

## **The Problem of Faith (Part 1)**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

Does Christian Commitment Sacrifice Reason?

According to an old, humorous quip: "Faith is believing what you know ain't true." It is not hard to see why this would be said. The tendency for people - whether they believe fantastic claims about UFO visitors or pathetic claims about the honor of a discredited politician - who have meager evidence or reasoning to support their personal convictions is to fall back easily on the claim that they "simply have faith" that what they believe is true,<sup>[1]</sup> even though there appear to others many good reasons for disbelieving it. People *should* know that what they are saying is not true, and yet they persist in believing it anyway - in the name of "faith."

This conception of faith as blind personal commitment is one of the chief obstacles that stands in the way of unbelievers giving Christianity an honest hearing. They have a fierce and fundamental difficulty in becoming Christians, they imagine, because religious faith would require them to sacrifice reason altogether and blindly trust some purported revelation in an arbitrary, undiscerning fashion.

In his *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Peter Angeles offers as two definitions of "faith" among others: "belief in something despite the evidence against it" and "belief in something even though there is an absence of evidence for it."<sup>[2]</sup> Given either of these popular understandings of the term - whereby the Christian call to "faith" is conceived of as either contrary to reason or at least without reasons - Christianity does indeed look quite irrational. "Faith" becomes a buzz-word for putting your intellect out of gear, suspending a cautious and critical attitude toward things, and making a personal commitment without sound evidence.

## Varieties of Irrationalism

Christianity is charged with irrationality by lots of people, but not all critics mean the same thing. Some distinctions should be drawn for clarity.

Some people pit Christian faith against reason because they feel that the teachings of the Bible are themselves irrational. For instance, some people look upon the idea of God becoming man (the incarnation) as a contradictory notion; for them, the concept of the God-man is incoherent, a violation (allegedly) of some elementary logical laws which all men recognize. When they charge Christianity with being irrational, they mean that its dogmas are illogical in this sense.

Other people believe that there is utterly no empirical (observational) substantiation for certain magnificent historical claims found in the Bible: for instance, that the sun stood still, that Jesus multiplied the loaves, or that men have risen from the dead. If Christian faith calls for affirming these kinds of unfactual matters (as they see them), people will deem it contrary to reason.

The previous two types of critics have wanted to charge Christianity with irrationality because of specific intellectual imperfections within the set of propositions which believers affirm - either logical imperfection or empirical imperfection. These kinds of attacks upon Biblical particulars call for apologists to offer focused answers which deal with the details of each different challenge - at least to do so at the *outset* of responding to such charges by the unbeliever. (Ultimately, presuppositional matters will need to be engaged and discussed, of course.) But our present concern is really with a more devastating version of the claim that Christianity is irrational.

## Affirming the Absurd

Much more intellectually vicious is the class of critics who judge the Christian faith to be irrational because they conceive of Christians as dedicated to believing the absurd (for its absurdity). As they see it, religious believers glory in the fact that the object of their faith is without rational support, is apparently untrue, and must be endorsed in the face of good sense and contrary reasons. Some unbelievers have been given the impression - not without the damnable "help" of many modern theologians - that Christianity is indifferent to logic, science, evidence or (even) truth.

Some people have been so misled as to feel that Christians actually elevate the value of one's personal faith in direct proportion to the degree that it must be dubious, blind or mystical.<sup>[3]</sup> Likewise, it is thought that believers degrade the worth of faith to the extent that it accords well with good reason. In *The Antichrist: Attempt at a Critique of Christianity* (1895), Friederich Nietzsche expressed his derision toward this attitude by saying: "*Faith* means not *wanting* to know what is true."

However, all criticism in this vein flows from a fundamental mistake as to the *nature* of Christian faith. As J. Gresham Machen boldly put the matter in his book, *What is Faith?*, "we believe that Christianity flourishes not in the darkness, but in the light." Machen wrote that "one of the means which the Spirit will use" to bring a revival of the Christian religion "is an awakening of the intellect." He fervently resisted "the false and disastrous opposition which has been set up between knowledge and faith," arguing that "at no point is faith independent of the knowledge upon which it is logically based." Reflecting upon the famous Biblical remark about faith in Hebrews 11:1 ("the evidence of things not seen"), Machen declared: "Faith need not be too humble or too apologetic before the bar of reason; Christian faith is a thoroughly reasonable thing."<sup>[4]</sup>

Regardless of what certain misguided spokesmen may say - whether enthusiasts, mystics, emotionalists, voluntarists, or fideists - the Bible itself (the sourcebook and standard of Christianity) is not indifferent to logical blunders or factual mistakes. The Christian religion does not pit "faith" against reason, evidence or (above all) truth.

It was just in order to vindicate the truth of his religious claims and conceptions that Moses challenged the magicians of Pharaoh's court, and that Elijah competed with and taunted the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. The Old Testament prophets knew that their words would be demonstrated to be true when their forecasts or predictions were fulfilled in history for all to see.

When Christ appeared, he himself claimed to be "the Truth"! His resurrection was a mighty sign and wonder, providing evidence for the veracity of His claims and for the apostolic message. Despite what the Jews and Greeks might think to themselves, wrote Paul, the gospel is in fact the very wisdom of God which destroys the arrogance of worldly philosophy (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). He said that those who oppose the gospel are the ones who have only a "knowledge falsely so-called" (1 Timothy 6:20).

Because of this attitude Paul was eager to "reason" (dispute, debate) daily in the marketplace with the philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:17-18). He did not hesitate to argue his case before the Athenian tribunal which judged new and controversial teachers, declaring "what you worship

displaying your ignorance, I authoritatively declare unto you" (v. 23). He was clearly not promoting the value of absurdities! Indeed, if the cardinal claims of the faith were demonstrably false, Paul would have been compelled to admit that our religious faith is wrong-headed and futile (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:14).

Peter's own attitude, even as an uneducated fisherman, was made unmistakably clear when he asserted with confidence, "we have not followed cunningly devised fables" (2 Peter 1:16) - as well as when he required every believer to be ready to present a *reasoned defense* for the hope that was within him (1 Peter 3:15). Jesus categorically taught of God's word in scripture: "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17). The Bible's bold perspective maintains that on the great and final day of judgment, the reason men will be condemned by God is that they preferred to believe "a lie" (Romans 1:25), rather than to trust the claims of God's own Son.

Consequently, when unbelievers repudiate Christianity for its alleged *goal* of religious irrationality, the apologist must decisively correct that mistaken conception. Christian faith does not aim to affirm what is absurd, reveling in irrationality. Such a thought misconstrues the nature of faith as it is presented by the Bible. The Christian notion of faith - unlike most other religions - is not an arbitrary leap of emotion, a blind stab of commitment, a placing of the intellect on hold. For the Christian, faith (or belief) is well-grounded.

Indeed, as Christians we claim that the content of our faith is what any reasonable man should endorse, not only because it completely accords with logic and fact (when they are properly viewed), but also because without the Christian worldview "reason" itself becomes arbitrary or meaningless - becomes unintelligible.

[1] People who speak this way seem oblivious to the trivial or tautological character of such a claim. To "have faith" that something is true (e.g., that Elvis is alive and residing in Idaho) is the same as "believing" that the claim in question is true; these are different semantic ways of expressing the same thing. Accordingly, when a person says he "believes" something "simply on faith" (without specifying further), he has merely told us that "he believes because he believes." I am not unaware that many religious people, including philosophers who reflect upon religious issues, think of "faith" as being in another category from "believing." The former is supposed to be a personal matter of trust or commitment, while the latter is a matter of intellect. For instance, in an essay entitled "Faith and Belief," the Oxford philosopher, H. H. Price, asserted: "Faith, then, is something very unlike belief 'that' and certainly not reducible to it nor definable in terms of it.... Surely when a person is actually in the faith attitude, he would never say he believed that God loves him. It is rather that he *feels* God's love for him.... It does not seem to be a matter of believing at all" (*Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964], p. 11). Such verbal stipulations may be made and often are, I realize, but it would require a heroic effort to bring such a conceptual distinction into verbal conformity with the New Testament use of the Greek verb "pisteuo" and noun "pistis."



[2] Peter A. Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 94.

[3] Cf. "Doubt, as the dark side of the cognitive aspect of faith, is an essential ingredient for faith.... A lively mind stands in *Angst* at the crossroads daily, and daily makes a choice, making it, as Kierkegaard would say, 'in fear and trembling.'" Geddes MacGregor, *Philosophical Issues in Religious Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. 239.

[4] 4. J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1925), pp. 18, 26, 94, 243.

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## **The Problem of Faith (Part 2)**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

### Faith versus Proof

Other opponents of Christian faith, as a further class of critics in addition to those considered in our last study, protest the presence of any attitude of faith (or trust) at all in a person's system of thought. They maintain, arrogantly if not naively, that they will not believe anything which has not first been fully proven to them. They are led by proof, not by faith!

They like to think that theirs is the spirit of Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the French scholar and theoretician of knowledge who became the primary philosopher of "the Age of Reason." Descartes was concerned that men should strive to realize and follow a reliable and proper method for arriving at their beliefs. [1] According to Descartes' way of thinking, this method would be that of doubting and criticizing everything he could, accepting nothing as true which was not clearly recognized as such (things which are self-evident) or which was not completely supported by other clear and distinct, foundational truths.

Descartes sought to doubt every thought that came into his head (e.g., is he really eating an apple or only dreaming that it is so?) until he would come upon something which was indubitable. Systematic doubt would open the door to final certainty for him. [2] Yet Descartes recognized that he could not ultimately doubt everything. The indubitable would turn out to be the stopping-point of his method - and the theoretical starting-point for all other reasoning.

The modern-day apes of Descartes who claim they will doubt absolutely everything and accept nothing except upon proof act or talk like arrogant fools. Nobody can doubt everything. Nobody. If a person were truly to doubt everything - his memory of past experiences, his present sensations, the "connections" between experiences, the meanings of his words, the principles by which he reasons - he would not be "thinking" at all (much less doubting), and there would be no "he" to think or not to think. A fundamental (logically basic) set of beliefs - a faith - is inescapable for anyone.

Men only succeed in deluding themselves when they say that they will not accept anything without proof or demonstration - that they allow no place for "faith" in their outlook or in the living of their lives. Accordingly, such unbelievers who criticize Christians for appealing to "faith" are intellectual hypocrites - men who cannot and do not live by their own declared standards for reasoning.

## "No Assumptions" Makes No Sense

The attitude which feigns that there ought to be no element within Christian commitment which has not been independently proven is illustrated by the statement of C. Gore: "It seems to me that the right course for anyone who cannot accept the mere voice of authority, but feels the imperative obligation to 'face the arguments' and to think freely, is to begin at the beginning and to see how far he can reconstruct his religious beliefs stage by stage on a secure foundation, as far as possible without any preliminary assumptions...."<sup>[3]</sup> Here we are told to examine the religious hypothesis from the beginning without preliminary assumptions - without presuppositions.

Of course, this is quite literally impossible. A complete demonstration of each of our beliefs by means of other independent beliefs cannot be given. When I demonstrate the truth that ice melts at room temperature, I press into service certain standards and procedures of demonstration. But the question can be asked whether I have chosen the correct criteria to use for demonstrating my conclusion. Further, can I be sure that I have properly used the chosen procedures and standards? In order to proceed "without assumptions," I would need to demonstrate that my methods of demonstration are the correct ones and that my execution of these methods was flawless. *But* that will call for *further* argumentation or proof *about* the *proof* used for the veracity and validity of my original demonstration. And on and on we would go.

If there can be no assumed starting point for a demonstration, then no demonstration can get started - or finished, depending upon how you look at it.

If an unbeliever considers Christianity to be irrational simply on the basis that it allows for something to be accepted without independent demonstration, then the unbeliever in question is unrealistic and must be pressed to see that he ends up refuting *himself* (not simply Christians) in terms of such values and demands. Thus *his* unbelieving attitude turns out to be the truly *irrational* attitude, for it inconsistently requires something of its opponents which it does not live up to itself. Such an attitude would make knowledge of anything whatsoever impossible for finite and faulty creatures - and thus shows itself to be supremely unreasonable.



## The Kind of Evidence on Which Faith Rests

The problem with Christian faith, then, cannot be that it involves presuppositional commitments. So we move on to consider one last category of unbelievers who criticize Christian "faith" as irrational. These critics acknowledge that believers have evidence and reasoning which they enlist in support of their beliefs, and they admit that nobody - not even religious sceptics - can proceed intellectually without assumptions nor prove *everything* they believe by independent considerations. What they object to, however, is the *kind* of evidence to which Christians appeal and the *kind* of presuppositions in terms of which they reason. To put it briefly: they object to the idea of believing something *on the basis of God's personal authority*, rather than on the basis of impersonal and universally accepted norms of observation, logic, utility, etc.

Christians may have evidence, then, for their faith, but it is completely the wrong kind of evidence, says the unbeliever. For instance, in his candidly titled book *Religion without Revelation*, Julian Huxley says: "I believe firmly that the scientific method, although slow and never claiming to lead to complete truth, is the only method which in the long run will give satisfactory foundations for beliefs," and "we quite assuredly at present *know* nothing beyond this world and natural experience."<sup>[4]</sup> For Huxley, Christian faith should not be grounded in revealed authority (since all metaphysical knowledge is precluded by decree), but in the authority of natural science.

What Huxley openly displays here is his own faith-commitment with its prejudice against Christianity. Having said on the one hand that the scientific method cannot give the *complete* truth, he turned around on the other hand and, based on the authority of the alleged scientific method, *completely* ruled out knowing anything beyond the natural world! Why does Huxley count out the *kind* of evidence offered by Christians for their faith (revelation from God)? Because of his *own faith* and devotion to natural science.

In *God and Philosophy*, Antony Flew likewise expresses the unbeliever's criticism of Christian faith for resting upon authority. "An appeal to authority here cannot be allowed to be final and overriding. For what is in question precisely is the status and authority of all religious authorities.... [It is] inherently impossible for either faith or authority to serve as themselves the ultimate credentials of revelation."<sup>[5]</sup> The teaching of Scripture cannot be accepted on the authority of God speaking therein, says Flew, because it is precisely that authority which is under question by the unbeliever.

This can only mean, then, that Flew has determined in advance that God cannot be the *ultimate* authority. For him, there must always be something independent of God which is more authoritative and in terms of which the authority of God can be accepted. Nor can God's authority be inescapable and *self-validating*, according to Flew: "the philosopher examining a concept is not at that time himself employing it; however much he may at other times wish and need to do so."<sup>[6]</sup>

Does Flew really pretend that he himself as a philosopher strictly and purely adheres to this general prerequisite - that we may not examine something while simultaneously employing it? This is simply not so, and Flew should know better. Those who *examine* and argue about logic simultaneously *employ* that same logic in their examinations. Those who *examine* and evaluate the powers and reliability of the eyeball simultaneously *employ* their eyeballs. To wave off and

automatically preclude the possibility that Christians could examine and argue about the authority of God's revelation while simultaneously employing (assuming, applying) the authority of God's revelation is little more than arbitrary prejudice on Flew's part.

Flew simply will not permit the thought that God's authority is *self-validating*. What is remarkable about his or any other unbeliever's refusal to submit in faith to God's authority *on the basis of that very authority* is that he thereby only discloses that he is committed *in advance against* Christian teaching. That is, it reveals an obvious and personal faith commitment to the proposition that there cannot be a God who speaks with a voice of inescapable, ultimate, self-validating authority over man and his thinking.<sup>[7]</sup>

God cannot have this kind of final authority for Flew, but only such an authority which will first be *authorized* by the reasoning of man. In the long run Flew and other unbelievers insist that man must not be reduced to bowing in abject dependence upon his Creator as the final authority. There can be *other* self-validating authorities acknowledged or entertained as a possibility, but *not God*. They will tolerate the Creator in their thinking only on the terms dictated by the *creature* - notably that He never confront men with the rational inescapability and ultimate authority of their *Creator!*

As Van Til observes: "The natural man then assumes that he has the final criterion of truth *within himself*. Every form of authority that comes to him must justify itself by standards inherent in man and operative *apart from* the authority that speaks."<sup>[8]</sup> Elsewhere he had noted that "If we must determine the foundations of the authority, we no longer accept authority on authority."<sup>[9]</sup> This is just to say that God cannot be permitted by the unbeliever to be and to speak *as God* - to be the ultimate and self-authenticating authority. Such a position and privilege will be assigned by the unbeliever to something else, something which is part of the creation (such as man's reasoning, experience)<sup>[10]</sup> and thus is implicitly treated as an idol. "They worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

The bottom line then, is that to criticize the Christian's irrational "faith" is itself nothing more than to express a different religious faith - a faith which in one way or another adopts the ultimate authority and self-sufficiency of the human mind and reasoning. *That* is irrational "faith" indeed, given the sad experience and history of mankind - as well as the unresolved, rational tensions within autonomous science and philosophy.



[1] What about their beliefs *about proper method*, then? Are *these* beliefs also arrived at by means of that proper method? If so, they have no independent (non-question-begging) authority or foundation! If not, then what has been deemed the proper method for arriving at beliefs is not foundational, after all.

[2] Descartes felt that his method brought him finally to the indubitable and foundational truth that he himself existed. Even if everything else he believed was an illusion, he at least needed to exist in order to do the doubting in the first place. Thus the famous dictum: "I think, therefore I am." But Descartes was here not scrupulous enough as a philosopher. By taking as his premise "I think," he had already begged the question of his existence (asserting the "I"). This was no more helpful, really, than arguing: "I stink, therefore I exist." Descartes should have more stringently premised only that "Thinking is occurring" - from which it does *not* logically follow that "I exist."

[3] C. Gore, *Belief in God* (New York: Penguin, 1939), p. 12.

[4] Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (New York: Mentor, 1957), pp. 15, 17.

[5] Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), pp. 159, 161.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 26.

[7] Part of the self-validating (self-authenticating) character of that authoritative revelation is that without it, reasoning and science and ethics become unintelligible, philosophically speaking. God's authority is necessary to the (subordinate) intellectual authority and usefulness of those very principles which unbelievers propose to use in testing God's authority. Nobody can utilize reasoning without simultaneously, even if implicitly and without acknowledging it, employing the outlook of God's revelation. Thus Christian claims about the self-validating character of God's revelation are not merely subjective testimony or beyond rational discussion or demonstration.

[8] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), pp. 145.

[9] *Ibid*, p. 49.

[10] Note well that "reason" is here criticized as an authority or standard (which stands above God in judgment), but *not* at all as a tool or instrument (which is used under God for His glory). Of course the unbeliever must use his reasoning ability in hearing, weighing and (hopefully) adopting the claims of God's word. This does not mean that the controlling norm by which he uses his reasoning must be reason itself. (In such discussions, it would be good to ask just exactly what is meant by "reason.")