

Five

FAITH, BELIEF, AND RELIGIOUS TRUTH

William Sweet

1. Introduction

In the preceding chapter, Hendrik Hart responds to my discussion (this volume, Chapter Three) of his account of faith (or what I called “religious belief”) and, specifically, of his claims that faith and rationality are incommensurable. The clarifications that Hart has supplied in this response are certainly helpful, but they do not, however, remove what I take to be serious objections to his view.

There seem to be two kinds of disagreement between Hart and myself: terminological ones and substantive ones. Let me deal with the terminological considerations first.

2. Terminological Considerations

Hart is correct in noting that, in Chapter Three, I have used the words “faith” and “belief” often interchangeably—something that he is loathe to do. Still, this should not contribute to any misunderstanding of his position. Admittedly, as Hart uses the terms, belief is cognitive and faith is not. Yet the essentials of this distinction are, I would argue, maintained in my contrast between what one might call (the disposition of) religious belief and (particular) religious beliefs, with the former meaning something like (subject to some caveats below) faith. (For ease of discussion, however, in the rest of this chapter, I will follow his terminology as far as possible.)

A second point that Hart raises concerns the use of the term “rational” and its cognates. Hart says that he uses the word rational to refer “*narrowly* to phenomena within the boundaries of conceptual/propositional arguing[,] subject to canons of first order logic” (p. 61), and not to mean “reasonable” or serve as a sign of approbation. His view, recall, is that it is inappropriate for reason to provide any foundation for faith.

But again, the criticisms made in Chapter Three are not insensitive to this. My concern in raising this issue was not to hold that one must expand the sense of the word “rational.” Rather, it was to note that Hart, like Richard Rorty, assumes that there is only one model of formal, philosophical demonstration. But some (my earlier example was Jacques Maritain) would deny this, and argue that even though one model of demonstration—the Enlightenment model—fails, this does not entail that no other model can succeed. In

other words, Hart has not established that one cannot argue for one's faith in a "conceptual/propositional" way, admitting at least the basic elements of "first order logic" (specifically syllogistic). For what makes some models appropriate and others not, Maritain would say, is not the formal character of argument but the kind of object to be proven. Thus, while some kinds of deductive "conceptual/propositional" arguments are unsuitable to prove (or disprove), say, the existence of God, others (as Maritain insists) may be suitable. Whether Maritain is successful here is, of course, an open question (see Sweet, 1994a). But the broader concern is one to which neither Hart nor Rorty has responded.

3. Substantive Issues

There are two substantive issues that I believe Hart has not adequately addressed: the nature of faith and how what believers say about their faith can be described as meaningful or true.

A. Faith

One issue separating us is whether faith has, in any way, a cognitive, descriptive, objective character. On Hart's view (as I read it), faith is entirely non-cognitive—it is just "trust"—and it is neither founded on nor justified by reason or evidence. He says at the end of his response, "I see faith as a form of life which . . . cannot be *reduced* to the life of reason" (emphasis added) (p. 65).

But there is more to our dispute than a different description of faith, for one can also ask to whom or to what we should turn to understand faith. On Hart's view, Christians have to return to the Bible. He writes that philosophical and Western Christian theological "talk about faith, religion, and belief . . . uses these terms in ways largely foreign to how they function in the Bible" (p. 61) and that we have to "re-open an understanding of . . . the Bible" to grasp "the meaning of the Biblical witness for our time" (p. 64). This would seem to stand in contrast to a view where one turns to the person of faith or to communities of the faithful who use scripture to see what "faith" means.

But, to begin with, has Hart represented the opposition to his view fairly? Certainly, I did not claim that faith is, or could be, reducible to reason. To deny Hart's view of faith as trust is not to adopt the view that faith is reducible to a set of propositions that can be rationally demonstrated. Indeed, this view of faith is more likely to be held by a skeptic than by a believer. (Admittedly, some religious believers have held such a view—for example, the nineteenth-century Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately (Sweet, 1999)—but even John Henry Cardinal Newman, a student of Whately's and a man who thought that "faith must rest upon reason" (1961, p. 3), recognized that faith involved more than this.) Faith is *more* than the set of particular religious beliefs we may have.