

The Basis of Belief

ALLAN W. ANDERSON¹

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I

One hears much these days about the "crisis of belief" — and little wonder. The crisis has been with us for some six centuries. And the end is not in sight. In fact, the crisis bids fair to grow much worse before a resolution to it can be found. Habituation (for six centuries) to disbelief in transcendentals and to the denial that universals have a real existence represents a spiritual disorder that will not be healed overnight. If one must choose between a life-style founded on the reality perceived by the intellect or a life-style based on the belief that reality is that which we perceive by the senses only, his decision will determine his destiny.

The issue here is far graver than the question of "meaning," whatever our cultural thirst for that might be. Quite simply, the issue turns on whether we will affirm or deny the being of objective truth. The question of meaning is without meaning, in any intellectual sense of the word, if it is not referred to its criterion, namely, the existence of an independent reality that measures meaning. The alternative is to make experience the criterion of meaning and thus fashion man as the measure of all things. We are self-condemned to this posture when we deny whatever transcends experience. If we substitute experience rather than truth as the criterion of meaning, inevitably appetite usurps reason; and the world is grasped as basically savage and alienated.

The words *estrangement* and *alienation* are so commonplace in our time that only the philosopher and the theologian who remain devoted to our culture's classical vision of being will pause to call the use of such words to account. Those who are professionally concerned in the life of the academy are well aware of the price one pays for holding publicly to the metaphysical

and biblical conviction that: (a) the world at its core is essentially good; (b) this transcendent goodness is abidingly available to all men of goodwill, since time does not affect things of the highest value.

This, the oldest of civilized convictions, is scoffed at by learned barbarians as medieval or — in their view, worse — antediluvian. And though they seem to have their dates right, that against which all dates are intelligibly measured and finally judged — namely, the eternal — somehow airily escapes them. Comically, in their infinite passion for and devotion to infinite progress, they overlook that no point is privileged above another within any infinite series. This oversight renders their claim that the present age is the one of highest development about as convincing as the self-inflation of a blowfish. Such lusting after the infinite is but one of many current symptoms of the disease we call the “crisis of belief.”

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II

We must be careful how we regard the word *crisis* in this phrase. If it means that we are uprooted from the basis of belief so that we are blown about by every wind of doctrine, then “crisis” points to a *disease* (if we shift the figure of speech), a fatal sickness that finally annihilates the possibility that we shall ever understand anything. Simplemindedness will counsel us to leave it at that, and urge us to drop all further inquiry, in the conviction that intellectual inquiry is the vanity through which we contracted the disease in the first place. Now simplemindedness is nothing if not babblesome. Immediately it prattles of an ancient remedy. One has only, with continuing muscular efforts of the will, to exert and exert himself to believe what he somehow has come long since to disbelieve. But the disease has never yet yielded to such quackery.

Fortunately, the word *crisis* bears another meaning that holds much promise. It is found in Kierkegaard’s observation that man, regarded as spirit, is always in crisis — that is, “always in a critical condition.” In part, he means by this that at every instant a man must be deciding always for the claim of the Eternal — on penalty of losing his self. That this requires faith and its corollary belief who would deny? Yet, seeing this as the case is far from possessing the faith and believing. One can see it as the case while in process of losing his self — something, perhaps, no one will notice. Kierkegaard says ironically: “About such a thing as that, not much fuss is made in the world; for a self is the thing the world is the least apt to inquire about, and the thing of all things most dangerous for a man to let people notice that he has it. The greatest danger, that of losing one’s own self,

may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed."²

If the crisis of belief is understood in this respect, then we might be in a fair way toward inquiring into the basis of belief — that is, its ground. At least, to begin with, we should have taken the matter seriously — itself no mean accomplishment during a crisis of belief, when supercilious reserve is cultivated as a virtue and seriousness is laughed off the stage.

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The *ground* of belief is properly distinguished from the *necessity* for belief. Moreover, it is also to be distinguished from psychological and epistemological considerations, such as the part played in belief by motivation and validation — important as these are for a comprehensive grasp of belief's activity. In a short statement such as this, perhaps it will suffice to distinguish between the necessity for belief and the basis or ground upon which belief is established.

The *necessity* for belief can be stated simply. Belief is necessary because our knowledge is finite and subject to becoming. It can be increased or it can slip from our grasp. Aristotle³ shows that, in the case of singular and contingent things that are far removed from our senses, it is necessary to depend on another person's testimony for an adequate report of them. He calls this a defect in the knowable things themselves. There is also a defect on our part, in our intellect. Thomas Aquinas comments on Aristotle's observation of these defects.⁴ Saint Thomas says that because of our defect we are insufficiently equipped at the start for the study of divine and necessary things, even though they are the most knowable in their own nature. We must necessarily move from things less knowable in their nature to those things that in their nature are more knowable and primary. But in order to do this, we must have some acquaintance with those divine and necessary things that are not apparent. This, he says, cannot be done without believing.

It remains the case, as every learner knows, that one must at first believe what only later he will grasp as known. There is no exception to this in any branch of formal study. Is it any wonder, then, that the prophet Isaiah declared, "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established" ?⁵

Having taken this step, it should not be too difficult to make our way to the *basis* of belief. But we shall need first to pause briefly over another philosophical distinction. It is this: the cause that produces effects is different from that which grounds them. One would hardly claim that the artist

is the ground of the picture he has painted, though he is its efficient cause, its producer. The picture and the man possess different natures. In order to discover the ground of a thing, we must look to its nature and to the principle intrinsic to it.

Belief is an activity whose nature it is to *prepare* for later knowledge. Belief has always an object; it is always belief in something to be known. Belief, then, has something to attain regardless of time elapsed to attain it. Since belief cannot in and of itself convert itself into knowledge, but acts to make one ready to receive knowledge, it is dependent on knowledge for its being. More precisely — for its activity, belief depends on the force of the things we learn later. These “later things,” as final cause, draw belief to its consummation in knowledge. Clearly, belief is not belief in knowledge, but in things to be known.

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We have now come upon the basis, the *ground* of belief. Shall we say it is the immanent power by which we make ourselves ready to receive the things we are waiting to know? But, as such, this basis for belief is necessarily a grace and will not indicate the natural principle intrinsic to the act of believing. Matters left here will likely lead to that confusion which theologizes in philosophy and philosophizes in theology.

The old saw *seeing is believing* causes no end of mischief for an inquiry like this. It is just not possible for one and the same person to be believing what at the same time and in all respects he is seeing to be true. The certitude proper to believing is not caused by the rational evidence we perceive in the natural light of reason. Belief requires an act of will. It is *consent* to remain confidently making ready to receive the thing to be known. Consent is a free act and cannot be coerced. The consent in belief can be discontinued at any moment, as happens when one tires of waiting confidently before the thing to be known. For this reason we are exhorted to pray without ceasing to hold on to that which will confirm itself to us if only we will consent to affirm it.

The principle intrinsic to belief is precisely this consent, for which we are responsible, since it is the basis, the formal cause of belief and, as such, proper to its nature.

At this point theology comes forward, in its own right, to complete what philosophy has begun. It will point us to the Author and Finisher of our belief in the sovereign and highest Good. He draws us to consent to make ourselves ready to receive things beyond all that we can ask or think. And in this preparation we are continually perfected.

To this end Saint Gregory of Nyssa exhorts in the full beauty of his dis-

course: "We should then make every effort not to fall short utterly of the perfection that is possible for us, and to try to come as close to it and possess as much of it as possible. For it may be that human perfection consists precisely in this constant growth in the good."⁶

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 These remarks were prepared for the 1970 fall retreat of the Southern Pacific Region of the Association of Adventist Forums.
- 2 Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, and the Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1954), p. 165.
- 3 Aristotle *Metaphysics*, II, 1, 993b7.
- 4 Thomas Aquinas *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, III, 1.
- 5 Isaiah 7:9.
- 6 Gregory of Nyssa *Contemplation on the Life of Moses*, B-301C.

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