieval formula, “faith seeking understanding”, or “I believe so that I may better understand” describes how we should approach the faith.

Once we have said yes to God in faith our understanding follows, aided immensely by our faith. It seems that the priest in question embraced a form of rationalism believing that everything known by faith is provable by reason, but as we have seen, this is not the case.

I often tell my students that reason can bring us to the door of faith, but only we, with the grace of God can walk through. Christ Himself says: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:21). Faith is a gift, not something that is attained by endless argumentation: however, as mentioned, the obstacles to faith can be cleared away through a proper use of reason. How beautiful is the gift of reason that God has given us and may we all, each according to all own capacities, be inspired to use it for the greater glory of God!

Next issue: “Proofs for God”

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