



Religion and Hope

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Thomas Aquinas on faith and hope



Aquinas distinguishes religious faith from hope in that faith gives us the truth about God and is in that sense cognitive, while hope allows us to trust in God's help in attaining eternal happiness and is therefore more like an attitude. Faith must come first since we must believe in God before we can hope to come to his presence in eternal salvation. Having argued earlier that hope must be for something possible but difficult to obtain, he now applies this to salvation and says that we must first believe the object of hope – our salvation in God – to be possible before we can hope for it. In this way faith comes before hope and is necessary for it.



A recent view on faith and hope



Theo Hobson in his recent book *Faith* (Acumen, 2009) says, "faith is a positive, hopeful attitude that is willing to dissent from convention, common sense, reasonability. It is a form of hope that sticks its neck out." (6)



"Faith resembles the boldness of love, the mad trust that one's desire for this person might cease to be just a subjective passion and become embodied truth. And an honest reading of Paul's letters will show that 'historical and metaphysical propositions' are almost beside the point; the key thing is this intensification of God-trust, to the point of expecting an imminent cosmic revolution that we struggle to conceptualize." (69)



What is Hope?



A hope is a wish that differs from other wishes in that

- it is motivated by some degree of anxiety or concern, as opposed to fantasy or desire,
- it is directed towards the future as conceived by the person who hopes,
- its object is an occurrence that is considered to be contingent,
- its object is an occurrence that is considered to be possible,



The grounds of metaphysical hope



The anxiety that metaphysical hope responds to is the fragile, vulnerable, fallible and mortal condition of being human.



The most important of these is our mortality.

- ▣ We also seek cosmic justice,
- ▣ and a ground for morality.
- ▣ We need “healing” – physical and spiritual.
- ▣ And we need an object for supplication.
- ▣ Hope-based arguments for God
- ▣ Pascal’s wager
- ▣ Kant requires God to give sense to morality
- ▣ Kierkegaard’s faith based on ‘subjectivity’

Countered by:

- ▣ Richard Dawkins’ argument that belief in God is neither rational nor realistic
- ▣ Does this miss the role of hope?
- ▣ Can faith based on hope be authentic?
- ▣ A hermeneutic account of faith
- ▣ Belief and desire are not in conflict.
- ▣ Facts and interpretations.
- ▣ Hope can drive interpretations.
- ▣ So hope generates faith authentically.
- ▣ But Aquinas says that faith comes before hope.

- ▣ The nature of faith
- ▣ Perhaps it is pre-intentional hopefulness that generates faith and then faith inspires specific forms of metaphysical hope.
- ▣ This is highlighted by the element of supplication that is characteristic of hope.
- ▣ But there are dangers in an excess of supplication: for example, messianism and cargo cults.
- ▣ Hope and metaphysics
- ▣ The stress on hope as an attitude or disposition – as a subjective condition – should not obscure the need to question the metaphysical status of its intentional objects.
- ▣ Accordingly, the critique mounted by the “new atheists” needs to be faced.
- ▣ Hope, faith and irony
- ▣ Towards the end of the *Phaedo*, Socrates says:

The reasons which we already described provide ground enough, as you can see, Simmias, for leaving nothing undone to attain during life some measure of goodness and wisdom; for the prize is glorious and the hope great. ... Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have

described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations – since we have clear evidence that the soul is immortal – this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking; for the risk is a noble one. We should use such accounts to inspire ourselves with confidence; and that is why I have already drawn out my tale so long.