CHAPTER 1

Faith

"I believe in God." This terse opening phrase of the Apostles' Creed leads us directly into our first theological topic. What does it mean to talk about "believing in God"? What are we to understand by words such as "belief" and "faith"?

The biblical sense of the word "faith" has a number of aspects. One biblical theme is of particular importance: the idea of trusting in God, related in the famous Old Testament account of the calling of Abraham (Genesis 15:1–6). This tells how God promised to give Abraham countless descendants, as numerous as the stars of the night sky. Abraham believed God – that is, trusted the promise that was made to him. Similarly, the crowds around Jesus are often described as having "faith" – meaning that they believed that he had some special status, identity, or authority, and would be able to heal them from their illnesses, or deal with their concerns (e.g., Luke 5:20; 17:19). Here again the basic idea is trust, in this case mingled with discernment that there is something about Jesus which merits such an attitude of trust.

In everyday language, words like "faith" and "belief" have come to mean something like "a weak form of knowledge."

I know that the chemical formula for water is H_2O, or that the earth rotates around the sun. When I say "I know" that the capital of the United States of America is Washington, DC, I mean that this statement can be verified. But when I say "I believe in God," this is widely understood to mean something like "I think that there is a God, but I cannot demonstrate this with any degree of certainty."

This everyday use of the terms "faith" and "belief" is misleading, however, as it does not do justice to the complexity of the theological notion of "faith." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western philosophy widely believed that anything worth believing could be *proved* – whether by logical reasoning, or by scientific experimentation. As the great nineteenth-century mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845–79), argued: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." This "positivism" had a deep impact on Western culture, and its influence still lingers. The idea of "faith in God" was ridiculed by some rationalist writers, who argued that unless God's existence could be proved, there was no reason to pay the slightest attention to this alleged divinity.

Yet with the passing of time, the credibility of this position has been severely weakened. It has become increasingly clear that many of the fundamental beliefs of Western culture lie beyond proof. The philosopher of science Michael Polanyi pointed out that certain unprovable beliefs lay behind the working methods of the natural sciences. As Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–92) pointed out in his poem *The Ancient Sage*, nothing that was actually worth believing could be proved in the way that people like Clifford demanded:

> For nothing worthy proving can be proven,
> Nor yet disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
> Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt.

Since then, philosophers have become much more realistic. Some things can indeed be proved; but some, by their very nature, lie beyond proof. God is one of these.

The basic Christian attitude to proofs for the existence of God can be set out as follows:

1 The existence of God is something that reason cannot prove conclusively. Yet the fact that the existence of God lies *beyond* reason does not for one moment mean that the existence of God is *contrary* to reason.
2 Certain excellent reasons may be put forward for suggesting that God exists; these do not, however, count as "proofs" in the sense of "rigorous logical demonstrations" or "conclusive scientific experiments."
3 Faith is about trust in God, rather than just agreeing that God exists.

We have already begun to move towards talking about "proofs" for God's existence. In what follows, we shall explore this aspect of Christian theology in a little more detail, focusing on the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, one of Christianity's most interesting theologians.

Proofs of God's Existence?

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74) is probably the most famous and influential theologian of the Middle Ages. Born in Italy, he achieved his fame through his teaching and writing at the University of Paris and other Northern universities. His fame rests chiefly on his *Summa Theologiae*, composed towards the end of his life and not totally finished at the time of his death. However, he also wrote many other significant works, particularly the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which represents a major statement of the rationality of the Christian faith, and especially the existence of God. Aquinas believed it was entirely proper to identify pointers towards the existence of God, drawn from general human experience of the world. His "Five Ways" represent five lines of argument in support of the existence of God, each of which draws on some aspect of the world which "points" to the existence of its creator.

So what kind of pointers does Aquinas identify? The basic line of thought guiding Aquinas is that the world mirrors God as its creator – an idea which is given more formal expression in his doctrine of the "analogy of being." Just as an artist might sign a painting to identify it as his handiwork, so God has written a divine "signature" upon creation. What we observe in the world –for example, its signs of ordering – can be explained if God was its creator. If God both brought the world into existence, and stamped the divine image and likeness upon it, then something of God's nature can be known from creation.

So where might we look in creation to find evidence for the existence of God? Aquinas argues that the ordering of the world is the most convincing evidence of God's existence and wisdom. This basic assumption underlies each of the Five Ways, although it is of particular importance in the case of the argument often referred to as the "argument from design" or the "teleological argument." We shall consider the first and last of these two "ways" to illustrate the issues.

The first way begins from the observation that things in the world are in motion or change. The world is not static, but is dynamic. Examples of this are easy to list. Rain falls from the sky. Stones roll down valleys. The earth revolves around the sun (a fact, incidentally, unknown to Aquinas). This, the first of Aquinas' arguments, is normally referred to as the "argument from motion"; however, it is clear that the "movement" in question is actually understood in more general terms, so that the term "change" is more appropriate as a translation.

So how did nature come to be in motion? Why is it changing? Why isn't it static? Aquinas argues that everything which moves is moved by something else. For every motion, there is a cause. Things don't just move; they are moved by something else. Now, each cause of motion must itself have a cause. And that cause must have a cause as well. And so Aquinas argues that there is a whole series of causes of motion lying behind the world as we know it. Unless there is an infinite number of these causes, Aquinas argues, there must be a single cause right at the origin of the series. From this original cause of motion, all other motion

is ultimately derived. This is the origin of the great chain of causality which we see reflected in the way the world behaves. From the fact that things are in motion, Aquinas thus argues for the existence of a single original cause of all this motion. This, Aquinas insists, is none other than God.

In more recent times, this argument has been restated in terms of God as the one who brought the universe into existence. For this reason, it is often referred to as the "cosmological" argument (from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning "universe"). The most commonly encountered statement of the argument runs along the following lines:

1 Everything within the universe depends on something else for its existence.
2 What is true of its individual parts is also true of the universe itself.
3 The universe thus depends on something else for its existence for as long as it has existed or will exist.
4 The universe thus depends on God for its existence.

The argument basically assumes that the existence of the universe is something that requires explanation. It will be clear that this type of argument relates directly to modern cosmological research, particularly the "big bang" theory of the origins of the cosmos.

The fifth and final way is known as the "teleological argument," which derives its name from the Greek word *telos*, meaning "purpose" or "goal." Aquinas notes that the world shows obvious traces of intelligent design. Natural processes and objects seem to be adapted with certain definite objectives in mind. They seem to have a purpose. They seem to have been designed. But things don't design themselves: they are caused and designed by someone or something else. Arguing from this observation, Aquinas concludes that the source of this natural ordering must be conceded to be God.

This argument was developed by William Paley (1743–1805). According to Paley, the world was like a watch. It showed evidence of intelligent design, and having been created for a

purpose. If there was a watch, there must also be a watchmaker. Paley was particularly impressed by the construction of the human eye, which he argued was so complex and highly developed that it could only be the result of intelligent design and construction.

Paley's argument was highly influential in nineteenth-century England. However, its plausibility was eroded by Charles Darwin's (1809–82) theory of evolution, which offered an alternative explanation of how such complex structures arose. In his *Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin insisted that these could be explained on a purely natural basis, without need for an intelligent divine designer. Nevertheless, the "argument from design" remains an intriguing idea, which continues to fascinate people.

It will be obvious that Aquinas' arguments are similar in terms of their structure. Each depends on tracing a causal sequence back to its single origin, and identifying this with God. These are thus not "proofs" in the strict sense of the word, as they actually presuppose God's existence! Aquinas' approach is actually rather different. His argument is that, if we presuppose that God made the world, we end up with a way of making sense of the world that makes a lot of sense of things. In other words, Aquinas is arguing that, seen from the Christian perspective, the existence of God resonates well with what can be observed of the world. It is thus a confirmation, but not a proof, of God's existence.

However, other theologians have viewed such "proofs" with skepticism. The great French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) had two major concerns about the kind of approach adopted by Aquinas. First, he found it difficult to accept that the rather abstract philosophical "god" which resulted from such arguments was anything like the living God of the Old and New Testaments. In his *Pensées*, Pascal put it like this: "The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning, and so complex, that they have little impact."

Second, Pascal argued that these "proofs" assumed that God was known primarily through reason. For Pascal, the human heart also had its reasons for believing (or not believing!) in God. "We

know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart." The appeal of God to the human condition went far beyond any resonance between the world as we know it and the ideas of the Christian faith. It extends to include a deep-seated longing for God, which Pascal held to be of major importance in the long, unended human quest for God and final meaning.

In the end, according to Pascal, you cannot argue someone into the Kingdom of God. The existence of God is not something that can be proved. Equally, it is not something that can be *disproved*. It is easy to overlook the fact that atheism is also a faith. An atheist believes that there is no God. This belief, however, is just as difficult to prove as the Christian belief that there is indeed a God.

Faith is Beyond Reason But Not Contrary to Reason

One of the most important recent discussions of the relation of faith and reason is found in Pope John Paul II's 1998 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason"). This letter sets out the classic Christian approach to the relation of faith and reason in a very accessible way. In what follows, we shall explore this important document's arguments.

The letter opens with a declaration that faith and reason can work together. "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves." This is a rich and powerful statement, which deserves close attention. The basic idea is that human beings long to know the truth, and are constantly searching for it. "In the far reaches of the human heart there is a seed of desire and nostalgia for God."

So can reason alone lead humanity to this truth? The letter pays a handsome tribute to philosophy, as the legitimate human quest for truth. Philosophy is "one of the noblest of human tasks," which is "driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of

existence." Yet unaided human reason cannot fully penetrate to the mystery of life. It cannot answer questions such as "why are we here?" For this reason, God graciously chose to make these things known through revelation which would otherwise remain unknown. "The truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason."

The letter stresses that faith is not blind trust, opposed to the evidence of the world. Rather, it points out that the world – which Christians see as God's creation – is studded with hints of God's existence and nature. It appeals to St. Paul's sermon preached at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17) in arguing that it is entirely reasonable to infer the existence of God from the wonders of nature and a human sense of divinity within us. These do not count as "proofs"; they are, however, confirmation or corroboration of the basic themes of faith. In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury argued that "faith seeks understanding." Having believed, we long to understand the inner dynamics and structures of our faith.

Similar lines of argument are developed by John Polkinghorne, one of Britain's leading theoretical physicists with a strong interest in Christian theology. Throughout his many books, Polkinghorne stresses that Christianity, like the natural sciences, is concerned about making sense of the world on the basis of the evidence that is available. "Faith is not a question of shutting one's eyes, gritting one's teeth, and believing the impossible. It involves a leap, but a leap into the light rather than the dark." Faith is to be understood as "motivated belief, based on evidence." It is rigorously based on reflection on the world – on the various "clues" it offers to its origins and nature.

For example, Polkinghorne argues that science shows us a universe that is deeply intelligible, rationally beautiful, finely tuned for fruitfulness, intrinsically rational, partly veiled in character, open in its process and information-generating in its nature. These remarkable properties, he argues, are not just happy accidents. They are something that needs to be explained. For Polkinghorne, the best explanation of these observations is

that the world is the orderly creation of God. The approach is evidence-based, asking how what we observe may best be explained. It is not conclusive; it is, however, highly suggestive.

Polkinghorne also stresses the importance of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth for Christian faith. Jesus is part of the evidence that has to be assessed:

> The center of my faith lies in my encounter with the figure of Jesus Christ, as I meet him in the gospels, in the witness of the church and in the sacraments. Here is the heart of my Christian faith and hope. Yet, at a subsidiary but supportive level, there are also hints of God's presence which arise from our scientific knowledge. The actual way we answer the question "How?" turns out to point us on to pressing also the question "Why?," so that science by itself is found not to be sufficiently intellectually satisfying.

Although some atheist writers persist in portraying Christian faith as a blind leap in the dark, it is clear that this is not the case. Faith, as Thomas Aquinas points out, has its reasons.

Up to this point, we have considered faith primarily in terms of intellectual assent. For Thomas Aquinas, faith could be defined as "assent to divine revelation." Yet there is more to the idea than this. During the sixteenth century, particular emphasis came to be placed on the relational aspects of faith. To "believe in God" is about more than accepting that God exists; it is about *trusting* that God. In what follows, we shall consider this important aspect of faith.

Faith and God's Promises

Martin Luther (1483–1546) is one of a number of writers who stressed that faith, as the Christian church understands the term, is far more than intellectual assent. Certainly, faith believes that certain things are true. There is unquestionably an element of understanding to faith. But there is more to it than that. For

Luther, faith is fundamentally trust. He often uses the Latin word *fiducia*, which could be translated as "confidence," to denote the aspect of faith he wants to emphasize. Faith is about trusting a God who makes promises, and whose promises may be relied upon. In his major 1520 essay *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther stressed this aspect of faith:

> Where there is the Word of the God who makes promises, there must necessarily be the faith of the person who accepts those promises. It is clear that the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of a promising God who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy goes before us and offers us a word of promise.

Three points relating to Luther's idea of faith may be singled out for discussion:

1 Faith has a personal, rather than a purely historical, reference.
2 Faith concerns trust in the promises of God.
3 Faith unites the believer to Christ.

We shall consider each of these points individually.

First, faith is not simply historical knowledge. Luther argues that a faith which is content to believe in the historical reliability of the gospels is not a faith which changes our relationship with God. Sinners are perfectly capable of trusting in the historical details of the gospels; but these facts of themselves are not adequate for true Christian faith. Saving faith concerns believing and trusting that Christ was born for us personally, and has accomplished for us the work of salvation. As Luther puts this point:

> I have often spoken about two different kinds of faith. The first of them is like this: you believe that it is true that Christ is the person who is described and proclaimed in the gospels, but you do not believe that he is such a person for you. You doubt if you can receive that from him, and you think: "Yes, I'm sure he is that person for someone else (like Peter and Paul, and for religious and

> holy people). But is he that person for me? Can I confidently expect to receive everything from him that the saints expect?" You see, this faith is nothing. It receives nothing of Christ, and tastes nothing of him either. It cannot feel joy, nor love of him or for him. This is a faith related to Christ, but not a faith in Christ . . . The only faith which deserves to be called Christian is this: you believe unreservedly that it is not only for Peter and the saints that Christ is such a person, but also for you yourself – in fact, for you more than anyone else.

The second point concerns faith as trust (Latin: *fiducia*). This notion of faith is prominent in the sixteenth-century conception of faith, and occurs frequently in the writings of both Luther and Calvin. Luther uses a nautical analogy to bring out the importance of trust and commitment in the life of faith: "Everything depends upon faith. The person who does not have faith is like someone who has to cross the sea, but is so frightened that he does not trust the ship. And so he stays where he is, and is never saved, because he will not get on board and cross over." Faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and rely upon it. To use Luther's analogy: faith is not simply about believing that a ship exists; it is about stepping into it, and entrusting ourselves to it.

But what are we being asked to trust? Are we being asked simply to have faith in faith? The question could perhaps be phrased more accurately: who are we being asked to trust? For Luther, the answer was unequivocal: faith is about being prepared to put one's trust in the promises of God, and the integrity and faithfulness of the God who made those promises. Believers "must be certain that the one who has promised forgiveness to whoever confesses their sins will most faithfully fulfill this promise." For Luther, faith is only as strong as the one in whom we believe and trust. The efficacy of faith does not rest upon the intensity with which we believe, but in the reliability of the one in whom we believe. It is not the greatness of our faith, but the greatness of God, which counts. As Luther puts it:

> Even if my faith is weak, I still have exactly the same treasure and the same Christ as others. There is no difference . . . It is like two people, each of whom owns a hundred gold coins. One may carry them around in a paper sack, the other in an iron chest. But despite these differences, they both own the same treasure. Thus the Christ who you and I own is one and the same, irrespective of the strength or weakness of your faith or mine.

The content of faith matters far more than its intensity. It is pointless to trust passionately in someone who is not worthy of trust; even a modicum of faith in someone who is totally reliable is vastly to be preferred. Trust is not, however, an occasional attitude. For Luther, it is an undeviating trusting outlook upon life, a constant stance of conviction of the trustworthiness of the promises of God. As Karl Barth put this in the twentieth century: "In God alone is there faithfulness, and faith is the trust that we may hold to Him, to His promise and to His guidance. To hold to God is to rely on the fact that God is there for me, and to live in this certainty."

In the third place, faith unites the believer with Christ. Luther states this principle clearly in his 1520 writing, *The Liberty of a Christian*:

> Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. As Paul teaches us, Christ and the soul become one flesh by this mystery (Ephesians 5:31–2). And if they are one flesh, and if the marriage is for real – indeed, it is the most perfect of all marriages, and human marriages are poor examples of this one true marriage – then it follows that everything that they have is held in common, whether good or evil. So the believer can boast of and glory of whatever Christ possesses, as though it were his or her own; and whatever the believer has, Christ claims as his own. Let us see how this works out, and see how it benefits us. Christ is full of grace, life and salvation. The human soul is full of sin, death and damnation. Now let faith come between them. Sin, death and damnation will be Christ's. And grace, life and salvation will be the believer's.

Faith, then, is not assent to an abstract set of doctrines – which is perhaps a weakness of Aquinas' approach. Rather, it is a

"wedding ring" (Luther), pointing to mutual commitment and union between Christ and the believer. It is the response of the whole person of the believer to God, which leads in turn to the real and personal presence of Christ in the believer. "To know Christ is to know his benefits," wrote Philip Melanchthon, Luther's colleague at Wittenberg. Faith makes both Christ and his benefits – such as forgiveness, justification, and hope – available to the believer. Calvin makes this point with characteristic clarity: "Having ingrafted us into his body, [Christ] makes us partakers, not only of all his benefits, but also of himself." Christ, Calvin insists, is not "received merely in the understanding and imagination. For the promises offer him, not so that we end up with the mere sight and knowledge of him, but that we enjoy a true communication of him."

Engaging With a Text

In this opening chapter, we have explored some aspects of faith. We have seen how faith can be understood in a number of ways. To believe in God is both about accepting that a God exists, and also that this God can be known and trusted. We have already looked at some ideas in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther to illustrate these points. Now we are going to try to take things further, and interact with a theological text.

Why is this so important? Because at some point, you are going to need to begin reading works of theology for yourself. It is therefore important to begin interacting with these in a manageable way as soon as possible. Some chapters of this book have a section which will help you to engage with a short extract from a leading theologian or theological document. These will be drawn from a variety of Christian traditions, offering you experience of a number of different approaches. You will be guided through this process. To begin with, the texts will be short – but gradually, they will become longer. Initially, you will be given a lot of help – but as you gain in confidence, there will be less need

for this assistance. We are going to begin this process of engagement with a short but fascinating extract from a leading Protestant writer on the theme of faith.

The text in question is John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was first published in 1536 and went through many editions until the final, definitive edition of 1559. Calvin is a very precise and logical theologian, who is generally very easy to read and understand. In what follows, we are going to interact with the definition of faith which he sets out in this major work. Here is the definition:

> Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Take a few moments to read this through, and take in what Calvin is saying. Then use these questions as a way of engaging with his ideas.

1 Note how Calvin's definition of faith is *trinitarian*. We shall explore this aspect of the Christian faith in more detail in chapter 6. For the moment, notice how Calvin ascribes different aspects of faith to each of the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. Try to write down what each of these aspects are. If you are studying this book in a discussion group, spend some time talking about this, making sure that you are happy about the threefold structure of this definition.
2 Now note that the first part of this definition declares that faith is a "steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us." Notice first how Calvin uses language that expresses confidence in God, and stresses God's reliability. Notice also how faith is defined as

"knowledge" – but a certain very specific kind of knowledge. It is not just "knowledge"; in fact, it is not even "knowledge of God." It is specifically "knowledge of *God's benevolence towards us.*" Calvin's language is very specific and intentional. Faith is grounded and based in God's *goodness.* It is not simply about accepting that God exists, but about encountering God's kindness to us. Do you agree with Calvin at this point?

3 The definition now goes on to declare that faith is "founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ." Again, notice how faith is again affirmed to be about knowledge – the use of the word "truth" is very important here. Calvin wants to make it absolutely clear that faith is not a human invention or delusion, but something that is grounded in the bedrock of truth. But notice how Calvin then proceeds to link this with a "gracious promise of God." For Calvin, we are dealing with a God who makes promises to us – promises which can be trusted and relied upon. You might like to compare this idea with Luther's views on the matter, which we considered earlier in this chapter, and notice their similarity at this point. It is important to see how Calvin identifies Christ as the confirmation or means of disclosure of these promises. You might like to look up 2 Corinthians 1:20 and see how Calvin's approach relates to that text.

4 Calvin clearly holds that faith involves both mind and heart. If you are in a discussion group, you might like to explore how he approaches each of these. Note how, once more, Calvin affirms that faith is indeed about knowledge – something that affects the way in which we think, affecting our minds. Yet it is more than this: it is something that transforms us internally. Notice how Calvin's language about the "heart" points to a deeper change within us than just mental acceptance of an idea. Calvin sees God as active throughout the process of coming to faith. Faith is not

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human insight; it is personal knowledge of God made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Having explored the meaning of "faith," we may now turn to explore its content, beginning with God.