‘Faith’ as a special kind of cognitive state

In Christianity, the importance of faith and its role in religious life stems from its significance in the New Testament. In that context, the term is most closely related to ‘trust’ – trusting God and God’s promises. In this sense, faith is more of an attitude than a state of belief or knowledge. It is described as a ‘virtue’ along with hope and charity. However, when you trust a person, you also believe what they say. And this connects faith to belief, which is a cognitive state. Those who emphasize faith as belief argue that God reveals truths that faith accepts. Those who emphasize faith as an attitude argue that God reveals God’s self, and that the question of truths arises at the level of human interpretation of that revelation.

One position on faith, which we shall not discuss further, is that it is simply religious belief, and like all belief, religious belief is (or should be) based on evidence and argument. This view understands faith as cognitive, but not a special kind of cognitive state.

FAITH AND REVELATION

If faith is not simply religious belief formed on the basis of evidence, through the usual rational processes, what kind of cognitive state is it, and how does it relate to questions of evidence?

St Thomas Aquinas argued that faith and reason must cohere together. As rational beings, our greatest happiness will be found in worthwhile rational activity. Therefore, our greatest happiness lies in rational contact with God. However, some truths about God are beyond our ability to grasp rationally. Our intellect is dependent on our senses, and from what we experience, we are not able, for instance, to infer God’s nature. We are, however, able to demonstrate that God exists and to know some of God’s attributes (e.g. through the cosmological argument). Reason can support faith.

Aquinas understands faith as believing what someone says because you trust them. Now, if you need someone’s testimony to believe something, that must be because you cannot work it out for yourself. Because our intellect is limited, we need faith to be in contact with God. Rationally understanding a truth is better, in a sense, than believing it on someone’s testimony. So it is good to seek understanding of God. But one cannot hope to achieve this understanding without the presence of faith first.

Because what we believe by faith is beyond rational understanding, then our belief isn’t rationally compelled by evidence or argument. So faith is voluntary, it involves, to some degree, choosing to believe. Anyone who doesn’t believe what God has revealed (which he took to be Christian doctrine) lacks faith.

We can object that there is a tension between saying faith involves believing a set of truths and saying that it is voluntary. Can we choose what to believe? Aquinas replies that the disposition to believe is given to us by God.
RELIGIOUS BELIEF AS ‘BASIC’
Alvin Plantinga agrees with Aquinas that faith is a type of belief, but he defends a different relation between faith and reason (‘Reason and belief in God’).

Evidence and basic beliefs
The view that all beliefs should be proportionate to the evidence is ‘evidentialism’: We should only believe things we have evidence for, and we should only believe them with the degree of certainty that the evidence supports. It is irrational to believe anything on insufficient evidence. So we should not believe that God exists unless we have good evidence that God exists.

Plantinga argues that not all beliefs can be based on evidence, because then every belief would rest on other beliefs. So some beliefs, says Plantinga, must be acceptable without evidence. A belief is ‘basic’ if it is not accepted on the basis of other beliefs.

Many philosophers have argued that two sorts of beliefs are rightly or ‘properly’ basic: ‘self-evident’ beliefs and beliefs that are based on ‘what is evident to the senses’. If I see a brown tree, I believe ‘the tree is brown’. I don’t, even subconsciously, infer this belief: I don’t think ‘I seem to see a brown tree’, ‘What I seem to see is often accurate’, ‘Therefore, I believe the tree is brown’. I form the belief immediately in the presence of sense perception.

Plantinga says that a belief is ‘basic’ if it doesn’t rest on other beliefs, which he equates with not resting on evidence. A belief is only supported by evidence, according to him, if it is supported by other beliefs. But this is a narrow interpretation of ‘evidence’. After all, the two types of properly basic beliefs foundationalists talk about are what is self-evident and what is evident to the senses. The evidence in each of these cases is something about the belief itself or about the circumstances in which it is formed (e.g. believing ‘the tree is brown’ when looking at a brown tree). The evidence is not other beliefs, but that doesn’t mean there is no evidence for these beliefs. The evidence for believing the tree is brown is your experience, that you see a brown tree.

The distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs, then, is not between beliefs that rest on evidence and ones that don’t. Instead, basic beliefs rest on a form of evidence that isn’t itself a belief (e.g. a sense experience).

We can then argue that a belief is justified if and only if it is either properly basic or it is accepted on the basis of other beliefs, which eventually come to rest on properly basic beliefs. Any belief that is neither properly basic nor based on other beliefs is not rationally justified.

Religious belief
Plantinga argues that religious belief is basic. But how so? The existence of God is neither self-evident nor evident to the senses, belief in God isn’t properly basic. Surely, then, we should only believe that God exists if we support this belief with other beliefs. Plantinga argues that this argument is self-defeating. How do we know that ‘only what is self-evident and what is evident to the senses is properly basic’? This claim is not itself self-evident nor evident to the senses, so it is not properly basic. It also is difficult to see
how we can deduce it either from self-evident beliefs or from what is evident to the senses. So it may be that other forms of belief are also properly basic.

Many theologians, particularly in the tradition of Reformed theology (theology that came out of the Reformation), argue that religious belief is not usually accepted or held on the basis of arguments. Some argue that arguments for the existence of God don’t work; but even if they did, religious faith in God is not dependent on them.

So faith is not inferred from other beliefs, but this does not mean that it is without justification. Instead, religious beliefs are comparable to beliefs based on sense perception. We don’t believe in the existence of physical objects because we have good arguments for them; we don’t infer them from experience, they are simply given to us in experience. Likewise, the existence of God is simply apparent to the believer.

How? John Calvin argues that God implanted a direct awareness of himself in every mind. We only lose touch with this awareness through sin. Other theologians argue that we see God in creation. We don’t infer God’s existence from nature; we see God in nature. Others argue that we have a direct awareness of God in religious experience. Again, this is distinct from saying that we infer God’s existence from religious experience.

On any of these views, religious belief is basic. Faith is a distinct cognitive state, just as each of the senses provides a distinct way of knowing about the world.

**What is properly basic?**

Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists reject the claim that only self-evident beliefs and beliefs based on what is evident to the senses can be properly basic. Religious beliefs are too.

One way to support this belief is to develop the analogy with perception. Perceptual beliefs are properly basic, Plantinga suggests, because they are caused by the circumstances in which they are formed (e.g. the experience) and are a product of ‘proper functioning’. My belief that ‘the tree is brown’ when I’m looking at a tree is caused by my looking at the tree, and is a product of my senses and cognition working properly.

So we can ask: Is the belief that God exists caused by the circumstances Reformed theologians appeal to or are people’s beliefs in the existence of God caused by something else entirely, e.g. upbringing? Second, is forming this belief an example of proper functioning? Is it part of the proper functioning of the human mind to see God in nature? Is religious experience an example of proper functioning? Arguments from psychology and the social sciences that try to explain religious belief and experience could suggest that they are not.

**FAITH AND DIVINE GRACE**

Properly basic beliefs can be defeated. For example, if I know that I’m in a museum of optical illusions, I won’t believe what I see. Perceptual experience gives us prima facie justification; we treat perceptual experiences as veridical unless we have reason to doubt them.

Plantinga argues the same is true for religious belief. Even if it is properly basic, that does not mean that it is immune to arguments against the existence of God. These may defeat our belief in the existence of God if they are not answered.
However, if perception was always faulty, generally unreliable, then it would be unreasonable to form beliefs about the world on the basis of perception alone. Such beliefs, then, would not be properly basic. An objection of this kind can be made to religious faith. People do not generally agree in the beliefs they form about God (either God’s existence or God’s nature). So whose faith (or lack of it) is an example of proper functioning and whose is faulty? And why do so many people ‘malfuction’?

Plantinga appeals to the idea that our cognitive abilities are damaged by ‘original sin’ (Warranted Christian Belief). For example, what we think to be reasonable or rational to believe might be a reflection of our pride or self-centredness. This is why so many people ‘malfuction’ in forming their basic beliefs about religious matters.

Aquinas rejects the strong version of this, since he claims that our limited intellect can at least know that God exists using reason. Plantinga emphasises more strongly the idea that faith is a gift from God, a matter of divine grace. By God’s grace, Plantinga argues, we come to be able to function properly, and so form the right basic beliefs.

The thought that faith is given by divine grace comes from the New Testament book of Romans, Ch. 4, in which St Paul asks how we can be ‘justified before God’. He answers that we could never earn this through good deeds; we can only be justified by faith. This entails that faith itself cannot be ‘worked at’ or ‘earned’ – so it must be a gift from God.

That faith requires divine grace for proper functioning does not make it irrational. Just as perception is rational, in the sense of being part of normal cognition, Plantinga argues that the sorts of experiences that support belief in God are likewise part of reason (functioning properly). If he is right, then faith is a form of reason and trying to draw a contrast between the two is mistaken.