

Anselm devised the slogan “I believe, in order that I may understand” (*credo ut intellegam*). To what extent is this a sufficient definition of the relationship between faith and reason?

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Exit in mysterium (Thomas Aquinas)

1. Introduction

The relationship between faith and reason has been discussed since biblical times. For the most part, Christians have attempted to define a constructive relationship between the two, and Anselm's famous dictum¹, "credo ut intelligam" has played a major role in this discussion. This is obviously a much wider area of study than can be summarised in a short essay, but the main issues at stake can be expressed in two questions: Firstly, is faith compatible with reason? And secondly has reason anything to contribute to faith? To what extent can Anselm's dictum help us in answering these questions?

2. Is faith compatible with reason?

The question of whether faith is "reasonable" touches on two areas:

- a) Is faith consistent with what we can know of the "real world", by empirical study and logical reasoning?
- b) Are the propositions of faith internally coherent and "logical"?

¹ Also attributed to Augustine. cp Richardson, *Apologetics*, Title page.

a. Is faith consistent with the real world?

Anselm's dictum turns this question on its head by asking, in effect, how we can know anything of the world *without* faith. The central truth in Anselm's dictum is that an act of faith is required of us in order to understand anything at all. To put it another way, we have presuppositions about the world which we use as a basis for our understanding. Without such presuppositions we would not be able to cope with all the sense impressions with which we are bombarded every day. We assume, for example, that the physical world has an objective reality independent of our senses. Observing that there are regularities in nature, we assume that these may be used to make predictions about future events. These presuppositions are "acts of faith" because they cannot in fact be proven to be true. Our senses may be lying to us; the physical universe may be a product of our imagination. But they are nonetheless necessary, for without them we would not be in a position to understand anything at all about the world. As Alan Richardson wrote,

The truth, however, appears to be that no philosophy or view of the nature and purpose of the world and man can in fact be built without an act of faith.²

This reliance on unproven presuppositions in our understanding of the world has been called a "fiduciary framework"³, and it would seem that the universe may be understood in different ways, depending on which "fiduciary framework" we choose as our starting point.

² Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* p.32

³ cp McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross* p.69

This has not however answered the question as to whether any particular “fiduciary framework”, such as the Christian faith, is compatible with what we can know of the universe. Even after we have accepted faith as a starting point, we must still ask if *our* faith (in terms of the propositions of that faith) can give a satisfactory account of the world as we know it. By Anselm’s dictum, Christian faith ought to make the world less confusing rather than more. In some matters it certainly does: Christianity can for example account for the inherent selfishness of mankind, and this basic truth can also be used to account for much of the suffering and hardship that exists. But Christianity also raises problems which an atheistic world-view need not cope with. “The problem of pain”, for example, is perhaps one of the most frequently used arguments against Christianity. If God is both loving and almighty, why has he not ordered the universe in such a way as to avoid the existence of disease and natural disasters? This is a question to which Christianity struggles to find an answer, and this shows us also the limits of Anselm’s dictum. Faith will not *always* help us to understand. However, many Christians have found a personal answer to the “problem of pain” by turning away from the propositional statements of faith, and emphasising instead their personal relationship with a caring God.⁴

b. Is faith internally consistent?

Theologians have generally been at pains to show that the Christian system of belief is “reasonable” in the sense that it has an internal logic and consistency. Nevertheless, some Christian doctrines appear at face value to be illogical or contradictory. The

⁴ eg the discussion of Psalm 73 in Davidson, *Wisdom and Worship* p.65-81

doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are perhaps among the most obvious: Human experience tells us that “one” cannot simultaneously be “three”, nor can a finite man simultaneously be the infinite God. For the believer, however, such things, though still paradoxical and mysterious, are an essential part of the faith. The force of Anselm’s dictum is that it is only the believer who is able to understand why this must be so. As Paul wrote:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.⁵

We do not understand *how* Christ could be both God and man, but we understand that it must be so, because this is the only way we can account for the way the Church has experienced Christ. For the believer, therefore, it is “reasonable” to believe in the incarnation – but it is only by faith that we could reach this conclusion.

3. Can reason contribute to faith?

Again, this question covers two main areas, concerning the contribution of reason before and after the decision to believe.

a. Can reason lead to faith?

Anselm’s dictum would appear to suggest that reason has no role to play in leading someone to faith. First we must make a “leap of faith”, only afterwards will

⁵ 1. Corinthians 2:14 NIV

understanding come. But it is doubtful whether Anselm meant his words to be applied in this way. It may be true, as Luther wrote, that we cannot by our own *unaided* reason learn anything significant about God,⁶ but that is not to say that reason plays no part in evangelism or in the conversion process. Indeed, the whole subject of apologetics is concerned precisely to show that Christianity is “reasonable”, and thereby remove barriers to faith. It remains true, however, that there are aspects of Christianity which cannot be appreciated except by a prior act of faith, and it is surely to these that Anselm was referring.

b. The role of reason after conversion

The problem is not to understand Christianity but to understand that it cannot be understood.⁷

This statement would seem on the face of it to be a negation of Anselm’s dictum. But Kierkegaard did not mean to say that reason has no part to play in the believer’s life. On the contrary, he insisted that “godfearing reflection”⁸ was necessary to Christianity. Although as believers we meet God primarily in a personal relationship, we still need reason to describe that experience, to put it into context, and not least to relate it to the revelation of God in the Bible. The role of reason after conversion may therefore be defined both as descriptive and prescriptive – describing religious experience, but also setting limits for what can legitimately be described as “Christian”. Again, Anselm’s

⁶ Luther, *Smaller Catechism* II,3

⁷ Dru, *The Journals of Kierkegaard* p.146

⁸ *ibid* p.146

dictum shows us that there are many aspects of this experience which are inaccessible and incomprehensible to the non-believer: We must believe in order to understand. The truth of Kierkegaard's statement, however, is that religious experience, the direct experience of God, is finally indescribable, and incomprehensible. There will always be aspects of faith which cannot be understood in terms of reason.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, Anselm's dictum may be used to describe many aspects of the relationship between faith and reason, both in establishing faith as a "reasonable" worldview, and in the use of reason to describe and confirm faith. There are many aspects of Christianity which cannot be properly understood unless one first accepts the premises on which Christianity is founded, and to this extent we must indeed believe in order to understand. But this cannot be pushed too far. Anselm's dictum says nothing about the role of reason in the process of conversion or evangelism, nor does it suggest that we could ever understand everything about the nature of God or even the nature of the world. Human understanding has definite limits, and finally, in the presence of God, we must admit, with Thomas Aquinas, that all ends in mystery. Important as it is, then, Anselm's dictum cannot be regarded as a *sufficient* definition of the relationship between faith and reason.

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