

THE DEMONSTRABILITY OF GOD'S EXISTENCE: A RE- CONSIDERATION

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Introduction

The problem of determining whether or not God exists seems a stale one.¹ However its revisitation from time to time is justified because of its prominent position in the practice of Religion. Russell recognises this point, when he calls the problem "a large and serious question."²

Even when it is taken for granted that God exists as religious believers generally do, a further problem arises from the question of how this existence could be demonstrated. For example, if one claims that a particularly entity, say, a table 'exists', he could go on to convince any 'doubting Thomas' of the validity of his claim through an empirical process. This kind of opportunity seems unavailable to the person who makes the claim: "God exists." Is the claim that God exists, then to be taken as a given datum of uninquied faith? Or is there the possibility of finding justification for this a claim either by way of reasoning process or factual demonstration?

The attempt to resolve this problem has led, (in theological and philosophical circles) to varying positions. The positions which have cut across ages and disciplines have also been more often than not contrary to one another. In the final analysis, three distinct positions seem to have emerged:

- (i) That attempts to demonstrate God's existence through proofs or arguments, both *a priori* (based on purely logical considerations) or *a posteriori*, (based on experience) are not possible.
- (ii) That attempts to demonstrate God's existence are possible and these could be done either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.³
- (iii) That attempts to demonstrate God's existence are only possible *a posteriori*.⁴

The first position is a flat denial and rejection of any claim of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence by way of proofs either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. This position must not however be confused with the atheist's total rejection of God's existence. Some of those who hold this first position are perfectly convinced of God's existence.

The second position is the claim that such a demonstration through proofs is indeed possible in the two ways mentioned. The third position, while admitting the possibility of demonstrating the existence of God through proofs, submits that this could be done only through *a posteriori* proofs.

The main preoccupation of this paper is to examine the following issues:

- (i) The background to the controversy concerning the non- possibility and the possibility of demonstrating God's existence, in positions of "Faith alone" and "Reason in Faith."
- (ii) The claims of the non-possibility and possibility positions concerning demonstrating God's existence.
- (iii) The objections posed by Biblical, philosophical and scientific positions.
- (iv) The question of the significance or dispensability of the proofs as an extension of the role of reason in faith.

Background to the Contentions

The opposing positions mentioned above did not develop overnight. They are in fact the end results of a long standing 'duel' between "Faith and Reason" in general. Strictly speaking, the controversy raged between the advocates of "faith alone" and those who believed that reason has a role to play in enriching faith.

Faith Alone

The proponents of "faith alone" rest their case on the belief that faith is inevitably opposed to reason or even contrary to it. As Mitchel points out, the group of "faith alone" tend to see faith as "... involving effort, the effort to believe things that are inherently difficult to believe."⁵

In which case they do not insist on an appeal to evidence or reason for what is believed. In this case the common sense assertion that the "reasonable man" has to base his beliefs on the evidence at his disposal is done away with. This is on the assumption that faith needs no rational justification for both itself and the various positions it holds.

As expected, this desire to separate or more appropriately to free faith from reason, has been defended in a number of ways. For example the Pietists of the eighteenth century stood out distinctly in their opposition

to the involvement of reason in faith. This is vividly reflected in their view that:

... the sentiments of God's being and presence in life was sufficient in itself and that rational reflection about faith was actually to be avoided as a danger to faith.⁶

Another prominent opposer of reason in faith was Martin Luther. Luther's opposition is founded on his dislike for the Nominalists, who, he believed, spent their time in logic chopping and clever sophistries. His opposition is further heightened by his low opinion of human nature which is not subsumed in God's total will.

The derivable conclusion from Luther's conception seems to suggest that since reason is from the divinely unaided nature of man, it has to be dispensed with, particularly when matters of faith are under consideration.

Immanuel Kant also gives no part to reason in faith as a result of his philosophical system. D'arcy brings this position home in stressing Kant's belief that:

Our thinking is limited to phenomenon and that we can know nothing of God or spiritual freedom or spiritual personality because these conceptions have no basis in sense. But though philosophically speaking such conceptions are illegitimate and have no content, they are demanded as postulates in the practical order. We cannot live as free, moral men without them. Faith then is a postulate of the moral or practical order.⁷

The tendency of positions so far mentioned could be seen as portraying faith as an experience of a unique type which could be held to be analogous to the artistic experience. In which case, the only approach available to faith is to be wholly independent of reason. In consequence faith needs no longer to be defended on rational grounds.

Faith With Reason

On the other hand, there are those who strongly believe that there could be and indeed there is a need for complementarity between faith and reason. It is their opinion that faith could only gain more in the application of genuine reason and not lose anything.

One of the prominent figures of the above view is Hegel. In demonstrating this position he says:

We are bound to reason about our faith. If only to ask whether and how far intuition itself is authentic and trustworthy.⁸

Reardon while echoing the opinion of Jacob, opines that:

It is necessary to discuss faith in a rational way to the extent, indeed of seeking to build a religious philosophy upon it.⁹

It is also the view of St. Bernard Abelard that faith could be seen as a belief which is formed from reason, varying in quality and quantity. Thomas Aquinas, also made his mark in the Middle Ages in the attempt to bridge the gap between faith and reason. This constituted his strong conviction that there could be demonstrations of God's existence, at least *a posteriori*.

The position that there should be a complementary relationship between faith and reason was held not only by individuals. Certain schools of thought held the same view. An example is the Pelagian school which extolled reason and saw no way in which faith could be free of it. The belief of the Pelagians is based on the ground that if faith were to be a virtue, conversion to it must involve in some way a part played by man which may have to depend on his rational capability.

A call for the partnership of faith and reason may be said to centre on the notion that even if faith and particularly its strength is seen to be passed on in an intuitive process, which could be said to be "self justifying" without the need of inferential reasoning, there is no denying the fact that the holder of whatever faith, when questioned still feels it necessary to supply a reasoned answer. Also, even if it is accepted that emotional satisfaction is all that faith requires, it may still be necessary to demonstrate how this is so. Invariably it may become obvious that faith as much as possible should not be divorced from reason.

Demonstrability and Non-demonstrability of God's Existence

Our discussion on the controversy between the proponents of "faith alone" and "reason in faith," has been unavoidably extensive. The rationale for this is that the acceptability or non-acceptability of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence through proofs or arguments is the

one of those things which are said to be intuitively known

corollary of the position held by either of the two parties (apart from the atheists' position). Invariably proponents of the "faith alone" view reject, or are at best sceptical of, any exercise either logical or experiential to demonstrate God's existence, while the proponents of "reason in faith" hold tenaciously to the conviction that it is indeed possible to demonstrate God's existence. It must however be noted that the latter group is divided in opinion as to how this could be attained. Some of them hold to the conception that *a priori* arguments are capable of doing the trick. Others, and incidentally the majority, dismiss this claim and submit that the process of demonstrating God's existence is possible only through *a posteriori* proofs.

Our discussion of this raging controversy will be done from three distinct perspectives.

First, we will provide reasons for the rejection of the possibility or the worthiness of demonstrating God's existence.

Secondly, we shall consider the views of the supporters of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence.

Thirdly, we shall then go on to offer a critique of the positions in view of Biblical, contemporary and other compelling human factors.

Non-Demonstrability

A close look at the position of the proponents of non-demonstrability of God's existence through proofs would reveal that their stand rests on the belief that God is a self-evident truth. In Gilon's view, the postulants of the above position are best categorised into two broad groups.

- (i) The simple faithfuls: these he says have been familiar with his name (God's) from their childhood and for them prayer is a habit. They mistake their very habit of believing in him for a proof of his existence.¹⁰
- (ii) The philosophers and theologians who for different reasons find the existence of God immediately evident and thus in need of no demonstration to establish its truth.¹¹

The second group, by virtue of their position, constitute our concern here because as Grendier points out:

*Philosophers and theologians who belong to this group are quite many and cover nearly the whole historical developments of philosophy and theology, from the traditional to the modern era.*¹²

Apart from the Traditionalists, we also have Moses Maimonides from among the Ancient Philosophers, Jansenius as well as the logical positivists in personalities such as Conte Anne, Condillac, Stuart Mill, Hobbes, Berkeley, Spencer and Ayer, to mention a few. In the category of the modern philosophers and theologians, we have examples in Loisy Tyrell Sabatier and William James.

The Traditionalists hold that the existence of God is known through the traditions received from our first parents, who in their own case learnt it from divine revelation. So to them, there can be no demonstration of God's existence through human argumentations.

Moses Maimonides contended that God can only be known by faith — a view subsequently shared by Protestants such as Calvin, Huxley and Gore. Jansenius' opposition was based on the notion that the knowledge of God was of no importance for a religious and moral life. The Modernists' opposition stemmed from their doctrine of agnosticism which states that human reason cannot know any superlative thing.

Demonstration of God's Existence – Possible

As we have pointed out earlier, there are those who are convinced of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence. We also indicated the two views that are characteristic of this group — those who believe that the demonstration could be done *a priori* and those who are of the belief that the demonstration could be done only *a posteriori*. The second shade of opinion has clearly been predominant and it is to it that we shall now give consideration.

The most faithful 'apostle' of this view was St. Thomas Aquinas. He was consistent in not only identifying a positive role for reason in faith, but also, and more remarkably, he carefully constructed arguments to sustain his belief that God's existence could be demonstrated through *a posteriori* arguments. Aquinas undertook this task in a peculiar way. He first put forward the arguments of his opponents before offering grounds for his conviction that their arguments are not valid. According to him, opposers of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence often sustained their arguments on one or both of the following grounds:

- (1) "That God's existence is self-evident and thus need no demonstration."¹³ This would mean that the knowledge of God has been naturally implanted in us. It may also be because they believed that from the term "God" existence becomes self-evident, as long as it is one of those things which are said to be intuitively known. On another

ground, it may be a result of the view that God is "truth" itself, which cannot be denied.

(2) That the existence of God is an article of faith, consequently belief in His existence is not subjectable to demonstration.¹⁴ If this position is held, then the tendency is to believe that:

- (a) the existence of God is an article of faith and what is of faith cannot be demonstrated.
- (b) Since we can only know what God's essence does not consist in and not what it consists in, we cannot demonstrate His existence.
- (c) It will only be possible to demonstrate God's existence from His effects, but since His effects are not proportionate to Him, in that He is infinite and His effects are finite, it is not possible to demonstrate His existence.

Aquinas believed that these two sets of arguments cannot be sustained on the following grounds. For the first set, he submitted that the knowledge of God's existence that we have naturally, is a general and confused one. It could be compared to knowing for example, that someone is approaching. This knowledge, according to Aquinas, is not the same as knowing specifically that Peter, for example, is approaching. If this analogy is sustained, then we cannot know absolutely that God exists from our natural knowledge. Also not everyone can understand the term "God" in a way that shows that "He is that than which none greater can be conceived." In addition, even if it is true that the existence of "truth" in general is self-evident, it cannot be so in the case of primal truth as in the case of God's existence.

Aquinas' dismissal of the second set of arguments, is based on his strong belief that:

- (a) The existence of God and the truths about him are not articles of faith but, rather preambles to the articles.
- (b) When we demonstrate the existence of a cause from an effect, the effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in the proof of the cause's existence.

This according to Aquinas is especially true in the case of God. For to prove the existence of anything, it is necessary to accept as a middle term of the argument, the meaning of the thing. Thus it is not its essence that is of relevance. This only follows when the question of existence is settled. For example, if we examine the names given to God, we could see that

they are derived from His effects, so when we intend to demonstrate God's existence from His effects, it is possible and in fact we should take the meaning of the word 'God' as the middle term of our argument.

- (c) Even if it is not possible to perfectly know a cause from its effects because they are not proportional to it, the existence of the cause from its effects can be clearly demonstrated. Applied in the case of God, even if we cannot perfectly know God as He is in his existence, we can demonstrate his existence.

Though Aquinas was the leading protagonist of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence, particularly in the medieval period, he was by no means alone. Others, in a number of ways and with arguments to justify their positions, did subscribe to Aquinas' optimism. We have quite a large percentage of these thinkers from the Scholastic School, who upheld the belief that though it may not be possible to demonstrate the existence of God *a priori*, it is possible to do so *a posteriori*. This they have attempted to justify on the following grounds:

- (a) It is possible to demonstrate God's existence from the world especially from the sensible world as we can demonstrate the existence of any cause from his effect.
- (b) Since it is possible to demonstrate the proper cause of effects from the effects themselves when such effects are better known than the causes, the existence of God can be demonstrated from the existence of the sensible world, which is clearly known and is accepted as an effect of God, who is its perfect efficient cause.

The following words of the Vatican Council seem to seal the above conviction and indeed the acceptance of reason in faith, when it says:

*The Holy mother, the church, holds and teaches that God, the beginning and the end of all things can be known with certainty by natural light of human reason from created things.*¹⁵

The conviction that it is possible to demonstrate God's existence have led to the postulation of proofs of God's existence. The most prominent of these proofs are the Ontological proof of Anselm, the Design or Teleological proofs, the FIVE WAYS of St. Thomas Aquinas and the cosmological argument.¹⁶

Contemporary Oppositions

The immense intellectual efforts which have gone and may still be said to be going on, into theists' attempts to demonstrate God's existence have not stopped the tide of opposition of contemporary thinkers. As impressive as *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God may sound, holes have been picked, not only in their conceptions of the possibility of demonstrating God's existence, but also in the proofs Aquinas and others have offered to justify their position.¹⁷

While most pre-Aquinas oppositions to the possibility of demonstrating God's existence were based on the claimed exclusion of reason from faith, (this is not to say that there were no proponents of "reason in faith" at this period. For example the contribution of St. Anselm in this regard was significant) modern and contemporary oppositions have shifted to consideration in 3 major dimensions:

- (i) Biblical understanding of knowing God.
- (ii) Claimed fallacies of assumption that have been used to show the demonstrability of God's existence.
- (iii) Scientific objections.

Biblical Understanding

The claim now is that there is a clear world of difference between the Biblical epistemological assumptions and those of the rationalists. This is because the Biblical epistemological assumptions do not agree with those of the rationalists which tend to hold that "to know means to prove." Rather the Biblical assumptions tend to imply that there is no way by which one could attempt to demonstrate God's existence through proofs. For the reality, which is sought to be established philosophically, has been vividly portrayed in the contents of the Bible.

Consequently, to the believers in Biblical sufficiency, the attempt to prove the existence of God via arguments, would only look absurd. This is because, there is an already established relationship between man and God - an interaction which is dynamic and evident in man's day to day living. The God he conceived of is one he believes in. He is living in His presence and is a self-experienced reality. The knowledge of the existence of this God cannot therefore be attained through a process of propositional manoeuvres.

The believer would contend further that even if God could be validly

inferred (which is highly impossible), from the premises of arguments, this would be of interest only to the intellectuals, who already know God as a living reality and who they consider themselves as living in personal relationship with.

The contention then is that those who worship God - the God whom Pascal calls "the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob"¹⁸ do not see Him as an inferred God of scholars and philosophers. The believers' God manifests Himself to them in the sphere of human self-experience and not through rational demonstration of His existence.

Fallacies of Assumption

The second ground for opposing possible demonstration of God's existence in contemporary circles may be said to be a take-off from an emerging position of philosophers. Reardon indicates very well this trend when he points out the increasing doubts of philosophers about the logical cogency of the proofs that have been offered to demonstrate God's existence.¹⁹ These doubts are reflected in the nature of the proofs and the consequent limits it imposes on them. As John Hick points out:

Philosophers recognise two ways in which human beings may come to know whatever there is to be known. One way (stressed by empiricism), is through experience, and the other (stressed by rationalism) is through reasoning.²⁰

When the two ways are examined in relation to the proofs of God's existence, their limitations become glaring. The empiricists standard of demonstration that believes only in things that could be experienced through the five senses, could hardly be said to be capable of providing a demonstration for the existence of God who, strictly speaking, is not an object of this kind of sense experience.

On the other hand, as Hick further indicates, the limitation of reasoning is that the only truths which are capable of being strictly proved are analytic and ultimately tautological.²¹ In this case it is not possible to demonstrate any matters of fact and existence by logic alone. This could be done only through personal experiences.

Consequently, if God exists, He cannot be an idea, but a reality which is outside of us. Thus His existence cannot be seen as demonstrable by both the kind of sense experience, the empiricists conceive of and the reasoning process of the rationalists. If His existence is to be known, as indeed the religious believer claims to do, it has to be through some other ways, in which God manifests Himself to men within their special experiences (religious and innate).

Scientific Objections

Apart from the philosophical arguments for the non-cogency of theistic proofs generally, the development of science, which has led to almost absolute dependence on empirical demonstration of facts as the only means of obtaining truths, has done further damage to theistic proofs. This is more so in the unfortunate and unsuccessful attempt of, particularly the *a posteriori* proofs, to employ quasi-scientific method in demonstrating God's existence. The scientific method of proving anything is a physical one, that asserts the existence of a certain fact by postulating a hypothesis, which is then tried out in the real world. This is done by experimentation. If the expected happens it becomes a true fact, if it does not, then the hypothesis is regarded as false and is discarded. The *a posteriori* proofs which are based on experience by the examination of events in the world as effects of God as the cause, can hardly be said to fall into this pattern of proving the existence of God, which is not physical, by means of tested hypothesis.

In addition the overwhelming dependence of science on materialistic obviousness would be hard put to accommodate the theistic demonstrations, no matter how experience or sense-based they may be. In fact this has conveniently constituted the reason(s) for scientific rejection of the proofs. For example the evolution theory of Charles Darwin, which constituted the climax of antagonism between religion and science, debunked the very basis of *a posteriori* proofs - the order in the world credited to God and seen as the conclusive proof of His existence. Darwin's theory postulated a position of the gradual evolvement of things from an embryonic state to the present matured state. This clearly shows that whatever order, (or disorderliness which the theistic demonstrations cleverly ignore), that is noticed in the world is part of this evolving process, which is necessary for being what it is - a materialistic, finite and mortal entity. Consequently the order or disorderliness cannot be seen as the special creation of an outside intelligence, as the propagators of the

theistic demonstrations would want us to believe.

Summary and Conclusion

The sum total of our immediate discussion, shows that it may be too ambitious, if not totally pretentious, to think that the existence of God is demonstrable through proofs which are products of logical inferences based on pure reasoning or empirical deductions. This is not by any means denying the immense contributions of the proofs as philosophical arguments and analysis, as an extension of reason in faith and theology generally.²² We cannot also run away from fact that man has always and will always endeavour to find justification for his religious beliefs. This is even more relevant these days in a world that has come to depend more for its epistemological development on reasonable deductions and observable things rather than authority and unquestioned faith.

As much as we recognise all the above gains from philosophy (reason) for faith, in the matter of existence of God, there seems to be no way, (in fact it looks illogical and unsupportable by evidence) that one can seek factual demonstrations for a concept which transcends empirical observation. At best, the end product of such demonstrations, to our mind, could only be of significance to scholarly oriented individuals as intellectual exercises (as indeed the proofs have turned out to be), and not necessarily proficient in generating or advancing faith. In consequence, the purpose of undertaking the whole exercise would have been defeated, as it would be of no significant relevance either to the believers who already have impeccable conviction in the existence of God, or the atheists who are convinced of the non-existence of God.

On the whole, it may well be asserted that in the contemporary dispensation, apart from the materialistic over-bearing tendencies that have led to the rejection of God's existence, those who accept and are committed to the existence of God base their conviction, not on inductive or deductive arguments, but on emotional feelings and experiences of the Divine in a personal, yet most often, unexplainable, intuitive illumination, strengthened and guaranteed by faith.

Notes and References

1. The problem has been so thoroughly discussed that new positions on it may seem belated.
2. Bertrand Russell: "Why I am not a christian" quoted from John R. Burr

- and Milton Goldinger (eds) *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, (2nd ed. 1976) p. 116.
3. See e.g. Aderibigbe I.S., "A posteriori Arguments to the proof of God's Existence: Aquinas Five ways approach." (M.A. Thesis, 1984), p. 100.
 4. In which case it would not be possible to demonstrate God's existence *a priori* as Anselm attempted to do in the Ontological argument.
 5. Basil Mitchel, "Faith and Reason: A False Antithesis" *Religious Studies* (Cambridge University Press, Vol. 16, No. 2, June 1980), p. 131.
 6. Reardon, B.M.G., *Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (London, Macmillan, 1977), p. 88.
 7. See Darcy, M.C., *Belief and Reason* (London, Burns Path & Washbourne Ltd., 1944), p. 2.
 8. Hegel, G.W.F., *Philosophy of Religion* (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962 Vol. III), p. 231.
 9. Reardon, *op.cit.*, p. 46.
 10. Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London, Victor Gollance Ltd., 1957), p. 46.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
 12. Grinder, H., *Thomistic Philosophy: Metaphysics*. (Charlotte town, vol. III, 1950), pp 262-263.
 13. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Quoted from *Philosophy of Religion*, Abenettly and Longford (eds.) (London, the Macmillan Co. Ltd., 2nd ed. 1958).
 14. *Ibid.*, pp 182-183.
 15. Dei Fillius, C.I., Quoted from Grinder Thomistic Philosophy: Metaphysics, *op.cit.*, p. 263.
 16. These proofs and many others have constituted materials for philosophical considerations by which they have been either sustained or dismissed.
 17. Aquinas "five ways" have been objected to in on the ground that they fail to meet the demand of the contemporary common-sense notion of proof.
 18. "Pascal" in Gilson's *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, *op.cit.*, p. 62.
 19. Reardon, *op.cit.*, pp.88-89.
 20. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall Inc., 1963), p.48.
 21. , p.49.
 22. Philosophy has not played an apologetic role alone, it has also

contributed immensely to clarification, definition, formation and analysis of terms used in theology. To some extent also it has been arguably accepted that philosophy can provide firm grounding for faith.

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