In Defence of Nonsense: Fideism in Tertullian, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein

By Tom Mosher

Do some religious beliefs require no justification? Amongst contemporary sources, philosopher Alvin Plantinga's responses are often among the first that are cited. Plantinga (2017, p. 306) has aimed to demonstrate analytically that Christian belief is justified, rational and warranted, even without appeal to extrinsic evidence. Indeed, Plantinga's approach is a compelling one for those who seek a reasonable basis on which to sustain belief.

But should we be permitted to believe in God even if it were – or maybe even because it is – contrary to reason? At least one scholar has dismissed this argument as either confused, absurd or ironical (Mawson, 2010, p. 99). Yet, it may be argued that nonsense – defined here as any proposition or belief that not only has no basis in reason or sense perception, but even may be intrinsically incompatible with the exercise of such faculties – may not be as indefensible as it at first seems. In fact, throughout the course of Western civilization, minds as luminous as those of Tertullian, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, among many others, have all defended the subjective, unscientific or inarticulable as the very source of ultimate truth, perhaps even deserving supremacy over philosophy itself. This paper will briefly explore the claims of each of these three sources, in anticipation of concluding that indeed, lucid and coherent assertions can be made in defence of nonsense.

Tertullian Misquoted

Fideism is the doctrine or theory that certain truths can be grasped only by foregoing rational inquiry and relying solely on faith (Amesbury, 2017, §1). Among the earliest Christian sources to be characterized as a forerunner of fideism was Tertullian, a North African who lived some two centuries after Christ. Tertullian wrote one of the subsequently most misquoted passages in history, the so-called *credo quia absurdum*. For hundreds of years, from the Enlightenment on through the twentieth century, this passage of the *De carne Christi* was thought to state in Latin 'I believe because it is absurd.' More recently, modern scholarship has debunked this and revealed the error (Harrison, 2017). In fact, Tertullian's writings are laden with highly reasoned passages, his style of argumentation characterised by scholarly erudition. He will forever be known as one of the founders of Christian apologetics – the rational defence of the faith.

Still, it must be observed, both with respect to the *credo* and more generally, that Tertullian's approach is unmistakeably to place Christianity and philosophy in what were to him properly separate spheres. In his *On the prescription of heretics*, he exclaims, 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between Academy and the Church?' (Pearse, 2018). Philosophy is pop-paganism, a 'work of demons'; whilst Platonists and Stoics are the forefathers of heretics. Clearly to Tertullian, one of the most eminent sources of early Christian theology, the way to supreme truth is not through philosophy.

Rather, our vision of God is apophatic, such that He is beyond the realm of ordinary perception: 'our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea

of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown' (Thelwell trans., 2017, §17). The ways of God are beyond man, and therefore it is absurd or foolish to attempt to reduce divinity to the altogether insufficient realm of our own notions of credibility. If anything, the persistence of belief in spite of the counterweight of reason could itself be seen as strong evidence of God's existence.

Kierkegaard Misattributed

Nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard is often associated with the phrase 'leap of faith', yet it is less commonly known that he never employed that expression in his own writings (Tietjen, 2018). Nevertheless, it is instructive to examine his assertion as to varying forms of truth. Kierkegaard drew a firm distinction between objective truth, which pertains to outward observation such as scientific inquiry or philosophical analysis, in contrast to subjective truth, being the domain of aesthetics, ethics and in – its purest and highest form – religion.

Kierkegaard's argument proposes that 'subjectivity is truth' and 'truth is subjectivity' (Kierkegaard, 1992, 2.II). He remained untroubled by the question of whether any attempt to demonstrate the existence of God dialectically had merit; for indeed, the central obligation of Christian existence is not to engage in such exercises, but to engage us on an inward and emotional level (Ibid.). In this vein, the essence of religion is preserved as personal, its purity unimpeded by the interposition of reason; and crucially, it is no less true because of that. Under what conditions would this approach have credence? In a theistic paradigm – one of an omnipotent deity with attributes of personhood – it could be that God wished to selectively make himself accessible through channels other than reason. Doing so would force us take a journey – latterly known as the 'leap of faith' – since such a journey may itself create the content of religious experience.

Kierkegaard fully understood that being is a process of becoming, and he viewed the interplay between uncertainty and the revelation of truth as an unfolding process. This approach points forward to future developments in ontology, and not only the existentialism for which Kierkegaard is often hailed as a forerunner. William James, too, would shortly thereafter emphasize the subjective aspects of religious belief, claiming that ineffability is among its definitive traits (James, 1902, p. 380). In the twentieth century, the legacies of both Kierkegaard and James as regards the authority of personal, subjective and non-dialectical beliefs would only live on.

Wittgenstein Misread

'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.' The statement that closes Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922, §7) is one of the most mystical and mystifying in all of modern philosophy. It is also one of the most misread. The quotation has been popularly interpreted as saying that if you don't know what you're talking about, be quiet. But in fact, Wittgenstein was indicating that there are aspects of reality that cannot be represented by language. Yet in his later work, Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games' entirely supplanted this earlier approach. To the later Wittgenstein of ordinary language philosophy, the dictum 'meaning is use'

applies. All we can say about any expressive enterprise is that 'this game is played'; we cannot say if it is true or not, for each game has its own discrete rules of rationality (Wittgenstein, 1953, §654).

The varying interpretations of Wittgenstein's thought extend into controversies about his views on religious belief, whether explicit or imputed. Most relevant here is the debate over so-called 'Wittgensteinian fideism'. Such term was coined in a 1967 article by Kai Nielsen, who looked at the position that religion is a self-contained and primarily expressive enterprise, governed by its own internal logic or 'grammar' (Nielsen, 1967, 206). As a result, it is impossible to criticize religion from an external or non-religious point of view, because religious concepts and discourse are essentially self-referential (Amesbury, 2017, §2.2.4). It must be said that this view is not without controversy. Detractors have argued that this is an inaccurate caricature of Wittgenstein, who would not be likely to have endorsed these claims (Phillips, 1986, pp. 1-16).

Yet the fact remains that Wittgenstein, himself an admirer of Kierkegaard, did not deny accusations against him of trying to undermine reason. In religious matters, 'Reasons [...] are quite inconclusive. The point is that if there were evidence, it would destroy the whole business' (Barrett, ed., 1966, p. 56) For those who think differently, what is unshakeably authoritative to one believer may be 'utterly crazy', 'ludicrous' or 'ridiculous' to another (Ibid., 53-55). Foreshadowing later twentieth century philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn (populariser of the concept of *paradigm shifts*) (1962, pp. 66-68), Wittgenstein cast doubt on the often unstated assumption of philosophers and scientists that their methods are the only routes to veracity.

Concluding Remarks

The reader will not have failed to notice striking commonalities across the sources discussed above. Each philosopher has drawn a dividing line between the empirical or sense realms and ultimate reality – a sort of dualism known since Plato – but which is summoned here to justify the validity of subjective, internal truth. Such truth is a process, it is constructed, and it is not only distinct from the rule of reason, it depends for its very existence upon such distinctiveness.

It cannot go unnoticed that the philosophers mentioned above have themselves been so often misquoted, misinterpreted or subjected to long-running scholarly feuds over the interpretation of their work. Even our most celebrated geniuses in the pantheon of reason have been distorted through the ages, even by other highly influential and trusted philosophical and scientific figures. (For example: both Voltaire and latterly Richard Dawkins both mis-relayed the *credo quia absurdum*.) What more evidence do we need that the dialectic of intellectuals on its own is an incomplete route to truth? We have diverse powers of perception, apprehension and cognition. Perhaps we shouldn't try to listen to music by attempting to touch it with our fingers.

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