

Bounds of Faith

Faith is belief in testimony given by God.

God can be expected to have revealed important truths to us.

This revelation might be original

(Testimony given by God to me)

Or it might be traditional

(Testimony given by God to someone else and transmitted by history)

Requirements for faith in an original revelation

Assurance that the revelation was in fact given by God

(Usually obtained by asking for a miracle)

Confidence that the testimony has been correctly understood

Requirements for faith in a traditional revelation

All of the above, plus:

Confidence that the original message has been transmitted without distortion

An important implication

Though faith is trust in testimony given to us by a witness who cannot be deceived and would not lie

this trust cannot rise above the level of “confidence”

This means it can only provide us with belief, not knowledge, and not even belief of the most assured sort

Consequence

Revelation cannot tell us anything that contradicts what reason (intuition, demonstration, or sensation) say.

were revelation to contradict reason, it would tell us we ought not to listen to what reason tells us

but to do that would be to accept a proposition that has less evidence in its favour over a proposition that has more evidence in its favour

All revelation is grounded in sense experience

the sense experience of the original witnesses to the revelation and the miracles performed in its support

the sense experience of the historical records of those reports

the sense experience of the historical records used to verify those reports

That sense experience builds a “case” for the authenticity of the revelation

this case can never be as strong as whatever is currently being told to me by my own senses

if for no other reason than that it is grounded in the reported sense experiences of others had long ago

which can't be as reliable as my own current ones

and as the case is based only on sense experience, it can never be as strong as what is based on intuition

So what is told to us by revelation cannot be allowed to contradict the current testimony of our senses

e.g., this is only bread and water, not flesh and blood

or the evidence of intuition and demonstration

e.g., the same body cannot be completely and entirely present in two widely separated places at once

e.g. the Eucharist in Rome and the Eucharist in Paris

Limits of revelation

Things that we can know by reasoning will not be revealed

(God will not employ less certain means to assure us of truths that we can come to know by more certain means)

Revelation can, however, tell us about things that go beyond reason (things reason tells us nothing about)

And it can assure us about things that we can only believe on the basis of probabilistic reasoning

it can even contradict probabilistic reasoning

(as long as it is possible for something to be true, God could bring it about, and that fact could be revealed)

Consequences of Locke's account

Absurd doctrines cannot be included in a religion.

Mysterious doctrines can only be included if they are not absurd.

Enthusiasm

Placing more confidence in an assertion than the evidence warrants

In particular, trusting that something is an original revelation without bothering to ask for a miracle or determine whether it has been correctly understood

Enthusiasm has been set up by some people as an alternative, 3rd source of knowledge

alongside reason (i.e., intuition, demonstration, sensation, probabilistic judgment on the basis of analogy and testimony)

and faith

Though they don't call it "enthusiasm"

they call it "divine revelation"

Enthusiasm vrs. the Ethics of Belief

People are entitled to form beliefs on the basis of an incomplete examination of the evidence.

And they cannot justly be expected to change their minds once they have made them up.

However, they are not entitled to hold their beliefs more firmly than warranted by such a survey of the evidence as they managed to perform.

(You cannot claim knowledge, assurance, or confidence if such evidence as you have does not exceed that for a lesser degree of probability)

And they cannot expect others to share their opinions when they fall short of knowledge.

To do otherwise is enthusiasm.

Causes of enthusiasm

Laziness
Ignorance
Vanity

Effects of enthusiasm

Belief in absurdities

Depraved and vicious actions

Violent suppression of the contrary beliefs of others

(Imposing on others to expect them to share your beliefs is natural to those who have imposed on their own understanding to place more assurance in a proposition than the evidence warrants.)

Historical study of the effects of enthusiasm ought to suffice to prove that it is a bad thing

but people continue to be swayed by its causes

The main argument for permitting enthusiasm: Inspiration

God does not confine himself to revealing truths and performing miracles to authenticate those revelations.

He also graciously compels those elected for salvation to believe what he has told us

The elect will have been “born again in the word”

(they will experience irresistible conviction upon encountering the revealed message)

The experience of the elect, in these cases, is like sensation or intuition. They “see” in a “light” that leads them to see what others cannot.

Their election, manifest in their “holiness,” warrants that others should follow them

Locke's case against inspiration

Claims asserted on the basis of inspiration cannot be considered to be knowledge.

If they were, they would not be private or reserved just for the elect but would be available to all.

This is because knowledge is based on intuition, demonstration, and sensation, which are all public

(If you know, what you intuit is intuitable by everyone or it is not an intuition; what you demonstrate is simply a chain of intuitions; and what you sense must be there for all to see)

Inspiration must therefore be belief.

Inspiration must therefore be belief.

As such, it can only be accepted as true with a degree of conviction proportioned to the evidence in its favour

But what is the evidence that an inspiration has come from God

as opposed to one's own overheated imagination

or some other being?

This question cannot be answered by appeal merely to how it feels (such feelings can have other causes)

it can only be answered by demanding a "sign" or even repeated signs (as the prophets of old did)

and critically assessing the quality of that sign

Do that, and you are proceeding wisely

Fail to do it, and you are an enthusiast, with no love of truth

Conclusion

God could nonetheless act to compel chosen people to believe certain things or to act in certain ways

But if he does so, it will be to believe something that is consistent with reason and with rationally authenticated revealed traditions

And the same holds for what he will compel people to do

In such cases, there is no blame to be attached to adopting the belief or performing the act

However, one cannot presume to know that the inspiration actually came from God

or presume that others should accept the belief or conform to the pattern of action