

10

One Another

The Pauline letters were letters from the apostle to the churches, not letters from God to St Paul.

JAMES BARR (1972), 123

CHRISTIANS PUT THEIR TRUST in God. To put one's trust in somebody is a responsible action, not a passive experience. A hopeful inquirer needs to be given reasons for taking that plunge. A mystic may be able to find God directly and trust God simply without depending upon intermediaries, but most people need the testimony of one another. We rely, explicitly or implicitly, upon the cumulative evidence of witnesses. I can decide to put my trust in God, but I cannot decide that I will trust God to exist.¹ What I can do is attend to the many people who have testified that God is indeed findable, in the hope that I can belong with them.

For belief to be reasonable it needs the support of reasoning; but that does not have to mean setting oneself doggedly to *think*, all on one's own. Believers are not incessantly pursuing arguments. They are entering into a tradition. Nobody has to do all the work in isolation. But that may sound suspiciously like a vicious circle. Do we all go round and round putting the onus of proof upon somebody else, an endless loop where nobody takes any responsibility? Is faith as happy-go-lucky as the children's game of "pass the parcel," which keeps going until the music stops?

1. See above, Chapter 8, heading.

Part II: Belonging

Looking for a more reliable foundation, I must go back to the philosophy of my youth and take heed of the skeptical doubt about how beliefs can be well-founded.² In the mid-twentieth century, one was supposed to begin where Descartes began, sure of his own existence but resolved to doubt anything he could possibly doubt, even questioning his trust that other things and people existed beyond himself. To begin here made “How do you *know*?” look like the main question that students of philosophy had to address.

But the method of doubt does not turn out after all to be a good starting point for exploring the world around us. Arguing with myself keeps me closed in upon myself, out of touch with whatever else there may be. We can extricate ourselves from the trap that Descartes set, by refusing to start with the assumption that each person is all alone, but asking instead how I or anyone can find out what the real world is like. Then the parallel problem of finding out whether God is real may likewise become less intractable.

Descartes’s question about whether we truly know anything would remain unanswerable for anyone who really began as a lone thinker. But isolation is nobody’s real starting point. People are born into families and learn from their elders how to live in the world and explore it. Recognizing other people and communicating with them comes before, not after, finding out by experience and reasoning what kind of world we are inhabiting together.³ Most of what we know, we have been taught. The characteristic human gift of language is no decorative garnish. Keeping in touch with one another is a basic human need and a basic human capacity. Autonomy is all very well, but interdependence is better for human creatures.⁴

My terms of reference are that I have lived all my life among other human beings, at home in the same world. I never made a discovery that other people are real like me. They brought me up to be like them. This account of how people arrive at understanding makes sense because we have seen it work in practice: not Descartes’ argument, “I think, therefore I am,” but the dawning awareness, “What I am is a human being.”

If one followed Descartes into skeptical doubt, then it would not do to trust that any of one’s assumptions answer to reality, whether about the material world, or other minds, or God. The reply to Descartes must be: there

2. See above, Chapter 7, 50–51; Oppenheimer, *On Being Someone*, Chapter 2, e.g., 13.

3. See Oppenheimer, *On Being Someone*, 14–15.

4. See above, Chapter 1, 10.

is no need to follow that path.⁵ That is not the way anyone has to live. Rather than starting alone and fortunately finding companions, we recognize ourselves all along in a world full of people who experience events together and tell each other about what to expect. We accept that they are what they seem to be; and they turn out to be reliable enough to keep confirming that hypothesis rather than upsetting it.⁶

Responsible religious faith can take a similar route. Belief in God is more reliable if it can be a joint undertaking. I do not have to work out my own creed, but learn what other people teach me: so long as somewhere the weight of the argument is carried. The hypothesis of faith is backed by the testimony of people through the centuries to their positive experiences of encountering God. In the stained glass windows in Chartres cathedral, there are memorable images of the Evangelists sitting on the shoulders of the prophets.

At least I am certain that human beings exist. It is not faithless to find one another more evidently real than God. When a school friend of St. Augustine died, he was deeply perplexed.⁷ He told himself to wait for God's help, but his soul "did not obey. And in this," said Augustine, "she was right because, to her, the well-loved man whom she had lost was better and more real than the shadowy being in whom I would have her trust."

At times when it seems that there is nothing there to back up Christian belief, only "the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the ebbing tide, Matthew Arnold's "Ah, love, let us be true To one another!"⁸ is a good place to stand. If I lost faith in God, faith in people would still be left. I have not lost faith in God, because I am able to trust the accumulated experience of other people. Some of them testify credibly to a direct awareness of God's presence. For the many people whose route is more indirect, deciding *who* can be trusted is just as rational as asking *what* can be proved by theoretical analysis, though less manageable by rules of logic.

This argument must not be rushed. It would be too easy to slide into saying: "Just as I believe in people because they show me, so I believe in God because God shows me." Often God does not, which is why there are far more skeptics about God than philosophical doubters about the existence of other minds. To fret that perhaps there are no other people

5. See Oppenheimer, *On Being Someone*, 19.

6. See above, Chapter 7, 47–48, Chapter 8, 59, Chapter 9, 67.

7. Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, iv, 9.

8. Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," *Poetical Works*, 401–2.

Part II: Belonging

would be an aberration. Solipsism, “sole-self-ism,” is rightly regarded as an academic exercise. Agnosticism about the existence of God has to be acknowledged as a live and honorable option, especially for people who have been confronted by indubitable evil. Most of us have to find our way with no plain sight of God’s reality. We can however discern moral reasons why the Almighty would very likely be concealed, not indeed inaccessible, but elusive, in order to allow the world to provide a setting for human creatures to live and grow.

Believers trust each other before they trust God. First, people show me that a great many people exist; and then some people show me their understanding that God exists. I am not required to depend upon an argument of my own: “Since I did not make myself, therefore there must be a God who made me: QED.” Knowledge of God is cumulative.⁹ When Isaiah “saw the Lord high and lifted up,”¹⁰ he was in the Temple where God was already worshiped, not arguing with himself like Descartes. Isaiah’s vision incorporated him into an existing tradition, to which in turn he added his inspired contribution.

More audaciously, Christians can take to heart the New Testament understanding that Christ himself, the perfect man, needed to have the experience of being taught by other people. It is not perplexing that as a child he learnt from his mother; nor that at twelve years old he asked questions of the doctors in the Temple;¹¹ nor that according to the Epistle to the Hebrews he “learnt obedience through what he suffered.”¹² The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman who argued with Jesus about whether he would heal her daughter, and won the argument,¹³ looks harder to fit into the Christian conviction that Jesus was divine and knew best all the time. This narrative becomes positively encouraging if it is allowed to illuminate what it means for God to be made man, an example of the Lord needing to find his way as a human being.

For such important lessons as where to put one’s trust, showing is better than telling. Some believers live in such a way that their lives are a strong kind of witness. Other believers live in ways so cold-hearted, or so sentimental, or so muddled, that their faith looks incredible. Atheists

9. See Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, e.g., Chapter 3.

10. Isa 6.

11. Luke 2:46.

12. Heb 5:8.

13. Matt 15:21–28; Mark 7:25–30.

see clearly how often believers go wrong, both intellectually and morally. Christians still maintain that even bad errors where we seriously mislead one another need not wreck belief in God, any more than our frequent misunderstandings of other people need make our common life an illusion. There are enough people who take up the joint enterprise of faith, who find it increasingly worthwhile, who show one another what they have found, to make it a reasonable choice to join with them in their search. Faith is, one might say, time-honored.

Christians have been glad to use the words “I know that my redeemer liveth”¹⁴ as a good way of affirming their faith. As my own creed, I feel safer with “I believe,” backed up with evidence; and the evidence is provided by the three standard kinds of authority: scripture, tradition, and reason.¹⁵ Scripture and tradition both consist of the witness of other people. Reason is my own responsibility but not my lonely responsibility. I reason better in company. As an Anglican Christian who was brought up somewhat Protestant, I am not accustomed to talk to the saints of old, but I can gratefully believe that I owe my faith to them. I can keep in touch with some of them by reading their books.

Among the candidates for trust are the people who over many centuries found themselves inspired to write the books of the Bible. Christians believe that the scriptures communicate God’s Word to them by way of human words. The people who wrote these books were real authors. The prophets and evangelists were not God’s secretaries taking dictation, never allowed either to fall into any errors or to make any creative contribution.

In the twenty-first century, strangely enough, it has become more needful, not less, to beware of threateningly mechanical ways of understanding the authority of holy scripture. The attitude that sets up all the words of the Bible as God’s guaranteed divine Word looks like a kind of Protestant counterpart to the more Catholic attitude that sets up the saints of the church as fit for veneration almost amounting to worship.

When readers pronounce confidently from the lectern, “This is the word of the Lord,” they seem to suggest that the Bible is one book, whose author is God. Christians who are slipping into this insidious misapprehension would generally not want to be reckoned as “fundamentalists.” They would hate to be doctrinaire about their own faith, or to unchurch other believers as sham Christians. But they are losing sight of the variety of God’s

14. Job 19:25.

15. See above, Chapter 7, p. 50.

Part II: Belonging

communications with people, and they are taking up a position which exposes their Christianity to the hostile criticisms of Richard Dawkins and the “new atheists.”

The Bible begins with ancient stories that tell what God the Creator is like. So far, so good. Many loyal Christians do not feel obliged to treat these stories as literal history; and have learnt to take as inspired myths the accounts in the Book of Genesis of how the universe began. They quite understand that people can make true statements by using poetic imagery. When they assert that God is Maker of heaven and earth, they do not worry that the “days” of creation were millions of years, any more than they suppose that their God actually keeps them safe under his feathers.¹⁶

But suppose that sometimes the biblical writers were wrong about the facts, and the vigorous statements they make are not true but misleading? If believers can accept the idea that the scriptures are inspired, but not dictated, then they should be willing to understand that inspiration may be a matter of degree. C. F. D. Moule stated firmly that there is “no serious reason for thinking the Bible (either Testament) to be infallible.”¹⁷

James Barr severely, indeed scornfully, criticized fundamentalists.¹⁸ He was not accusing them, unfairly, of taking the words of the Bible too literally, deaf to its poetry. A fundamentalist Christian can use imagery, happy to describe God as the Good Shepherd, without expecting the flock to bleat like woolly sheep. Barr explains what is wrong with fundamentalism: the dogma that nothing the Bible says, whether expressed in prose or poetry, could ever be misleading. He pointed out that the very people who maintain that scripture is free from all error are actually unable to take the Bible literally. Fundamentalists turn out to be particularly likely to forsake the plain meaning, because they have to provide more far-fetched explanations of biblical statements, in order to reconcile them well enough to go on believing all of them.

The majestic recital of the creatures coming into being each day, from evening to morning,¹⁹ tells in the form of a myth how the universe was brought into existence by God’s will. There is one word in the Genesis sto-

16. Ps 91:4.

17. Moule, *Christ Alive and at Large*, 111.

18. See Barr, *Fundamentalism*, Chapter 3, e.g., 43–44, 49; *Escaping from Fundamentalism*, e.g., 96–97, 128–29; *The Bible in the Modern World*; and Dunn, *The Living Word*, especially Chapter 5.

19. Gen 1:31.

ries that is more awkward than their narrative about God's artistry: "He made the stars *also*."²⁰ It seems to be stated as a fact that the earth, lit by its two great lights the sun and the moon, is the center of God's creation and that the twinkling stars are a beautiful backdrop. If believers insist on reading everything the first chapters of Genesis say as physics or history, failing to understand them as a poem that conveys to human imagination the glory of God's creative power, they may find themselves fearing modern astrophysics as if it were a threat to belief.

There is a question-begging children's hymn which says, "Jesus loves me, this I know, For the Bible tells me so." Rather than taking biblical authority as simplistically as that, it makes sense to follow a longer route. We have this great *library* of stored testimony to a particular way of understanding the universe, passed on by people in successive centuries who have lived by this tradition and found it good. At least it is reasonable to attend to them hopefully and take their message seriously. Because I can believe that *what* they said conveys the truth, I can throw in my lot with them and believe *in* the God about whom they said it.

If this is the best way to understand faith, coming to believe is not much like working out a sum, sure to get the right answer if only I am careful. Nor is it at all like having an intuition and saying "I just know." It is more like considering the available data and using my reason to weigh it up. I adopt this proposed *hypothesis* and set about finding out whether I can confirm it.²¹ Of course I might fail to confirm it. I cannot prove that there is a God, but surely it is in order to try out this theory, to act on the testimony that I have been offered and see how I get on.

It is better still if I can say, see how *we* get on. I am willingly entering into a tradition that has been handed on to me. Christian faith is based upon the cumulative and cooperative development of many people's belief in God.²² The old argument from religious experience was founded on a person's own awareness: "*I saw this, I had this experience, so I know.*" When faith is treated as a hypothesis for us to confirm together, it can rest more securely on the threefold foundation of *scripture* recorded, *tradition* communicated, and *reason* applied.²³

20. Gen 1:16.

21. See note 6 above.

22. See note 9 above.

23. See above, Chapter 7, 50 and Chapter 10, 77.

Part II: Belonging

The Christian church hands on the New Testament narratives of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which themselves rely upon the Hebrew writings that tell what had happened before Jesus was born. For people to be able to receive these scriptures as true and enter into this tradition, they need something more substantial than inspiring poetry. Unlike the creation myths in the book of Genesis, the Gospel stories, especially the proclamation of the Resurrection, must be understood as making a definite claim to be history.

Christians living in later centuries trust the testimony of the people who came before them, who had found that they could trust this particular man, who fulfilled and expanded the hopes of the tradition that they had already received. There is no need for believers to be afraid of scholars who study the Bible closely, consider the problem, set the books in their contexts, expound their meaning, and convey their message freshly to the church.²⁴ Indirectly but not shakily, Christians are able to believe, trust and follow the Lord Jesus, who they find reveals God to them.

24. Encouraging examples are Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*; and Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* and *Beginning from Jerusalem*.