

Christianity and the ethics of belief

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Abstract: The ethics of belief does not justify condemning all possible forms of religion even in the absence of evidence for any of them or the presence of evidence against all of them. It follows that attacks on religion like the recent one by Richard Dawkins must fail. The reason is not that there is something wrong with the ethics of belief but that Christian faith need not be a matter of beliefs but can instead be a matter of assumptions to which the faithful person is committed. It follows that Christianity can be compatible with scientific rationality.

Introduction

Opponents of religion sometimes try to justify rejecting all forms of it by appealing to the ethics of belief. For instance, in his book, *The God Delusion*,¹ Richard Dawkins attempts to justify the rejection on the grounds that faith is unsupported belief that either results directly in harm or contributes to an atmosphere in which harmful beliefs can flourish. I am going to argue that a Dawkins-style attack cannot succeed. I am going to argue for that conclusion on the ground that at least one possible form of Christianity is compatible with the ethics of belief – even if it is unsupported by evidence. Indeed, I am going to argue that it implicitly requires its followers to adhere to the ethics of belief. In the most general terms, the contention here is that *even if* the ethics of belief is true and *even if* there is considerable evidence against religious claims, the ethics of belief does not necessarily preclude a religious life.

The possible form of Christianity that is compatible with the ethics of belief is a standard type of Protestant Christianity that includes the claims that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God, that the true Christian loves both God and his fellow human beings, that the Christian is justified by faith, that he gains faith through the grace of God, that justification results in salvation, that faith results in good works, etc. The claims are to be interpreted literally rather than metaphorically. I confine myself to standard Protestant Christianity and will

not discuss the issue of whether other forms of Christianity or non-Christian religions are compatible with the ethics of belief. No doubt, some are and some are not; no doubt, some could be rendered compatible but others could not. Standard Protestant Christianity and the ethics of belief need not conflict because, contrary to Dawkins, faith need not be taken to be belief; faith can instead be construed as commitment to a set of fundamental assumptions in the hope of salvation.

As for how I will proceed, I will first point out what is wrong with Dawkins's attempt to justify the ethics of belief. I will substitute W. K. Clifford's approach for Dawkins's attempt because it does not have the same defects and because it is therefore defensible – Clifford's arguments are better than the prevailing opinions would lead one to believe, as I will point out below. After that, I will show how making assumptions can be morally acceptable even when there is considerable evidence against their propositional objects being true and even if the ethics of belief is true. Third, I will argue for the plausibility of the redefinition of faith from a Christian point of view. In other words, I will attempt to justify it in a way that would move a Christian to accept it. Finally, I will discuss the relationship between Christianity and the modern world in the light of the redefinition.

The project is motivated by a commitment to the ethics of belief rather than a commitment to Christianity. When it comes to overbelieving, I share Dawkins's conviction that it is immoral: if Christian faith were a matter of belief, then it would almost certainly involve overbelief and would therefore be immoral.² However, if it is wrong to overbelieve, then it is also wrong to overbelieve that religion is *necessarily* incompatible with the ethics of belief.

The ethics of belief

In outline, Dawkins's argument in *The God Delusion* is that some fanatical forms of religion are bad, that all religions require us to believe more than can be justified by the evidence, that those that do not exhibit fanaticism nonetheless promote an atmosphere in which fanaticism can flourish because they promote overbelief, and that therefore all religions should be rejected. The argument is unconvincing as it stands and even more so when restated in particular instead of general terms: the Islamic counterpart to white supremacy that is promoted by Al-Qaeda is bad, all religions require us to overbelieve, Quakerism is not fanatical but promotes an atmosphere in which Al-Qaeda can flourish, and therefore Quakerism as well as Al-Qaeda should be rejected.

The notion that Quakerism promotes Islamic fanaticism even indirectly is intuitively implausible – but there are more substantial problems with the argument as well. For all Dawkins tells us, it is possible to establish that an overbelief is harmless or beneficial prior to adopting it. If Quakers established

that their beliefs were at least harmless before adopting them, then Quakers would hardly be guilty of promoting an atmosphere in which fanaticism could flourish. Dawkins needs to show that evaluating beliefs in this alternative way is not an option but he fails even to notice the possibility. Moreover, while Dawkins notices the evils, he does not consider the possibility that we would be even worse off without beliefs that were less than optimally supported; in other words, he also needs to argue that we gain more than we lose by eliminating overbelief.

Since Dawkins's ethics of belief is vulnerable to these objections, I will substitute the version advocated by W. K. Clifford, which is not. I doubt that there is anything better than Clifford's ethics of belief that could serve as the basis for a *moral* case against Christianity as a whole.³ The doctrines and actions of Christians are so varied that the only way to try to justify the conclusion that all forms of Christianity are immoral is by arguing that there is something immoral about faith *per se*, and if Clifford is right and if Christian faith always involves overbelief, then it does follow that all variants of Christianity are immoral. On the other hand, of course, if the best we have cannot justify the total rejection of Christianity, because faith is not necessarily belief, then no less sophisticated effort like Dawkins's attempt will succeed either.

I believe that Clifford was right to conclude that 'it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.⁴ I have argued elsewhere that that Clifford's critics have failed to come to grips with his real position,⁵ and that Clifford's argument is actually sound.⁶ Readers do not have to agree with me about Clifford, because, as mentioned in the introduction, I am arguing conditionally: nothing I say here depends on Clifford's view actually being true. However, I will say enough to show that Clifford's position is plausible.

Clifford begins his argument with the now famous discussion of the ship-owner who convinces himself that his unseaworthy vessel is actually sound and who collects the insurance when it sinks with its emigrant passengers. He adds a second example. There is nothing special about Clifford's own examples; it is easy to come up with contemporary examples of the same sort. Consider neglect of the base rate, which is sometimes called the prosecutor's fallacy.⁷ A witness may be 90 per cent accurate when it comes to judging the race of muggers in the circumstances in which he witnessed a mugging but his testimony that a mugger is a member of a minority does not mean that there's a 90 per cent probability that the mugger is a member of the minority. If the minority constitutes 10 per cent of the population, then the probability is only 50 per cent, because there will be one false positive for every true positive. If the minority is just 1 per cent, there will be 11 false positives for every true one. Neglect of the base rate does result in unwarranted convictions for crimes,⁸ so overbelieving that someone is guilty because one neglects to consider the base rate is harmful.

Clifford comments that,

... in the two supposed cases which have been considered, it has been judged wrong to believe on insufficient evidence The reason of this judgment is not far to seek: it is that in both these cases the belief held by one man was of great importance to other men.⁹

In other words, the consequences of one person's belief as manifested in his actions and the potential effects of his actions on others included significant harm to the others. If disaster had not struck, however, the ship-owner 'would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out'¹⁰ – Clifford holds that 'when an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that'.¹¹ In light of these comments, some have thought that Clifford mixes consequentialism and non-consequentialism.¹² However, it is more charitable to interpret Clifford as holding that overbelieving is wrong because others are *endangered*: endangering others would hardly be wrong if harm never resulted but it is wrong even when no harm occurs. This interpretation is the more charitable one because it does not entail that Clifford is meta-ethically inconsistent. Moreover, other statements by Clifford, such as the ones in the next paragraph, are unequivocally consequentialist.

No matter how many examples of harmful overbeliefs we can come up with, we are unable thereby to eliminate the possibility that other overbeliefs are harmless or helpful. As Clifford acknowledges, 'if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts.'¹³ However, he adds that 'no real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others.'¹⁴ This is not just a tendency to overbelieve again when one has overbelieved once. The fact that a belief 'prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others' means that overbelieving affects our standards of evidence.¹⁵ It affects our standards of evidence because we cannot believe at will but need what we take to be evidence for our beliefs.

It follows that if we overbelieve, then, because we alter our standards of evidence and probably for the worse, we probably impair both our ability to judge accurately whether we overbelieve in other cases and our ability to judge accurately whether our other overbeliefs are potentially dangerous. Someone who believes something on the basis of anecdotal evidence in one case, for instance, is liable to regard anecdotal evidence as reliable in other cases. Believing on the basis of anecdotal evidence may be harmless in the initial instance but, once someone's standards of evidence permit its use, he risks sincerely but mistakenly believing that other propositions are true or harmless on the same basis. Even

if our standards of evidence are undamaged, we cannot be certain that they are undamaged and thus render ourselves incapable of *knowing* whether other beliefs are overbeliefs or whether other overbeliefs are harmful. In short, acting in a doxastically responsible way precludes overbelieving even if we can establish that a particular overbelief would be harmless or helpful with respect to its direct effects on our actions. The second part of his position is what distinguishes Clifford's from Dawkins's ethics of belief: he explains why overbelieving is always a bad thing even if a specific overbelief does not lead directly to harm. His explanation is a reasonable response to the first objection to Dawkins.

At this point, it is necessary to go beyond exegesis and to supplement Clifford's own views by arguing that it is necessary to have a policy to govern all cases and that the policy should be Cliffordian. Since believing at will is impossible, so is overbelieving at will. Since we always need what we take to be evidence, overbelieving after determining that a candidate overbelief would be harmless with respect to its direct influence on our actions would still damage our standards of evidence. This means that a rule to the effect that we should overbelieve only when we have evidence that overbelieving is directly harmless will not work. But if that rule will not work, then neither will any other alternative rule and for the same reason: we will always damage our standards of evidence when we try to apply it. Hence, the only choices we really have are Cliffordianism and doxastic amorality, where there are no moral restrictions at all on what people may believe.

It is now necessary to argue that doxastic amorality would be worse than Cliffordianism. Indeed, both alternatives will result in gains and losses but Cliffordianism seems the better policy overall, despite the occasional losses it results in, because it stands in the way of the perpetration of the very great evils that result from false ideologies such as the racist ideology of the Nazis, the Marxist ideology of the Khmer Rouge, the Islamic supremacist ideology of Al-Qaeda mentioned earlier, and many lesser evils. Therefore, despite the losses we incur, we ought to adhere to the Cliffordian position when it comes to the beliefs we acquire. This, obviously, is a reasonable response to the second objection to Dawkins. Of course, there are those who would say that the benefits of salvation need to be added to the mix but we must limit ourselves to what is demonstrable; it would be irresponsible to risk undeniable evils for the sake of unproved benefits.

Our inability to believe at will does not render the ethics of belief pointless. We are still able to control what we believe *indirectly* by improving our standards of evidence and we can make improvements by studying informal fallacies, logic, statistics, and so on. And we are able to control it more directly by exercising care and being thorough when we investigate. As for those who have neither the time nor the ability to improve their standards of evidence or to investigate matters on

their own, Clifford claims that they can refrain from believing and that there are cases in which it is reasonable for them to rely on authority.

As for the former contention, it is easy enough to suspend belief in most cases. There are only a possible few exceptions: people who have been indoctrinated may not be able to do so; it may also be impossible for people who have overbelieved a doctrine, acted in accordance with it, and thus cemented their commitment to it.¹⁶ There is a place for excuses in other areas of ethics; these may be legitimate excuses in the case of the ethics of belief. There may also be cases in which there is an evolutionary explanation for a belief, which might therefore not be susceptible to rejection even if it was unsupported by evidence and we knew that it was not: our belief in other minds might be such a belief. It is necessary to modify the ethics of belief to accommodate this possibility, limiting it to acquired beliefs and excluding any that come with the rest of our genetic inheritance.

As for our relying on authority, Clifford allows that we may do so when we have sufficient evidence that the authority is truthful, has the expertise to acquire a legitimate opinion about the matter in question, and has exercised his expertise appropriately in reaching his conclusions. Moreover, it would surely be reasonable to develop institutions that vet authorities for us; an example would be an organization of physicians that verified that their members had been trained properly and had developed the requisite diagnostic skills, that they used these skills in their practice, and that they were ethical in their interactions with their patients.

What the foregoing shows is that proper observance of the ethics of belief is partly a social and not totally an individual responsibility. However difficult it may be for an individual to adhere to the ethics of belief, it is much easier when the right institutions and supports exist and when we can rely on experts for advice concerning what constitutes good evidence – most of us have to rely on the expertise of statisticians when it comes to the prosecutor's fallacy. In this, it is not much different from other ethical requirements: it is easier to be honest when the right institutions and supports exist, and when opportunities for and temptations to dishonesty are fewer. If it is difficult for people to adhere to the ethics of belief at present, it may have to do with the fact that many societies are not ones in which respect for the evidence is universally valued but ones in which people claim a right to believe anything they want to believe and in which a capacity for overbelieving is frequently proclaimed to be a virtue.

Now, it might be objected, as undergraduates are liable to object, that we do have a right to believe whatever we want and that what we do not have is a right to do whatever we want. This is insightful to the extent that, because laws apply to acts and because beliefs are objectionable because of what they lead us to do, there is no need for specific laws compelling or forbidding belief.¹⁷ But the fact is that beliefs do have an effect on actions and it is impossible to neutralize them in the way recommended. Moreover, if we have a right to believe anything at

all, then we have a right to believe that we may act on our beliefs. In other words, if we have a right to believe anything at all, we have a right to disbelieve the second half of the recommended position; it is thus impractical if not paradoxical.

Assumptions and the ethics of belief

While condemning overbelief, Clifford allows that we may make and act on assumptions in order to discover whether they are true: 'there are many cases in which it is our duty to act upon probabilities, although the evidence is not such as to justify present belief; because it is precisely by such action, and the observation of its fruits, that evidence is got which may justify future belief'.¹⁸ What makes the difference is that overbelieving affects our standards of evidence but making assumptions does not: people can make assumptions while knowing consciously that they do not have sufficient evidence that they are true. Moreover, the permission to act on assumptions in order to acquire evidence can be generalized to cover other cases.

An assumption is a proposition that is not believed but is nevertheless used as a guide for action with a view to achieving a particular aim. We often adopt assumptions when we act under conditions of uncertainty. For example, when it comes to repairing machinery, it is often not certain what the cause of the malfunction is. In these cases, the mechanic will proceed by assuming that the problem is such and such, acting on the assumption by doing what would correct the assumed problem, and observing the results. If the repair work is successful, the mechanic will believe that such and such was indeed the problem. However, it would be a mistake to say that he had believed that it was the problem before he tried the repair. He might have to try more than one possible repair before he succeeds and he does not have to convince himself that his first assumption is true before proceeding to act on it. If he had believed that such and such was the problem and if the repair had been unsuccessful, he would be puzzled or surprised by the lack of success; in contrast, if he merely assumed that it was the problem, he would know that there was a degree of probability that the problem was really something else and he would be neither puzzled nor surprised if the attempted repair failed.

It is possible to act on assumptions even if the evidence is against them. This is obvious in cases in which people act on assumptions that they believe to be false for the purpose of demonstrating their falsity. To return to the mechanic, a client might insist that the problem is such-and-such when the mechanic believes that it is not and has more than sufficient evidence that it is not. The mechanic might declare that he will prove that the client is mistaken by doing what would solve the problem if the client were right about it. He might do that very thing in order to show that the client's diagnosis is not the correct one. In this

case, he assumes what he does not believe, indeed, what he disbelieves. Making this kind of assumption in these circumstances is compatible with having optimal standards of evidence; in fact, making it can reinforce good standards of evidence by providing another confirming instance of what the standards say we ought to believe.

In general, it is permissible to make any assumptions at all and for any purpose at all, provided that we take care to ensure that we do not put others at risk when we act on them. We can determine whether we would put others at risk by assessing the consequences of acting on the assumptions. Since making assumptions will not have a deleterious effect on our standards of evidence, a person may assume propositions that he should not believe. It follows that if faith is not belief but commitment to a set of fundamental assumptions in the hope of salvation, it is simply not possible to use the ethics of belief to make a case against Christianity. Christians can avoid moral condemnation of any sort by assessing the effects of their faith on others (through their faith-inspired actions) and by adopting the stance of faith only when it is neutral or beneficial. They can adopt the stance of faith even in the teeth of the evidence: neither ethics in general nor the ethics of belief in particular precludes hoping that things will later be revealed to be different from how they appear now, or living in the light of that hope. Since there are Christians who lead blameless and exemplary lives in other respects, demonstrating that their possessing faith is compatible with the ethics of belief is enough to show that they are beyond moral reproach of any kind.

The nature of faith

If faith is a commitment to a set of fundamental assumptions in the hope of salvation, standard Protestant Christianity is no less serious a religious option than if faith were belief. A commitment to a set of assumptions is not merely an acceptance of them, where ‘to accept that p is to have or adopt a policy of ... including that proposition ... among one’s premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that p ’.¹⁹ Acceptance can be casual or contingent in a way that commitment cannot: obviously, in light of the speed with which they changed their ways, many Party members in the former Soviet Union had accepted Marxist doctrines but had not been committed to them. Instead, his commitment means that the person of faith has a strongly positive attitude toward the assumptions, that he does not maintain them idly or temporarily, that he will not readily give them up, and that he is not merely pretending to be a Christian or self-deludingly acting as though he were one. Thus, the definition captures the steadfastness that is characteristic of the best examples of faithful people. The fact that the assumptions are fundamental means that they orient and inform the faithful person’s

whole life. In this way, the definition captures the transforming power of conversion.

The phrase 'in the hope of salvation' is part of the definition because a person cannot commit himself to a set of assumptions without a purpose in doing so; the absence of a purpose would indicate that no assumptions had been made. A number of things should be noted in connection with this. First, the definition is not defective because the purpose can be understood only in the light of the assumptions, i.e. that people see the possibility of salvation only in the light of them; nor is it defective because the goal might be unachievable because the assumptions are false. Second, the existence of the stated purpose does not necessarily make faith ultimately self-serving. It depends on why the person hopes for salvation: the reason need not be that he wishes to escape death out of self-interest, say, but can be that he loves God and, just like other lovers, wants to be with his beloved. Third, the phrase is necessary because, while it may be through the grace of God that people succeed in committing themselves to the assumptions of Christianity, if faith is to be voluntary, people must want to have faith and they must therefore have some reason to want it. In connection with this point, the grace of God enters the picture by enabling people to achieve what they cannot achieve on their own even though they want to: it empowers them rather than overpowering them. Finally, saying that Christians commit themselves to the assumptions in the *hope* of salvation is consistent with salvation being the free gift of God rather than something that people earn or to which they acquire a right. This is a point at which they must trust in the God whom they assume to exist.²⁰

Intuitively, the redefinition does not distort faith. On the contrary, assumptions seem to fit better with the nature of faith than beliefs do. Faith seems to include at least the following three elements: first, it is a propositional attitude; second, the propositional attitude is not evidence-dependent and is adopted voluntarily; and, third, its adoption results in the right sort of action. Faith as a commitment to a set of fundamental assumptions in the hope of salvation readily fits this description. An assumption is a propositional attitude. One can commit oneself to an assumption voluntarily; assumptions do not depend on putative evidence in the way that beliefs do. And if one does not act consistently with an assumption, or if one does not promote a world consistent with it, it is doubtful that one has committed oneself to it, *ceteris paribus*. In this way, the redefinition is compatible with the doctrine that faith leads to good works; indeed, combined with the right assumptions, it can explain why faith leads to good works.²¹

In contrast, a belief is a propositional attitude that ordinarily depends on what the believer takes to be evidence. It is not voluntary; as mentioned earlier in connection with the ethics of belief, we cannot believe at will; moreover, we cannot avoid believing in many cases. In addition, although belief shapes what

we do, it does not necessarily shape it so that it results in the right sort of action; what we do also depends on what we desire and the fact that torture is painful can lead the saint to do one thing and the sadist another. Finally, if faith were mere belief, it would be possible to have faith without performing good works. It follows that if faith involves belief, it must also involve something else such as a desire to serve God.

I am far from the first to suggest that faith is not belief. I will not, however, discuss alternative analyses except to note John Schellenberg's contention that faith is neither belief nor a matter of assumptions.²² Schellenberg maintains that faith is a combination of visualization and incantation with respect to a desired state of affairs that a person employs when the available evidence is insufficient to cause him to believe. I reject it because it seems more like wishful thinking than firm resolve, and Christian faith seems closer to the latter than the former. Moreover, for someone who wants to show that faith is compatible with the ethics of belief, the problem with this sort of 'faith' is that, although it is not belief, it could far too easily become belief. Human beings are suggestible: in one study, about a quarter of teenagers who were never lost but who were asked whether they remembered being lost when they were five years old subsequently acquired the belief that they had been lost; they suffered from source amnesia, possessing the notion of an event having occurred but forgetting that the notion originated in a question rather than in actual experience.²³ If merely asking a question can result in the development of beliefs in suggestible people, visualization and incantation are liable to have the same result. It is possible that a commitment to an assumption might also become a belief but the probability of its doing so seems less; it seems less because it is less likely that the lack of evidence will fade into the background.

Returning to the main issue, there is good reason for standard Protestant Christians to prefer faith as a commitment to a set of fundamental assumptions in the hope of salvation to 'faith' that includes or is reducible to belief. The Christian is commanded to love both God and his neighbour, but it would be impossible for him to love both *objectively* if faith involved belief. If faith in God involved belief, then, since we cannot believe at will, faith would probably have a deleterious effect on the believer's standards of evidence. The problem with this for the Christian is that sub-optimal standards of evidence could interfere with his *objectively* loving his neighbour: he might think that he is acting lovingly but he might not actually be doing so. While no one would intentionally give his son or anyone else a stone when he asked for bread, avoiding relevant overbeliefs is a necessary condition for avoiding doing so *unintentionally*. In short, if overbelieving affects our standards of evidence, there is tension between loving a God that one *believes* to exist in the absence of sufficient evidence and objectively loving one's neighbour. Since Christianity explicitly commands its adherents to love both God and their neighbour, Christianity implicitly commands them to

reject overbelief and therefore requires them to reject faith *qua* belief. It is not possible to save faith as belief by supplementing belief with a desire to serve God, say, because supplemented overbelief in God would damage people's standards of evidence just as much as unsupplemented overbelief.

The foregoing argument does not presuppose Clifford's ethics of belief; instead, it provides a Christian justification for his conclusion. It presupposes only that overbelieving can result in unloving acts and that it can have a deleterious effect on our standards of evidence. Moreover, the argument succeeds even if overbelieving does not always have a deleterious effect and even if some people are immune to its deleterious effects, provided we cannot predict the effects with certainty, as indeed we cannot. No matter how remote is the possibility that overbelieving would damage someone's standards of evidence, it would be more loving of that person to avoid overbelief entirely because he would thereby reduce the probability, however small, of his hurting another unintentionally. It cannot be claimed that the probability is zero because there is no doubt that overbelieving can at least occasionally damage some overbelievers' standards of evidence: the herbalist who overbelieves that a remedy is harmless because he relies on a small, non-random sample of subjects is liable to use the same bad inductive reasoning in other cases and, hence, is liable to endanger others in other situations if not in the initial one. Generalizing, since overbelieving has the potential to damage the overbeliever's standards of evidence, no religion that requires its adherents to act righteously in the world can consistently require them to overbelieve about a supernatural realm.

Of course, it is customary to use the term, 'belief', as a synonym for 'faith'. But an assumption that a person accepts and to which he is committed functions much like a belief in his life; it would often have the same effect on his actions. I think it would be charitable to conclude that Christians have used 'belief' ambiguously and to regard what I have done as a clarification. If this is not the case, then I would argue that Christians ought to reform their understanding of faith. I do not claim to have the last word here, however; further reflection or investigation may show that the definition of faith given here needs alteration, refinement, or even replacement. But such changes will not affect the compatibility of faith with the ethics of belief as long as faith is defined in terms of assumptions instead of beliefs.

Some implications

Obviously, the moral restrictions on Christianity are looser if faith is a matter of assumptions rather than beliefs, because it is unnecessary to worry about the indirect effects of overbelief. All that needs to be taken into account is whether the actions it inspires are morally acceptable. It will not be the case that the person of faith is a wrongdoer simply in virtue of being a person of faith; on

the contrary, he can be worthy of tolerance, or respect, or admiration – even if the assumptions that constitute his faith turn out to be false. His moral status depends on whether he has taken the appropriate precautions and on what his faith moves him to do.

The looser restrictions mean that more than one morally acceptable denomination is possible. Different denominations can make different assumptions without violating morality; they can even have distinctive values and still be morally acceptable provided that the distinctive values are the consequence of different emphases on supererogatory activities. Neither conservative nor liberal Christianity is favoured: although I have assumed for the sake of argument that the propositions of Christianity are to be taken literally, those who take the description of the Christian stance as poetry rather than prose can also live religious lives without infringing morality. Literalists can assume that there is a supernatural entity who loves us so much that it can be said, metaphorically, that He is love; non-literalists can assume that it is literally true that God is love and that Christianity involves promoting loving relationships among human beings.²⁴

Of course, if Christian faith is a matter of assumptions, it cannot be made mandatory, because people can reject it without thereby putting their moral status as decent people in doubt. Christians may regret that some people reject Christianity and thereby lose its putative benefits but they cannot condemn them for rejecting it: they can be sad but not angry. Thus, faith as a matter of assumptions necessitates tolerance. It does not follow, of course, that merely being a good person is sufficient for salvation. The Christian doctrine is that faith results in good works, not that *only* faith results in good works. If faith results in good works, then the absence of good works indicates the absence of faith but the presence of good works does not necessarily indicate faith. It can still be the case that faith is necessary for justification and that justification is necessary for salvation. Human beings do not have a moral right to salvation and setting the standards for salvation is God's prerogative.

Finally, if faith is a matter of assumptions and not beliefs, standard Protestant Christianity is compatible with scientific and other forms of rationality. Science deals with how the world is as a matter of physical fact but this version of Christianity is about how people hope the world will be revealed to be in the end. Facts about the physical world do not tell us what ought to be true and they do not tell us what we should hope for. On the view advocated here, science and standard Protestant Christianity are not merely different fields of inquiry but are different kinds of approaches to the world we inhabit. At most, science can provide evidence that one or another of the assumptions that constitute standard Protestant Christianity is false. But this is no great danger when it is sometimes permissible to make assumptions in the teeth of the evidence. And it is not a particularly new danger: induction by enumeration has long provided strong grounds for doubting the virgin birth. Hence, a standard Protestant Christian

can be committed to his faith without rejecting scientific – or any other type of – rationality.

Faith as assumptions does not vindicate all variants of Christianity. Dawkins is obviously upset about the denominations that oppose evolutionary biology because they (say they) believe that the Bible is literally true and that the theory of evolution contradicts it. There is enough to justify opposing them without the ethics of belief: one criticism is that assuming that the Bible is literally true and that it contains moral truths results in morally irresponsible behaviour. The claim that the Bible is literally true rests on the contentions that it is a revelation and that an authentic revelation is guaranteed to be true. The problem is that we cannot know that a revelation is authentic unless we can prove, using independent evidence, that it is true: if it is an authentic revelation, then we can be sure that it is true, but if we cannot show that it is true, we cannot be sure that it is an authentic revelation.

This epistemological circularity means that revelation is not a source of moral or any other sort of knowledge; it is indistinguishable from arbitrary assertion. Induction does not solve the problem; no matter the number of confirmed contentions in a putative revelation, there will be no evidence that any unconfirmed claims are genuine parts of the revelation rather than interpolations. It follows that using the Bible for moral guidance amounts to using arbitrary assertions for moral guidance, which is irresponsible. Moreover, there are clear examples that show that moral absurdities result from taking the Bible literally as an authority on ethics: taken literally, the Golden Rule – ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ – entails that if you want a dentist to remove your wisdom teeth, you should take his out.²⁵ There is even good reason to object to fundamentalists assuming that evolution does not occur. For instance, it could lead people to oppose doing what is necessary to minimize the danger from disease: the justification for taking precautions against new strains of influenza depends on evolution being true; and this is not the only case in which that kind of dependence holds.²⁶

Conclusion

If faith does not involve belief, Christianity is undoubtedly compatible with the ethics of belief, rationality, and science. The conviction that faith is belief leads some Christians to reject rationality and some intellectuals to condemn Christianity. Both the rejection and the condemnation are avoidable. Standard Protestant Christianity need not be seen as an intellectual enterprise, defective or otherwise; instead, it can be seen as a response or reaction to the world we inhabit and, possibly, God. As a response, what matters is not whether it is true but whether it has morally acceptable consequences. As a reaction, it is compatible with the contemporary world, including the contemporary intellectual world.²⁷

Notes

1. Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* (Boston MA and New York NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).
2. I believe that I do have enough evidence to say that it would involve overbelief. See my 'Religion and the pursuit of truth', *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 43–60.
3. Some see the ethics of belief as not being about whether holding a particular belief is morally permissible but as being about whether a putative belief is a properly constituted belief. (See, for example, Jonathan E. Adler 'The ethics of belief: off the wrong track', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 23 (1999), 267–285.) I am using the term in the former sense. The latter is not so much an ethics of belief as an 'ethics' of belief: there are norms involved but they are epistemic rather than actual moral ones.
4. William Kingdon Clifford 'The ethics of belief', in his *Lectures and Essays*, Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (eds) (London: Macmillan, 1879), 186.
5. Brian Zamulinski 'A re-evaluation of Clifford and his critics', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 40 (2002), 437–457.
6. *Idem* 'A defence of the ethics of belief', *Philo*, 7 (2004), 79–96.
7. John Haigh *Taking Chances: Winning with Probability*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
8. For a recent example, see Mark Buchanan, 'The Prosecutor's Fallacy', <http://buchanan.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/05/16/the-prosecutors-fallacy/>.
9. Clifford 'Ethics of belief', 178.
10. *Ibid.*, 182.
11. *Ibid.*, 178.
12. Timothy Madigan 'Ethics and Evidentialism: W. K. Clifford and the Ethics of Belief', *The Journal for the Critical Study of Religion, Ethics and Society*, 2 (1997), 9–18.
13. Clifford 'Ethics of belief' 185.
14. *Ibid.*, 181.
15. See my 'A re-evaluation of Clifford and his critics' for a more extensive discussion of this issue.
16. See my *Evolutionary Intuitionism: A Theory of the Origin and Nature of Moral Facts* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007) for a discussion of this phenomenon.
17. On the contrary, there are Cliffordian reasons to reject all such laws. See my 'A Defence of the Ethics of Belief'.
18. Clifford 'Ethics of belief' 189.
19. L. Jonathan Cohen *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 4.
20. Obviously, this discussion is about faith-that rather than faith-in. However, the latter presupposes the former. The believer has no advantage over the maker of assumptions when it comes to faith-in.
21. There is an ambiguity here between the propositional attitude and its content. No doubt, the Christian view is that good works require both the right attitude and the right content, however, so the ambiguity is harmless.
22. J. L. Schellenberg *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005). Incidentally, his objections to definitions of faith in terms of assumptions are not transferable to definitions of faith in terms of *commitments* to assumptions.
23. Daniel Schachter *The Seven Sins of Memory* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
24. Andrew S. Eshleman 'Can an atheist believe in God?', *Religious Studies*, 41 (2005), 183–199.
25. See Harry Gensler *Formal Ethics* (New York NY: Routledge, 1996).
26. See Randolph M. Nesse and George C. Williams *Why We Get Sick: The New Science of Darwinian Medicine* (New York NY: Times Books, 1995).
27. I wish to thank Dr Walter Deller, Dr Jan Bigland-Pritchard, the participants in a Saskatoon Theological Union seminar, and anonymous readers for *Religious Studies* for discussions of, criticisms of, and helpful comments on, earlier versions of this paper.