1

The Basis of Christian Belief

What is the relationship between the evaluation of the assumptions of Christianity outlined in the Introduction and Christian belief? Suppose that these doctrines are not supported by evidence or argument. Suppose, what is worse, that the weight of the evidence is against them. Should Christians still believe them? Should the doctrines be believed on pragmatic rather than evidential grounds? For example, should one believe Christian doctrines if they make one happy? On the other hand, perhaps it is permissible to believe Christian doctrines without evidence and argument or even without a pragmatic basis. Can Christianity be based on pure faith? Indeed, why does one need a basis for Christian belief? Perhaps Christian doctrines are basic beliefs that need no justification.

Christian Belief and Epistemic Reasons

Under what conditions should one believe Christian doctrines? Surely the answer that recommends itself to reason and common sense is: Other things being equal, one should believe them only if there are good reasons to do so. However, this answer can be interpreted broadly or narrowly. In the broad interpretation we can understand having good reason for believing that the doctrines are true to include reasons that make the doctrines likely as well as ones that benefit the believer and others. Let us call the first sort *epistemic reasons* and an argument based on these an *epistemic argument*. Let us call the second sort *beneficial reasons* and an argument based on these a *beneficial argument*. Beneficial reasons can, in turn, be either moral or prudential. In the narrow interpretation we can understand having good reasons

for believing that the doctrines are true to include only epistemic reasons.

There is a strong presumption that one should believe Christian doctrines only on epistemic reasons.[1] First, there are good utilitarian arguments for believing them only when there is good evidence for them. William K. Clifford, in his famous essay "The Ethics of Belief," argued that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence."[2] Clifford maintains that believing on insufficient evidence has a variety of harmful consequences: It corrupts our character, undermines public confidence, leads to irresponsible action, and fosters self-deception. Although Clifford's fears may have been exaggerated, there is surely a great deal of truth in what he says—there are indeed great dangers in believing Christian doctrines, or anything else, on insufficient evidence. However, Clifford was talking primarily about believing something on insufficient evidence, not about believing something that is contrary to the evidence. If there is anything to Clifford's utilitarian arguments when Christian doctrines are based on insufficient evidence, there is even more to them when belief in such doctrines goes against the evidence. Although believing in Christian doctrines that are in conflict with the evidence is not necessarily morally wrong, as apparently Clifford thought, there are certainly moral dangers in doing so, and as a general social policy believing something that is in conflict with the evidence should be avoided.

Moreover, Clifford overlooked an important point. His argument for basing belief only on epistemic reasons was itself a moral one. Thus, ironically, his reason for not using beneficial reasons in justifying belief was apparently based on one type of beneficial reason: the undesirable *moral* consequences of doing so. In addition, Clifford should have argued that there is an independent epistemological duty to base one's beliefs on purely epistemic reasons. If one does not so base them, one is epistemologically irresponsible. To be sure, under some circumstances this epistemological duty may have to give way to moral considerations.[3] But this does not mean that there is not an epistemological duty that must be outweighed by moral considerations. Although Clifford gives strong *moral* reasons why in general this suspension is impermissible, he does not consider the initial *epistemological* duty that these reasons must outweigh.

Taking these points into account one can say that there is both a

moral duty *and* an epistemic duty not to believe Christian doctrines unless there are good epistemic reasons to believe them.

Christian Belief and Beneficial Reasons

Although there is a strong presumption that epistemic reasons should prevail, there are some conditions under which it is permissible to believe Christian doctrines on the basis of beneficial reasons. One special case in which beneficial reasons may be used to decide whether to believe some Christian doctrine p or to believe ~p is when there are equally strong epistemic reasons for p and ~p. Indeed, there is a presumption that beneficial reasons should only be used in such cases.[4] One supposes that beneficial reasons should normally be used only as tiebreakers.

It should be noted that both presumptions—that only epistemic reasons should be used and that beneficial reasons should only be used when epistemic reasons are evenly balanced for and against—allow that in special circumstances it is morally permissible for people to believe Christian doctrines because of beneficial reasons and without adequate epistemic reasons and that in *very* special circumstances it is morally permissible for people to believe Christian doctrines for beneficial reasons even when there are strong epistemic reasons to believe the opposite.[5] Clearly, however, candidates for these special circumstances must be scrutinized carefully for both the likely benefits that will result from belief in terms of beneficial reasons and the possible long-term adverse effects on society, its institutions, and human personality and character.

Our presumptions could be defeated by special circumstances. For example, suppose you are a non-Christian and are kidnapped by a religious fanatic with access to nuclear weapons who will kill you and blow up New York City, London, Paris, and Tokyo unless you accept the Apostles' Creed. You have good reason to suppose that if you undergo two months of rigorous Christian indoctrination, you will accept the creed. To make the case crystal clear, let us suppose that very few people will know of your conversion, that the fanatic will die in three months, that he has no disciples to carry on his work, and that the effects of the indoctrination will disappear in four months. Presumably, in such a case there would be good grounds for undergoing the religious indoctrination. Even the most militant anti-Christian would

perhaps admit that under this circumstance refusing to convert would serve no purpose; indeed, would be an act of insanity.

Let us now consider a more realistic case in which the question arises of whether beneficial reasons for believing in God should count. On her death bed Mrs. Smith, an eighty-nine-year-old Black Muslim and former Catholic, is not completely convinced that she will see her dead husband again unless she returns to the Catholic church. It is clear that her mental state is such that with only a little encouragement from a priest she will embrace her old faith once again. Should we ask a priest to visit her? The answer may seem obvious but it is not until many questions are resolved. For example, given her present situation, is she competent to make the choice? Will this case set a precedent for other cases? Will other people know of her return to the fold and be encouraged to do the same? To simplify the case, let us assume that there are no more epistemic reasons to believe in the doctrines of the Black Muslims than in the teachings of the Catholic church, her return to Catholicism would set no precedent, that she has only a few days to live, that she would be much happier if she did believe, that very few people would ever know about her return, and that her choice to return was competent, rational, and uncoerced. We may conclude that under these assumptions we should send for a priest. But these are big assumptions to make and cannot simply be taken for granted.

It may be asked: If we grant these two presumptions, is there not still a presumption that in those rare cases in which it is legitimate to use beneficial reasons to decide what to believe or not to believe, the Christian doctrine is to be preferred? It is hard to see why this would be true. General beneficial arguments for the existence of God such as Pascal's and William James's provide no unique reason for accepting the Christian God over other supernatural beings.[6] Furthermore, whether someone would be happier believing in the Christian doctrines rather than, say, the doctrines of Islam or Judaism is an individual matter that must be decided with respect to the particular person's background.

Christian Doctrines and Faith

But why do Christians have to believe on either epistemic or beneficial reasons? Cannot Christian doctrines be based on faith? Let us take a look at some theories of faith in order to see the problems of believing on faith.[7]

Thomas Aquinas's theory is representative of a traditional conception of faith.[8] In his view, faith is not only not opposed to reason but is in some respects guided by it. In contrast to Aquinas some religious thinkers have maintained that faith needs no rational guidance. Søren Kierkegaard, for example, argued that there is great merit in Christian belief that not only goes beyond the evidence but even against it.[9] Maintaining that religious faith was more important than reason in achieving human happiness[10] and interpreting religious faith as a total and passionate commitment to God, he argued that people with this faith completely disregard any doubts that they may have. If there are serious problems with both of these theories, it is likely that there will be ones with other theories that are based on similar ideas.

According to Aquinas's theory, religious truths are divided into those of reason and those of faith. On his view, the truths of reason include the proposition that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God exists. However, particular Christian doctrines such as that there are three persons in one God and that Jesus was born of a virgin cannot be known by reason. Aquinas nevertheless maintained that these truths can be known because they are revealed by God to human beings through the Bible or the church.

On Aquinas's view, although a truth of faith, P, is not capable of rational demonstration, the proposition Q—God has revealed P—can be believed on rational grounds.[11] He used three kinds of arguments to show that Q is true: scriptural prophesies have been fulfilled; the Christian church has succeeded without any promise of carnal pleasure in an afterlife or without any resort to violence in this life; and miracles have occurred within the Christian tradition.[12] On his theory of faith, therefore, one must assume that God exists. Otherwise it would make no sense to suppose that God revealed truths through the Bible or through the church. Consequently, belief in God is not *based* on faith, but is a *precondition* of faith in such Christian doctrines as that there are three persons in one God and that Jesus was born of a virgin.[13]

Because in Aquinas's theory there is an attempt to guide faith by reason, his view of faith has decided advantages over some more recent ones. Indeed, according to Aquinas, a Christian who believes, for example, in the Virgin Birth has very good reason to suppose that his or her belief is true. Nevertheless, Aquinas's view is unacceptable.

Even if the existence of God is assumed, the reasons that Aquinas gives to suppose that God revealed certain truths through the Bible and the church have little merit. As we have seen, Aquinas appeals to

the existence of miracles within the Christian tradition as support for his view that it is rational to believe that God revealed particular Christian doctrines. However, there are difficult general obstacles that must be overcome for anyone who claims that a miracle has occurred and, as I argue in Chapter 2, these have not been overcome in the standard defense of miracles.[14] Further, an appeal to Christian miracles has special problems such as ones connected with Jesus' life and death—the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection—since these are among the assumptions of Christianity. But surely we cannot appeal to the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection to support the truth of Christianity without begging the question.

Aquinas's appeal to the success of the Christian church to justify his belief in the rationality of Christian revelation faces the problem that many different churches or similar institutions outside the Christian tradition have been successful in the way he specifies.[15] If this sort of success shows that God revealed truths in the religious traditions dominated by these different churches or their equivalents, then conflicting "truths" were revealed. But conflicting propositions cannot both be true.

Further, Aquinas's appeal to fulfilled biblical prophecy to justify the rationality of believing the assumptions of Christianity on faith is plagued by the problem of unfulfilled prophecies. One of the most notorious of these is Jesus' false prophecy of the imminence of his Second Coming.

There is still another problem with Aquinas's view, however. According to Aquinas the truths of faith are certain and are supposed to be believed without any doubt. But not all the historical events that are supposed to provide the evidence for God's revelation can be known with certainty. Indeed, the evidence for some of the historical assumptions of Christianity is weak. It is difficult to see how one can claim certainty for revelations that are based on historical events that are not known with certainty, however. Such a high degree of belief seems irrational in the light of the historical evidence.

According to Kierkegaard, the person with faith or, in his words, "the knight of faith," is not unaware of the possibility of error in such a commitment but is not anxious because of this possibility. The knight of faith keeps well in mind that according to objective reasoning—that is, reasoning that would be accepted by all (or almost all) intelligent, fair-minded, and sufficiently informed persons to have established its conclusion as true or probably true—belief in God is not justified.