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Fides Quaerens Intellectum: A Brief Reflection on Reason and Faith

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Fides Quaerens Intellectum: A Brief Reflection on Reason and Faith[1]

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Fides quaerens intellectum. 'Faith seeking understanding' was Saint Anselm's answer to the perennial question of the relationship between reason and faith. In his view, faith is not contrary to reason; rather, an encounter with God – through experience and human relationship, creation and scripture - often spurs believers to understand the depths of themselves and the world around them. I have personally found this to be the case.

As a boy, I would often walk up to Saint Mary's Church, the highest point in Harrow, which was consecrated by Anselm in 1094, shortly after his arrival with William of Normandy. Like the dreaming spires of Oxford, St Mary's gothic spire points to heaven. In the medieval cosmos, these spires signalled that all our learning, like our prayers, are an attempt to reach the Truth. There is no strong divide between 'prayer' and 'study.'

As I retraced his steps, I would often wonder what Anselm was thinking atop the hill. My mind would turn over his 'ontological argument,' which claims that we can know God exists just by contemplating his nature. This argument is often considered in relation to the project of natural theology, which asks what we can know about God through reason alone. Lest we divorce this argument from Anselm's personal faith, however, we must remember that he presents this 'proof' within his Proslogion, an 'address', or 'word' (logion) 'towards' (pros) God. For Anselm, the best theology was generated within the space of contemplative prayer, an embodied and personal devotion to the Truth.

This all sounds very quaint, I can hear a Habs' boy riposte, but surely the relationship between faith and reason has become somewhat more strained in recent years? In the late nineties and early noughties, the tide of atheism came in, and many came to

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share a new definition of faith, proposed by Professor Richard Dawkins, as belief without evidence. For Dawkins, religious belief disrupts scientific progress and is antithetical to the spirit of the Enlightenment, for it demands that we suspend our better judgement and believe things without empirical warrant. To believe is to leave our brains at the door.

Yet Dawkins is a biologist, not a historian, and few historians assent to the 'conflict narrative' of science and religion which he proposes. Far from opposing science, the machinery of Anglicanism played a significant role in promulgating the theory of evolution; many of its earlier advocates were clerics. To be sure, evolution has posed a devastating challenge to the literal interpretations of Genesis which Dawkins naturally finds himself so comfortable critiquing. Yet these are not the only readings on the table. Many of the great theologians long before Darwin were reading these cosmogonies allegorically. Dawkins is better informed about biology than biblical hermeneutics.

Dawkins' new atheism also faces a pressing metaphysical problem: it is not clear what the biologist means the same thing as 'God' as the metaphysical and mystical traditions of the major world faiths. According to these traditions, God is not to be understood as merely another being among beings; a contingent thing like a table or a person or this book. Rather, he is God with a capital G; Being with a capital B. In other words, he is not another thing in the Universe, but the ground of all that is. Dawkins thinks that evolution has removed the need for God in the same way that the discovery of the laws of thunder removed the need for Zeus. But the discovery of the laws which cause thunder-claps no more disprove this 'God' than the rules of iambic pentameter disprove the existence of Shakespeare. The laws describe how nature behaves, not why it exists.

As a scholar of the Bible, however, there is one episode in the Gospels which seems to support Dawkins' definition. It is the story of 'doubting Thomas,' who initially refuses to believe the disciples' testimony of the resurrection. Obstinately, Thomas claims that he will not believe until he sees Jesus and thrusts his hands into his wounds. When Jesus does later appear to Thomas, and the sceptic's doubt gives way to faith, the moral of the story is drawn: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed' (John 20:29).

At a cursory glance, this passage does seem to support belief without evidence: to be a 'doubting Thomas' today is to be one who demands too much. But nowhere in the passage is there a call to believe without evidence. On the contrary, just a moment later, the writer goes on to suggest that this story was expressly written 'in order that you may believe' (John 20:31). John's leitmotif of witness, the evidence of human and divine testimony, provides a wider set of evidentiary tools which the author of the Gospel includes within his umbrella of evidence. We might say, then, that when it comes to God, we are not being invited to do away with evidence, but to find the right kind of evidence apropos to both the subject (ourselves) and object (God) in question.

To return (one last time) to my foil, one of Dawkins' crucial mistakes is to view the question of God as an empirical one – one that can be resolved with our sense

experience. As one of his fellow Professors at the University of Oxford has said, this is somewhat like trying to detect radio-waves with an infrared machine. It is no wonder, with this epistemology, that Dawkins finds God to be a delusion. I also find Dawkins' idea of God – a thing to be detected scientifically within the Universe – to be a delusion, too. For Dawkins to begin to critique the traditional conception of God, he must expand his view of what he considers evidence.

That the Gospel of John invites its readers to broader their horizons of evidence – to widen our sense of what it means to have a rational faith – is embodied in Thomas' response. Previously, Thomas has claimed that he would only believe if he could thrust his hands into Jesus' side. In Caravaggio's realist depiction, which lines this volume, we see Thomas doing just that. The Gospel of John, however, never claims that Thomas actually touched Jesus' wounds; in the end, this was not needed. Similarly, we may at times find ourselves pleasantly surprised by the fact that what was for us previously a necessary condition for rational faith is met by something apparently weaker, yet wholly sufficient.