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Faith, Hope, and Charity

The idea that Western civilization is a magnificent flowering that extends back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and was enriched and nourished by Christianity is a myth. Nevertheless, it continues to be perpetuated by philosophers, historians, and theologians.

In truth, the success of Christianity in the declining years of the Roman Empire was a triumph of an Eastern and Semitic religion over the pagan civilizations of Greece and Rome. This is particularly evident when we compare the respective virtues of the pagans with the Christians. Nothing represents the inner core of a civilization more than its ideals—particularly its conceptions of the good in general and human excellence in particular. The ancient Greeks and Romans expressed their vision of human excellence in terms of the four cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. These were the highest ideals to which humanity could aspire, not only for the good of the community but for human flourishing, completion, and the happiness of the individual in this world.

The victory of Christianity over Rome involved an introduction of a new set of virtues—faith, hope, and charity. Christian philosophers and theologians thought that they were completing and enriching the legacy of pagan philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. But on careful examination, the new virtues cannot simply be added to the old ones the way more sugar can be added to lemonade. The addition of faith, hope, and charity was an addition of something foreign that had the effect of destroying the original virtues.



Faith would not be incompatible with wisdom were it simply a recognition that reason cannot suffice to penetrate the mystery of existence. But faith is much more than that. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) defined faith as a gift of God's grace that allows the intellect to surrender to the authority of God by believing in the unknown and unseen. However, Aquinas did not want us to confuse faith with any ordinary opinion or belief. He tells us that, while mere belief is filled with doubt, faith is characterized by a "fearless certainty" that accounts for the pleasure faith gives to believers. The certainty of the faithful comes from their conviction that they are on the side of God, and, like God, they are in possession of infallible truth. Their fearlessness comes from their belief that God will care for them and harm their enemies. Indeed, Jesus promises the elect that God will destroy their enemies: "And shall not God avenge his own elect.... I tell you that he will avenge them speedily" (Luke 18:7–8).

Since faith is the greatest of Christian virtues, it follows that demons do not have faith. Aquinas tells us that "demons believe and tremble," but they cannot be said to have faith. Demons

have an opinion about God: they think he is both powerful and vengeful, and they tremble because they suspect that a dreadful fate awaits them.

Even though faith is the supreme Christian virtue, this capacity to surrender one's intellect to God is not an achievement but a gift. Nevertheless,

The victory of Christianity over Rome involved replacing the ancient world's four cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice with Christianity's trio of faith, hope, and charity.

the mere possession of the gift is rewarded by the promise of eternal bliss. This is why faith is intimately connected with the hope that the unknown and unknowable God will deliver the faithful from the pain and horror of existence and whisk them away to a perfect world beyond the grave.

Since God has a habit of neither speaking clearly nor revealing himself to all those who desire such a revelation, there is a need to determine what the will of God to which one should surrender is. The problem is invariably solved by declaring some authority or other the representative of God on earth and the infallible interpreter of his word as it appears in the sacred texts. Aquinas thought that the Catholic Church was that infallible representative and interpreter of God's will.

First, the Church makes blind obedience and surrender of one's intellect to the supreme virtue. Abraham becomes the supreme manifestation of faith, for he is prepared to do anything that God demands, including killing his innocent son. With blind unthinking obedience

established as the supreme virtue, the Church then posits itself as the highest authority to whom this surrender is due. In other words, faith—defined as the intellectual (and moral) surrender of the individual to God—turns out to be a surrender to the self-proclaimed “infallible” human authority.

The “infallible” authority betrayed the trust and launched humanity on a long path of unspeakable barbarity. It commanded the unprovoked slaughter of Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land during the Crusades. And if infidels could not be tolerated in the Holy Land, then why should they be tolerated in Europe? So, the Church demanded that Jews be isolated in ghettos, made to wear distinctive clothing, robbed of their property and children with impunity, and subjected to pogroms on the grounds that they were dangerous and depraved Christ-killers. This “infallible” authority ordered the slaughter of fellow Christians in the so-called Albigensian Crusade (1208–1226), during which “heretics,” defined as those who questioned the authority of the Church or did not share its interpretations of Holy Writ, were stoned, burned, and crucified by the thousands. This “infallible”

authority required the drowning or burning alive of women who were—on the flimsiest evidence—accused of consorting with the devil. This “infallible”

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authority instituted a system of “legal” investigations—the Inquisition—to stamp out heresy defined as insubordination, that is, unwillingness to “surrender.” The Inquisition was a shocking innovation and a complete sabotage of the rule of law as practiced by the Romans. The popes declared that it was the duty of every Christian to denounce heretics to the authorities. Children were encouraged to accuse their parents and husbands to report on their wives. Bringing about the hideous death of a loved one was deemed an act of faith and devotion to God. This was history’s longest and most sustained assault on every principle of natural justice, every instinct of human decency, and every scruple of moral conscience.

The defenders of religion usually dismiss the evils committed in its name as examples of bad people doing bad things that have nothing to do with faith. But that is not the case. Faith is the source of the wickedness. The barbarities of the Church are integral to the faith, not a foreign or alien imposition. Only faith can inspire good people to do or defend terrible things with a clear conscience. Thomas Aquinas, by all accounts a gentle soul, endorsed and defended these wicked commands of the Church. He defended the Crusades, the Inquisition, the persecution of Jews, and the burning of witches. Why? The nature of his faith required it.

Faith hungers for certainty on the one hand and is painfully aware of its fragility on the other. As Aquinas explained, heathens and Jews “hinder

the faith” by their “blasphemies and evil persuasions.” Faith can be harmed by the mere existence of unbelievers. That explains why Jews were isolated, forbidden to appear in public during Christian festivals, and forced to convert on pain of death. And since a single heretic can “contaminate” the faith and threaten salvation, it is better for a hundred innocent people to be burned alive than for one heretic to go free.

It is the fragility of faith—faith in the unknown and unseen—that accounts for this exaggerated concept of “harm.” Far from being characterized by fearless certainty, the faithful are full of doubt and fear—doubt about the extravagant dogmas they must believe to be saved, and fear that they will lose the faith at the slightest provocation. It is not the demons but the faithful who tremble.

Far from being a virtue, faith as understood by Thomas Aquinas and his Church is a vice that undermines the cardinal virtues admired by the pagans. To enjoy a “fearless certainty” in the absence of all rational evidence is antithetical to wisdom. Surrendering one’s intellect to fallible authorities and failing to take responsibility for one’s actions epitomizes puerility and cowardice, not courage. Succumbing to fanaticism and committing atrocities flies in the face of the virtues of moderation and justice.

As to charity, it was certainly not extended to Jews, heretics, or unbelievers. It was more often than not squandered on idlers, beggars, mendicants, and most of all on the Church itself, which made sure that it was the greatest beneficiary of Christian charity.

Far from being a friendly amendment to the pagan virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice, the Christian “virtues” of faith, hope, and charity destroyed the pagan understanding of human excellence and subverted the civilizations of Greece and Rome. ■

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