Arguing Religion

A Bishop Speaks at **Facebook** and **Google**

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Introduction

SPEAKING AT FACEBOOK AND GOOGLE

EARLY IN 2017, I received a visit from five gentlemen from San Jose, California. Though we had never met before, they had been following my work for some time. They told me that they were all, in various capacities, involved in the culture of Silicon Valley and that they wanted to find a way to introduce me to that highly-influential world, perhaps by setting up speaking engagements for me at the headquarters of Facebook and Google. I responded positively and we all shook hands, but I must admit that I didn't think their plan would come to much. About six months later, to my delight and surprise, one of these men called me to say that a representative from a "Catholic group" at Facebook would be contacting me shortly to schedule a talk at their headquarters in Menlo Park, California.

The Facebook compound is a fascinating place: cutting edge architecture, open work zones for the employees, a giant cafeteria to rival the dining areas at major universities, bicycles everywhere, a garden for meditating and strolling on the roof of one of the

principal buildings, and, above all, young people. I don't know if I saw one denizen of Facebook over thirty. I felt more or less like Methuselah.

But I was very warmly received, as an enthusiastic crowd attended my lecture. The talk was also live-streamed to thousands of viewers worldwide, and as I write this, the video has nearly 500,000 views. The topic I spoke on was "How to Have a Religious Argument." I decided not to address any particular theological theme in an apologetic manner, but rather to step back and consider how we might begin to approach the discussion of religious issues. I have long endorsed Stanley Hauerwas' claim that one of the most pressing demands of our violent and volatile time is to learn again how to have a religious argument in public. From fairly extensive experience on Facebook and other social media websites, I know that people are quite adept when it comes to shouting about religion, but that very few know how to constructively, rationally, and helpfully enter into conversation about religious matters.

About six weeks after the Facebook presentation, I was contacted, again through the kindly ministrations of my friends from San Jose, by a representative of Catholics who work at Google. They proposed the

same sort of arrangement, and I happily acquiesced. Like Facebook's headquarters, the Google campus looked like the kind of world that millennials would build if you gave them infinite amounts of money: lots of open space, a gym, napping pods in the work areas, music rooms, etc. I will confess that, as I explored both facilities, I often smiled, wondering what my no-nonsense, Greatest-Generation father would have made of all of it. But then I reminded myself that I was touring the workplaces of arguably the most successful, culture-influencing operations on the planet. So if napping and bike-riding help, more power to them.

For the talk at Google, I decided to broach the topic of religion more directly, taking as my cue the idea, dear to all Google-users, of the search. I titled the talk "Religion and the Opening Up of the Mind." Religion, I argued, is born of the human being's essentially unlimited capacity to quest, both intellectually and spiritually. Far from shutting down the mind—as is so often claimed by its critics—religion expands the mind and pushes it ever further, toward a properly infinite goal.

The book you are reading is a slightly expanded version of the lectures I gave at Facebook and Google.

The intended audience is not so much the convinced religious believer, but rather the outsider, the seeker, the skeptic. The tone that I adopted for both lectures is rather elevated intellectually. This is because I'm convinced that a dumbed-down religion, practiced across the denominational divides for about the past fifty years, has been a disaster. When the "new atheist" critiques arose fifteen years ago, most believers in God didn't have a clue how to respond to what were, basically, tired arguments and crude caricatures. Especially in our increasingly secularized culture, we need a smart presentation of faith.

My hope is that this little book might find its way into the hands of those, especially the young, who have wandered from God. May it be an invitation to take another look, and perhaps even to come home.

Section One

HOW TO HAVE A RELIGIOUS ARGUMENT

IF YOU HAVE the slightest acquaintance with the internet, you know that people in the digital space fight about religious matters all the time. The comment boxes of religious and atheist sites are among the most visited and most heated in the virtual world. I know this not only from my perusal of such sites, but also from nearly twenty years of direct experience running websites and social media connected to my Word on Fire ministry. When I posted my first YouTube videos, I was frankly surprised to see that people could comment on my offerings. I was barely over my surprise when I became appalled at the content of the commentary. Around 90 percent of the posted reactions were sharply negative, arising from people who hated God, religion, and me, roughly in that order.

What has become abundantly clear to me over the years is that, though there is a great deal of energy around matters religious, and though lots of sharp words are regularly exchanged, very few of the people on the internet really know how to have an

argument about religion. They don't know, at least in regard to matters religious, how to marshal evidence, construct syllogisms, draw valid conclusions, listen and respond to objections, etc. Much of this incapacity is a function of an assumption that is operative in both the high and the low culture—namely, that when it comes to religion, there are only two lively options: either aggressive, even violent imposition of one's views, or a bland and universal toleration of all opinions. And underneath that assumption is the even more fundamental conviction that religion is finally irrational, a matter of complexes and fantasies rather than reason. What I want strenuously to advocate for our time is a *tertium quid*, a third way that was taken for granted for large swaths of Western history: real argument about religion. I want to be clear at the very outset that in calling for argument, I'm not encouraging religious conflict. Just the contrary! The more we cultivate rational speech around matters religious, the more peaceful our increasingly roiled culture will be.

In the course of this section, I will endeavor to lay out five conditions or prerequisites for the formulation of this sort of argument. I trust it will become clear that these are as much behavioral and attitudi-

nal as strictly intellectual. Just as the disputants in a Platonic dialogue had to be schooled in an entire way of life before they were capable of entering into constructive conversation, so the restless men and women of our culture, conditioned by materialism, relativism, and the prerogative of self-assertion, must be habituated to a certain manner of being in the world before they can speak to one another fruitfully about matters of faith. They must come to understand—and put into practice—the convictions that authentic faith is not opposed to reason; that scientism must be put to rest; that mere toleration must not be tolerated; that voluntarism must be eschewed; and that opponents must seek to really listen to one another. As an exemplar of these various intellectual and moral virtues, I shall propose St. Thomas Aquinas, whose method of engaging religious questions is an optimal one for us today.

CHAPTER ONE

Faith Is Not Opposed to Reason

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I was watching Bill Maher's program "Real Time." I'll admit that Maher for me is something of a guilty pleasure. Though he is one of the most virulent opponents of religion on the scene today, I'm drawn to his show, perhaps under the rubric of knowing one's enemies. This particular program featured a one-on-one interview with Ralph Reed, the well-known political activist and evangelical Christian. After bantering for five minutes or so on a number of political issues, Maher paused and said, "Now Ralph, you're a person of faith." Reed did not disagree. Then Maher said, "And this means that you accept all sorts of things on the basis of no evidence whatsoever." To my astonishment and chagrin, Reed simply responded, "Yes." I nearly threw my remote at the television screen. I have spent a good deal of my

adult life fighting against just the sort of irrational fideism that Reed was apparently advocating. One of the signal graces of my life occurred when I was a high school freshman and heard the first of Aquinas' famous arguments for God's existence. From that moment on, I intuited that faith and reason are not opposed to one another but that they are, in point of fact, mutually implicative. A particular sadness of our time is that far too many people, both believers and nonbelievers, hold to some form of fideism. The former find themselves unwilling and unable to sustain a conversation with the wider culture, and the latter slough off religion, so conceived, as primitive and irrational.

Accordingly, an indispensable step toward making a coherent argument about religion is the clarification of the nature of faith. If Ralph Reed is right, then religious people can assert, emote about, or impose their belief, but they cannot argue about it. But authentic faith is not, in fact, infrarational; it is suprarational. The infrarational—what lies below reason—is the stuff of credulity, superstition, naiveté, or just plain stupidity, and no self-respecting adult should be the least bit interested in fostering or embracing it. It is quite properly shunned

by mature religious people as it is by scientists and philosophers. The suprarational, on the other hand, is what lies beyond reason but never stands in contradiction to reason. It is indeed a type of knowing, but one that surpasses the ordinary powers of observation, experimentation, hypothesis formation, or rational reflection.

In order to make this a bit clearer, permit me to offer an analogy. Coming to know another human being well is always a function of, broadly speaking, reason and faith. If I am interested in someone, intrigued by her, I can discover an awful lot through the exercise of my own powers of investigation and ratiocination. I can observe her in different situations; I can read what she has written or analyze the details of a project that she has supervised; I can speak to her friends and enemies and get their impressions of her; I can do a Google search on her or read her Wikipedia page. And once I've actually met her, my reason continues to operate alertly as I assess what I'm learning and draw my own conclusions about her personality and motivations. Moreover, I continue to check my own experience of her against what I've already taken in, searching out points of

confluence and contrast. All of this active engagement is productive and illuminating.

But if I want to know her heart, I have to stop investigating and start listening. Supposing that our friendship has grown sufficiently intense, she will, at a point of her own choosing, speak something of herself that I could never have known through my own efforts. She will reveal truths about her life, her motivations, her longings, her most intense inner experiences. And at this point, I will be compelled to make a decision whether or not I believe her. What would motivate this act of the will? I might reason that nothing she told me is fundamentally at odds with what I've come to know about her on my own, that it is, in fact, deeply congruent with the results of my own investigations. I might determine that it fits in with her general character and pattern of life. But most of all, I will accept what she has told me about herself because I've come to *trust* her. I will never be able fully to verify what she has revealed, but in accepting it (because I accept *her*), I come to a knowledge and appreciation of her that I could never have achieved any other way. My faith in her word is a risk, to be sure, but a deeply rewarding one. Now,

once I've chosen to believe what I've been told, does my reason go to sleep? Of course not! I ruminate on what she has said, seek to understand it more completely, compare and contrast it with other truths I've garnered from interacting with her, etc. At no point in this process have I succumbed to irrationality. No move of my mind or will could be reasonably characterized as superstitious or credulous, and my rationality has never been negated. But its limits have been acknowledged and its tendency toward pride and epistemic tyranny has been resisted.

This is a very precise analogy to the play between reason and faith in matters religious. From ancient times, human beings have used their minds to understand truths about God, and they have, in point of fact, been remarkably successful. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Whitehead, and many others have proposed compelling arguments for God's existence. In the second section of this book, we will examine one of these in some detail. Furthermore, on the basis of these demonstrations, philosophers have drawn conclusions about many of God's attributes, including his perfection, goodness, infinity, omnipotence, etc. St. Paul expressed his own confidence in

this "natural" or rational theology when he said, in his letter to the Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." Aquinas referred to these insights garnered by reason as *preambula fidei* (preambles to the faith). Some people, he thought, gifted with sharp minds and sufficient leisure time, could enter into the forecourts of faith, as it were, discerning a number of fundamental truths about God and the things of God. He also spoke of this kind of natural theologizing, charmingly, as a *manuductio* (a leading by the hand). Just as we might take a young child by the hand and cajole him to walk, so the philosopher can lead the fallen and finite mind toward the consideration of the deeper and more intimate truths of revelation.

The claim of the great Abrahamic religions—and something that sets them apart from the religions and mysticisms of the East—is that God has spoken (*Deus dixit*). God is not a mere force or ontological principle dumbly present as the deep background of existence, nor has God remained sequestered in complete and indifferent transcendence. Rather, he has spoken personally to his people. Please don't

think I'm talking literally about a booming voice echoing from the clouds. That image is a classic metaphor for what I'm describing. Rather, through the prophets, patriarchs, events, and institutions of Israel, God disclosed his heart to his people Israel. He communicated his passion, anger, tender mercy, and covenant fidelity. Then, in the fullness of time, he spoke, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews has it, "by a Son." The Word, which made the universe and filled the minds and mouths of the prophets, came finally in person, speaking the compassion that God is. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

Now, in the face of this communication, one has a choice to make: belief or unbelief. No one is asking a prospective believer to abandon her reason or jettison the insights that she has arrived at through her own assessment of evidence and rational speculation. No one is expecting her to sink to the level of mere credulity. But she is indeed being asked whether she is willing to believe the person who has disclosed a truth that she cannot control and that she would never have arrived at unaided. She is asked whether she is willing to trust. It is fascinating to note how often the word *pistis* occurs in the

pages of the New Testament. Usually translated as "faith," it does indeed carry the connotation of explicitly religious belief, but in a more basic sense, it means "trust." In his inaugural address in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe (*pisteuete*) in the good news." After calming the storm at sea, the Lord says to his frightened disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith (*pistis*)?" After curing the blind man, Bartimaeus, Jesus blithely tells him, "Go; your faith (*pistis*) has made you well." In the great Last Supper discourse in the Gospel of John, the Lord tells his Apostles, "Believe in God, believe also in me." He is saying, in all these cases: "Have the courage to trust in me and in what I am telling and showing you. The life-changing, storm-calming, sight-restoring, purpose-giving truth that I embody is on offer. Are you willing to accept it?"

Now, let us suppose that someone makes the act of faith. His reason is not suppressed, no *sacrificium intellectus* (sacrifice of the intellect) is required. For critical intelligence takes in what faith has accepted, turns it over, analyzes it, meditates upon it, and draws conclusions from it. This process goes by the technical name of theology, and it was succinctly charac-

terized by St. Anselm of Canterbury as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). Do you see now why describing faith as "accepting things on the basis of no evidence" is just silly? It's really as silly as saying that falling in love is superstitious.

John Henry Newman, the greatest Catholic theologian to have written in the English language, spent a lifetime wrestling with this issue of faith and reason. He was on the frontlines when powerful rationalistic critics of Christianity emerged in the nineteenth century. Newman took the intriguing tack of remarking how so much of our ordinary knowing is a function of both rational and non-rational moves. He observed that we very typically give complete assent to propositions for which there is far from clinching inferential support. To cite his famous example, we assent to the claim that England is an island without hesitation, though we cannot produce an airtight syllogistic argument to that effect. Rather, the surety of our knowledge is the result of a whole congeries of experiences, testimonies, hunches, conversations, empirical observations, historical witnesses, etc., none of which in itself is perfectly convincing, but all of which, taken together and converging on the same point, push the

mind to assent. Similarly, a man's conviction that he will marry a particular woman is hardly the result of a rational demonstration; rather, it is the fruit of a long process of assessment—both rational and non-rational, both reasonable and beyond reason—of a range of evidences.

Thus, the religious person will accept the claim that God is love, but he won't be able to justify that acceptance in any straightforwardly philosophical manner. Instead, if he reflects upon his assent, he will recognize in it elements of both reason and trust. Newman's point is that, in this, religious assent is not qualitatively different from ordinary acts of assent, even regarding the simplest matters. And this is why he can say, in one of his sermons on faith and reason, that "faith is the reasoning of a religious mind."

In the great temple of Jerusalem there were precincts reserved only for Jewish believers, but there was also a section called "the courtyard of the Gentiles." There, nonbelievers could gather and garner some sense of the holiness of the place. I fully realize that there are an awful lot of people today who have rejected religion, who are angry at religious institutions, or who have bought into the atheist critics of faith. I certainly don't expect such

people to come right into the temple with eagerness and enthusiasm. But I wonder whether I might invite them into the courtyard of the Gentiles—which is to say, the arena of what I've characterized as natural theology or philosophical reflection on the things of God. I am not asking them to leave their brains at the door. On the contrary, I want them to pose any and all relevant questions. I would propose as common ground only the epistemic imperatives formulated by the twentieth-century Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible. Trust me, we will have a great deal to talk about.