

Faith, doubt and evidence



by JONATHAN GAISMAN | @JONATHANGAISMAN

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An arch from the cloisters in Norwich Cathedral frames the towering Norwich Cathedral above a quadrangle pictured on 7th August 2023. (Shutterstock)

In a criminal prosecution, the jury may not convict unless it is satisfied so that it is sure of the defendant's guilt. Whether the standard of proof is met depends on the evidence deployed in the trial. Advocates adduce evidence; witnesses give it; documents contain it; judges and juries make decisions in light of it. The process is an adaptation of the scientific method which has applied with suitable modification to all areas of empirical enquiry since the time of Francis Bacon.

This is plain sailing enough. Today however, I address a harder issue. What is the role of evidence in the domain of religious faith? Is faith won by an exercise in weighing facts so as to satisfy a given standard? Is it the case that the surer we are of the propositions of the Nicene Creed, the greater our faith, while the more we doubt them, the less our faith? If that is so, it implies that doubt is the opposite of faith. Yet many wise Christians do not hold with that idea. Bishop Richard Chartres' staple confirmation sermon preached that doubt is not antithetical to faith. The theologian Paul Tillich said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Seen in this softer light, faith is not so much propositional as dispositional. Father Cormac Rigby defines it as "being open to the possibility that God exists". Faith is not therefore the shrill assertion of a given state of facts, to disbelieve which is error, but a receptiveness to the ultimate ground of being, whose loving presence underwrites all mature systems of religious belief. If something like this be so, it suggests that recourse to the concepts of evidence and proof are not what faith is about at all, and that doubt is faith's inevitable concomitant.

This is not to imply that facts play no part in the Christian faith – that it is a mere state of private devotionalism. One has to locate belief in some mental space with, so to speak, an x and a y axis. Christianity is blessed or burdened, according to your point of view, with a formidable quantity of doctrinal baggage compared with other religions. It invites belief in the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the appearance of God the Father at the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Miracles – and so on, before one even gets to the most important doctrines of the Resurrection, Atonement, the Ascension, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. What is our attitude to these orthodoxies to be?



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however, if we are the realm of facts, they must be approached even-handedly, as they would be in court. You cannot start from the assumption that one side has a monopoly on truth. If you go on the Alpha course, you will be invited to accept the circular argument that every fact related in the New Testament is the literal truth because it is the word of God. On what authority is it the word of God? The New Testament's. The Christian who believes that is pulling himself up by his own bootstraps.

Approached with an open mind, the Gospels, for all their spiritual heft and power, can only take you so far. The accounts of the Resurrection themselves would read no differently if every word of them was false, but the people who wrote them devoutly believed that they were true. As for the line: "No man cometh to the Father but by me", did Jesus really say that, or did the Evangelist in perfect good faith write those words because that was his conviction?

If we are looking at the evidence, we have to look at all of it. Galileo was instructed that to postulate the existence of sunspots was heretical, because the sun was perfect. Yet the sun is not perfect, and there they are. No more is the New Testament perfect. Talking of accounts of the Resurrection, we need for example to confront the predominant opinion of modern scholars that the last verses of St Mark's gospel, which describe the appearances of the risen Christ, are a later addition by a different hand. Gospel truth? Who knows? The point is that, if we treat them as evidence, we cannot insulate these texts from critical examination by some *a priori* assumption that they are immune from it.

On this more nuanced view, the New Testament is at least the repository of perhaps the most precious and beautiful religious *mythos* ever created. By *mythos*, I do not mean myth, but even I did, I do not intend to say that myths are untrue. Only children think that. Truth is not confined to literal truth, and the sublime truthfulness of the Gospels is not to be reduced to the prosaic accuracy of a scientific narrative. A Bishop of Durham once got into trouble for saying that the Resurrection was more than a conjuring trick with bones. He was badly misquoted, but apart from that, what was the fuss about? To cite Paul Tillich again: "When [religion] defended its great symbols, not as symbols, but as literal stories, it had already lost the battle."

Some believers, particularly those in the Evangelical constituency, are certain of their empirical faith – their literal stories. They think that the Resurrection is an event of the sort that could have been captured on film. They also believe that you dispute this at your soul's peril. But people who believe that you are in danger of eternal damnation for not being their sort of Christian hold a conviction no less extreme than Muslims who believe that everyone else is an infidel. What indeed is the difference between these two fanatical positions?

Since, moreover, one may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, the whole concept of damnation is rather problematical, when you think about it. Does God really mete out eternal punishment and reward, dependent on the precise degree to which a human has fallen short in his lifetime from a standard which he is inevitably (owing to his God-given nature) not going to meet, the extent of the allowable falling-short being entirely obscure, and the punishment almost by definition being disproportionate to the crime?

To those who possess a faith made certain by the evidence, that is all that matters. It does not signify how the message is conveyed or by what acts of worship it is accompanied. The proof is all around us. How can anyone, except someone already convinced to a certainty, have come up with the idea of closing the churches at the outset of Covid even to their own priests, as if these physical spaces did not really matter? Or of thinking that the Primate's kitchen table was a suitable place to celebrate an Easter Eucharist in 2020 of all years? Or of instituting the current C of E policy which deliberately deprives parish communities of their priests and churches, instituting instead a system of vast, impersonal benefices? As Fr Marcus Walker has recently written, there is today one of these units in the diocese of Truro which comprises no fewer than 23 churches, looked after by a total of two priests, one of whom (if you can believe it) does not work on a Sunday.

The trouble with faith of this sort is that it tends to omit one of the most important aspects of religion: its link with beauty. If all that concerns you is the calorific value of what you consume, it does not matter how it tastes, or where you eat it. On this view, the exclusive truth of the New Testament is sufficient nourishment, like so much astronaut food. The good news is the same whether shared in a great cathedral like this one, or broadcast from a sitting room online, whether in the timeless rhythms of the Prayer Book or in the dreary cadences of the management consultant. Who needs an actual church, who needs traditional Sunday worship, sunlight through stained glass, Romanesque arches, the music of Bach, a liturgy of the age and quality of Shakespeare, a community of fellow-worshippers, hallowed gestures and rituals that stand as embodied metaphors of the bridge between worlds which is what religion should be – who needs any of that? Well, one answer is that many of us stand in great need of these things, and we wish our church leaders would provide more of them.

So there is another approach to Christian faith – less simplistic than the conviction that its truth is unassailably established beyond reasonable doubt on the evidence, and that all paths to God except one are wrong. On what foundations might such a faith be built? I conclude by identifying three inter-related points of departure. There are many others.

First, one truth or many truths? From the 4th century BC onwards, Greek philosophers taught that there is only one truth, and that its opposite is falsehood. Christianity imbibed this belief entirely. It represented a departure from much pre-Socratic thinking, and it would baffle many followers of other religions today. Think of the children's poem, Sufi in origin, *The Six*

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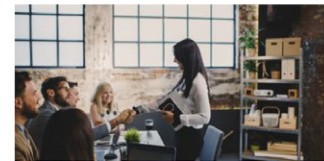
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Blind Men of Hindustan: they all touch different parts of an elephant, and their evidence-based approach leads them to think that they have encountered six different objects. Some religions seem more comfortable than others with the obvious possibility that there are different paths up the same mountain.

Paradox provides another avenue to truth, though again it is not a Christian speciality. The late Jonathan Sacks used to tell this story. A certain devout Jew was troubled about whether a given theological proposition was correct. He consulted the wisest rabbi he knew, who pronounced it to be true. Still unsure, the man consulted a second rabbi, no less learned, who pronounced the belief false. Understandably confused, the man asked God which of the rabbis was right. The answer from God came: "They're both right." The man said in exasperation: "But they can't both be right." God replied: "All three of you are right."

Secondly, we can tread the ancient path of the *via negativa*. This involves facing up to the fact that any imagination we can have of the supreme being is bound to fall short. As Richard Chartres has said, God is "no-thing" and if we think we have defined Him, we have created an idol. Any religion which ascribes to God characteristics exhibited by humans is treading on thin ice. Only the word love will do, though even this is ultimately a metaphor for the divine energy that is expressed in the un-words which many religions use for God. As for the already mentioned concept of divine judgement, perhaps God no more wears a full-bottomed wig than a white beard. If only we put our brains away, we can experience Him differently. This is how the point is put in the medieval text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. "All rational beings have in them two principal faculties, one a faculty of knowledge, and the second a faculty of love; and God, their maker, is forever beyond the reach of the first of these, the intellectual faculty; but by means of the second, the loving faculty, he can be fully grasped by each individual being."

Thirdly, we can embrace mystery. Christianity in its early centuries was an unequivocally mystical, non-literal religion. If you read Olivier Clément's *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, you will see how far from its origins our religion has strayed, under the influence of successive movements, of which the so-called Enlightenment is the most notorious. Not everything can be comprehended in words. Indeed, the most important things can hardly be expressed in words at all: art; music; love; God. This necessary inarticulateness in the face of God's mystery is the guarantor of humility and an aid to wordless prayer (the best sort). As TS Eliot says, quoting *The Cloud*. "With the drawing of this love, and the voice of this calling." In other words, belief arises not as the result of a Baconian quasi-scientific inquiry, but because some of us are drawn and called, and have no choice but to respond.

The encounter of the sceptical disciple Thomas with the risen Christ in St John's Gospel, chapter 22, is one of the most dramatic and moving moments in the New Testament. Thomas has said that he will not believe in the Resurrection unless he is persuaded on the evidence. He needs not just to see the risen Christ, but to go so far as to put his fingers into the Master's wounds. Many artistic depictions of this meeting show Thomas doing just this, before exclaiming "My Lord and my God". But St John does not say that he so much as touched Him. Another interpretation of this story is that in the end Thomas did not require the evidence of physical contact with the resurrected body of Jesus in order to believe. His spontaneous utterance is not a case of him being satisfied beyond reasonable doubt, but rather represents a fundamental change of what I have called disposition. In that moment, he is overwhelmed by the impulse to believe. He believes because he has to.

A comprehensive defence of the religious disposition is contained in the final chapter of Iain McGilchrist's great book, *The Matter with Things*. Having described the evidence-based faith of the fundamentalist as "blind", he says this: "There is nothing blind about faith, but there is nothing certain about it, either. It is like trusting the outstretched hand that helps you ford the stream: you see the stream, you see the hand; you do not blindly step, but step you must."

This is an edited version of an address given at the Justice Service in Norwich Cathedral on Sunday 15th October 2023. Jonathan Gaisman is a KC practising in commercial law and a writer on cultural and other topics. He has written at greater length on the subject of faith, doubt, evidence and scepticism, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210124090809/https://standpointmag.co.uk/features-september-2018-jonathan-gaisman-the-devout-sceptic-for-those-of-little-faith/>

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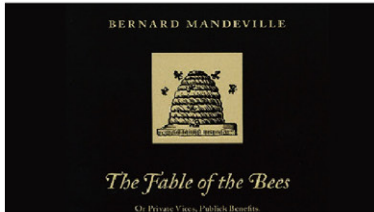
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