

STEPHEN MAITZEN

TWO VIEWS OF RELIGIOUS CERTITUDE

At least since Cardinal Newman's *Grammar of Assent* (1870), Anglo-American philosophers have been concerned with the role of certitude, or subjective epistemic certainty, in theistic belief.¹ Newman is himself famous for holding that certitude is an essential feature of any sort of genuine belief, including in particular religious belief. As one recent commentator, Michael Banner, notes, for Newman

there is only a case of belief where we are possessed of certainty, marked by an unhesitating and confident judgement that a proposition is true.... Newman held not only that ...certainty was essential for faith, but that where one lacked it, one was not properly described as believing the proposition in question (1990: 100-1).

Not surprisingly, Newman's view has been challenged by many philosophers, starting with his contemporaries.² In Banner's words, 'it seems that we apply more lenient standards in judging something to be a belief than Newman allows.... Belief warranted by an inference to the best explanation is not a certainty of truth, but it may be belief none the less' (1990:102). Indeed, it is controversial whether certitude plays any essential role in belief generally or in religious belief in particular.

In this paper, I examine two recent and resourceful defenses of the role of certitude in theistic belief.³ They are alike in taking certitude about standard theistic propositions to be epistemically defensible; they differ in defending ostensibly different *kinds* of certitude. I argue that neither defense succeeds: each fails to show that its respective form of certitude is an epistemically justifiable propositional attitude for the believer to take. But theistic belief, I maintain, is like other sorts of belief in needing epistemic justification. Therefore, I regard the failure of these two defenses as evidence for my own view that certitude plays no essential role in theistic belief.

¹ In using 'certitude' for 'subjective epistemic certainty', I join a tradition going back at least to Newman's contemporary J. F. Stephen, who urges that we 'distinguish between certitude, a state of mind, and certainty, a quality of propositions'. Stephen claims, moreover, that there is 'no assignable connection' between the two, a claim I echo below. (See Stephen, 1986: 163-4.) Some of the authors I discuss prefer the term 'certainty', but they should be understood as referring to certitude unless otherwise specified.

² For example, J. F. Stephen (n. 1).

³ By 'theistic belief' I mean belief in the God of orthodox monotheism. Like nearly all contemporary philosophers of religion, I will take belief in God to require belief in the existence of God. As for theistic faith, I will be focusing on its belief-component, whatever other components it may have.

I. THE CONDITIONAL JUSTIFICATION OF CERTITUDE

Eleonore Stump's recent paper 'Faith and Goodness' attempts, in part, to defend Aquinas's account of theistic faith against the objection 'that nothing in Aquinas's theory can account for the certainty he ascribes to those who have faith' (Stump, 1990:185). In her discussion of Aquinas's theory, Stump distinguishes 'between the metaphysical and the epistemological strands of the justification of belief' (*ibid.*). Briefly, this distinction is supposed to correspond to the difference between (a) one's being in fact justified in believing that *p* and (b) one's knowing, or being justified in believing, that one is justified in believing that *p*. While (b) (or at least its stronger disjunct) pretty clearly entails (a), the converse does not hold. The difference between (a) and (b) is sometimes called an 'epistemic levels distinction,'⁴ and, Stump says, it tracks the distinction she draws between metaphysical and epistemological justification of belief. One might naturally associate metaphysical justification with so-called *externalist* theories of justified belief, for *S* can be metaphysically justified in a belief even if *S* has no subjective access whatever to the grounds for the belief.

Indeed, on Stump's reading, Aquinas accepts a very strong version of externalism regarding justification. For he holds that the nature of God entails that the theist is (metaphysically) justified in accepting the essential propositions of faith (including, of course, the proposition that God exists).⁵ On his view, the propositions of faith are indeed true, and they are true in virtue of their connection to the metaphysically most real and stable thing there is: the nature of God. Much as she is metaphysically justified in believing that, say, there's a prime number between 78 and 80, the theist is at least as metaphysically justified in believing that God exists; for metaphysical justification she needs no subjective access to the grounds for her belief.

Stump uses Aquinas's account of metaphysically justified theistic belief to explain his defense of religious certitude:

Aquinas says we can think of certainty in two different ways: either in terms of a cause of the certainty of the propositions' truth or as a characteristic of the person believing those propositions. The cause of the certainty of the propositions of faith is something altogether necessary, namely, the divine nature.... That is, given the divine nature, the propositions of faith are as certain as any propositions can be (1990:185).

It should be clear by now that I'm using 'certainty' to refer to certainty in the proposition and 'certitude' to refer to certainty in the believer (see n. 1). There is, then, a distinction between certainty and certitude that parallels

⁴ See, for example, Alston (1980), cited by Stump (1990: 183 n. 29).

⁵ Aquinas held that 'God exists' was demonstrable to the unaided reason and so, strictly speaking, not a proposition of faith. However, 'God exists' is obviously entailed by genuine (non-demonstrable) propositions of faith such as 'God is triune'.

Stump's distinction between, respectively, metaphysically and epistemologically justified belief. However, as Stump explicitly concedes, Aquinas's argument offers justification for, at most, metaphysical certainty: 'The certainty of faith, then, is...not a certainty which is characteristic of believers' (1990: 186).

I will pass over the objections to metaphysical justification that would be raised by internalist theories of justified belief. The important question is this. How does the presence of metaphysical *certainty* justify the sort of religious *certitude* with which we're all familiar – the subjective assurance that is, some say, required of true believers and is, at any rate, often expressed by them?

According to Stump, Aquinas's 'answer to this question is complicated' but not altogether unpersuasive (*ibid.*). I myself find nothing persuasive about it. She writes:

On Aquinas's account of faith, we can explain the assurance and confidence a believer has in the truth of the propositions believed in faith in two ways, based on the twofold role of intellect and will in faith (*ibid.*).

Again, she concedes that the divine nature establishes, at most, the metaphysical certainty of propositions of faith. 'But', she says,

if [the believer] thinks of the propositions of faith...as based on the immutable nature of God, then he is in a position to believe justifiedly that *if* his belief in the propositions of faith is justified at all, it is justified with the maximal justification possible for human beliefs (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

The second occurrence of 'if' in Stump's formulation is important; it signals that a kind of conditional justification of belief is being attempted. Even if this sort of conditional reasoning could actually suffice to justify belief in the propositions of faith – and it is far from clear that it could – such reasoning does nothing to justify the *certitude* that so often attaches to theistic belief. To see why, compare this reasoning. If Goldbach's Conjecture⁶ is true, then it's necessarily (hence certainly) true; so, if I correctly believe it's true, my certitude about its truth is justified. But if it's false, then it's necessarily (hence certainly) false; so, if you correctly believe it's false, your certitude about its falsity is justified.⁷ Surely this argument from metaphysical certainty to epistemically justified certitude is fallacious.⁸ Mathematicians just don't know whether Goldbach's Conjecture is true or whether it's false. In the absence of a valid demonstration, what (epistemic) justification could

⁶ Goldbach's Conjecture, as yet neither proven nor disproven, states that every even number greater than 2 can be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers.

⁷ Recall that, on Stump's reading of Aquinas, the theist is (metaphysically) justified in believing that God exists just because she *correctly* believes that God exists. God's nature provides the metaphysical justification. So, too, with Goldbach's Conjecture: if I correctly believe it's true, then the (noncontingent) truth of the Conjecture provides metaphysical justification for my belief. Parallel reasoning applies, of course, if you correctly believe that it's false. In either case, 'correctly' will mean 'justifiedly'.

⁸ What's more, the presence of subjective certitude in *S*'s belief that *p* adds nothing to the likelihood that *p* is in fact *true*. On this, see Stephen (1986:166).

they have for believing one way or the other? *A fortiori*, then, mathematicians would have to admit that *certitude* about its truth (or about its falsity) would be unjustified. The sheer noncontingency of the Conjecture is not enough to justify either of those strong propositional attitudes.

The same goes for theistic belief. One can't justify the subjective certitude of theists by pointing to the noncontingency of propositions of faith. This is one major shortcoming of Aquinas's externalist account; and, as I've already indicated, Stump seems to recognize the shortcoming. Yet she continues to regard Aquinas's account of faith as plausible, especially if we understand the role it assigns to the will:

[A]s regards the will, ... a believer ... is in a position to know that *if* the propositions of faith are true, then his happiness can be achieved and the deepest desires of his heart can be fulfilled only by adherence to the propositions of faith.

'This way of looking at the believer's position,' she concludes, 'helps us ... to understand the commitment of believers to the propositions of faith ...' (1990: 186–7, emphasis added).

Presumably, Stump is not using 'commitment' to introduce a new notion *in place of* (epistemic) certitude; for if she is, then it's hard to see how her conclusion is relevant to the question we're both addressing. In either case, it's hard to see how her remarks about the will add to the epistemic justification of religious certitude. In fairness to Stump, she concludes that Aquinas's account *helps us to understand* religious certitude, without necessarily *justifying* it. Still, if it helps us to understand only how some believers could be led fallaciously to claim certitude for their beliefs, then it's hardly a defense of their epistemic attitudes. Moreover, Stump ends her paper by referring once again to the value of Aquinas's account in 'the justification for faith', not merely in its explanation (1990: 191).

In short, our discussion so far seems to underscore J. F. Stephen's point (see n. 1) that there is 'no assignable connection' between certainty and certitude. In particular, there's nothing, so far, which shows that the subjective certitude characteristic of many theists is an epistemically justifiable state of mind. This suggests already that certitude plays at least no essential role in religious belief, but that's a conclusion to which I'll return in due course. In the meantime, I want to examine an account which tries to defend religious certitude of an ostensibly different kind.

II. CERTITUDE AS VOLITIONAL COMMITMENT

In an excellent forthcoming paper,⁹ Scott MacDonald takes up essentially the same objection to Aquinas that Stump tries to rebut. MacDonald confronts the familiar charge that 'the person who has faith seems to be irrational

⁹ 'Demons, Doxastic Voluntarism, and Aquinas's Account of Faith' (unpublished manuscript, 3 May 1990); references to this work will give page number only. I am grateful to Professor MacDonald for permission to discuss, and quote from, his manuscript.

in holding the propositions assented to in faith with the high degree of confidence that is characteristic of faith' (26). He answers this charge by distinguishing 'between epistemic and volitional confidence or commitment':

[A]s one perceives the evidence for a proposition increasing, one's epistemic confidence with respect to that proposition increases, reaching a limit in epistemic certitude in the case in which one perceives the evidence as guaranteeing the truth of the proposition. On the other hand, one's volitional confidence with respect to some object or state of affairs is a function of one's practical commitment... to that object or state of affairs (28).

Unlike Stump, MacDonald does not attempt to justify (what I've been calling) the subjective certitude of theistic believers. On the contrary, he seems to hold that such certitude cannot be justified along the lines suggested by Stump's reading of Aquinas. He argues, instead, that the 'certitude characteristic of faith is not *epistemic* certitude'. On his view, it is *volitional* certitude – or, as he says, 'total volitional commitment' – that distinguishes faith, particularly Christian faith (29).

For reasons I've already adumbrated, I entirely agree with MacDonald that epistemic certitude is not characteristic of (or essential to) faith. However, I suspect that MacDonald's defense of volitional certitude may commit him to the kind of epistemic certitude that his own account finds unjustifiable. MacDonald writes that 'those who have faith can pursue the ends identified by Christianity with a high degree of volitional commitment while being less than epistemically certain of the truth of Christianity' (*ibid.*).¹⁰ But I doubt that the volitional certitude MacDonald attributes to believers can be justified unless it's accompanied by epistemic certitude that is itself justified. And this will be particularly true of believers in Christianity (or any other religion with distinctive volitional demands), as I'll try to show.

According to MacDonald,

Christianity demands *total* commitment to its ends.... Hence, those who have faith are typically quite *certain of what general ends to pursue* and are willing to forfeit a great deal in pursuing them. That sort of *certainly about what one must do and how one must act* can have the appearance of epistemic certainty and is sometimes an expression of it.... But volitional commitment or practical certainty is not always based on epistemic certainty in this way (*ibid.*, first emphasis in original).¹¹

He tries to illustrate the divergence of volitional and epistemic certitude with the following example:

¹⁰ Gary Gutting appears to make a similar claim: 'It is true that acting with total commitment to a belief does not require absolute certainty about the belief' (1982: 107).

¹¹ On MacDonald's view, volitional certitude about (e.g.) Christianity must not be confused with either of the following attitudes: acting *as if* Christianity were true, or being *certain* that one should act *as if* Christianity were true. On his view, faith requires belief (38, n. 50). However, as my critique of his account suggests, volitional certitude about Christianity may amount to acting *as if* Christianity were *certainly* true.

If I judge that there is a one-in-three chance that the house in which my children are sleeping is on fire, I am absolutely certain about what I must do – I must try to get them out of the house, whatever the cost (29–30).

He offers this as a case of volitional certitude unaccompanied by epistemic certitude. Indeed, he points out, it's volitional certitude in the absence of propositional belief: 'I do not believe that the house is on fire but only that there is a reasonable chance that it is' (30). Hence, if volitional certitude doesn't even entail belief, it surely does not entail epistemically certain belief.

But MacDonald's account faces, I think, the following problem. Even if his analysis of the preceding example is correct, it won't work for the sort of religious certitude he wants to defend. As MacDonald observes, religions such as Christianity impose volitional obligations on their adherents; religions have, let us say, volitional consequences. But religious certitude will apply to volitional obligations that are distinctive consequences of the relevant religion(s); it won't apply to volitional obligations in general. An utterly non-religious person can be certain, for example, that he shouldn't perpetrate gratuitous cruelty. That obligation is not a distinctive volitional consequence of any religion: one can recognize it without adhering in any way to a particular religious view.

By contrast, the obligation to worship Jesus as God is one of many distinctive volitional consequences of traditional Christianity. That is, suppose we have the following pair of propositions:

(*T*) The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is true.

(*W*) One ought to love and worship Jesus as God.

Clearly *T* entails *W*; the obligation expressed by *W* is a volitional consequence of *T* (or, perhaps, of one's knowing that *T*). But surely *W* is also a distinctive consequence of *T*. There is no reason at all to think that *W* holds *even if* *T* is false. On the contrary, if *T* is false – if the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is just wrong – then there would seem to be an obligation *not* to worship Jesus as God. Even if that last claim is arguable, it seems clear that no such obligation as *W* holds if *T* is altogether false. In other words, *W* also entails *T*.

But this means that one's rational degree of belief that *W* cannot exceed one's rational degree of belief that *T*, a fact which follows from a theorem of the probability calculus:

If *A* entails *B*, then $EP(A)$ cannot exceed $EP(B)$,

where 'EP' denotes epistemic probability, or rational degree of belief.¹² Thus, if *V* is any distinctive volitional obligation of Christianity, my belief that *V* holds cannot, rationally, be stronger than my belief that the relevant Christian doctrine is true. This goes not only for worshipping Jesus as God

¹² Although this probabilistic constraint on rational degree of belief seems to me to hold in general, it's especially plausible where *A* obviously entails *B*. But it's plausible to claim that *T* obviously entails *W* (and conversely). I owe this point to Carl Ginet.

but for every distinctive volitional consequence of any religion at all. My degree of belief that the relevant obligation obtains cannot rationally exceed my degree of belief that the relevant religious claim is true.

On MacDonald's view, religious certitude is certitude about the obligations imposed by religion, including (for example) obligations of worship. It's not, to repeat, certitude about obligations that can obtain independently of religion, such as the obligation not to perpetrate gratuitous cruelty. In short, it's certitude about the distinctive volitional consequences of religion; and the probability calculus shows why such volitional certitude cannot be rational unless accompanied by epistemic certitude about the truth of the religion.

I should emphasize an important distinction between MacDonald's defense of epistemic religious certitude and a somewhat similar defense with which MacDonald's might be confused. Religions typically regard their volitional consequences not as dictates of prudential or pragmatic rationality but, rather, as objective moral obligations. Christians, for example, typically take there to be a moral obligation to worship Jesus in a manner befitting his deity. They would surely resist the suggestion that Christians ought to worship Jesus as God not out of moral duty but, instead, for the sake of prudence.

Therefore, I'm assuming that propositions such as W are meant to express objective moral obligations, an assumption that MacDonald presumably shares. I'm also assuming that a subject's volitional commitment to an end E can be measured by the subject's degree of belief that she's obliged to pursue E . But that assumption, too, seems to square with MacDonald's own descriptions of volitional certitude, to wit: being 'quite certain of what general ends to pursue', possessing 'certainty about what one must do and how one must act', and so forth. MacDonald is, pretty clearly, concerned to defend the epistemic – rather than the prudential – rationality of being certain that one is under some religious obligation. Thus he should not be read as simply advocating a version of Pascal's Wager. While Pascal purported to defend the prudential rationality of 'taking up' theistic belief, he never pretended to defend the truth-oriented, epistemic rationality of doing so.

Once this distinction is grasped, it becomes clear that MacDonald's view cannot be rescued by the following admittedly tempting rejoinder.¹³ I have objected that, since W entails T , one's rational degree of belief that W cannot exceed one's rational degree of belief that T . But, goes the rejoinder, there are any number of propositions besides T that also entail W but are *not* entailed by W : for example,

(T^*) $EP(T)$ exceeds one-half.

Now, even if the Christian is less than certain of the truth of T , her evidence might well justify certainty about T^* , for T^* simply states that the available

¹³ This argument was suggested to me independently by Richard Boyd and Joseph G. Moore.

evidence renders T probable; and surely the reflective Christian can be justifiably certain of that probability judgement without being certain of T itself. It can be quite plausible, in other words, to suppose that for some Christians $EP(T^*)$ is virtually 1.

Suppose, further, that T^* entails W . This will, of course, mean that W is a consequence of the Christian's belief that T^* and, further, that the Christian had better be at least as confident of W as she is of T^* (on account of the same probability theorem invoked earlier). Thus, since she's virtually certain of T^* , she had better be virtually certain of W . But, unlike T , T^* is not entailed by W : W itself entails nothing about the epistemic probability of T . So, in fact, the Christian is rationally permitted to be *more* certain of W than she is of T^* . (Again, if T^* entails W , she is not rationally permitted to be *less* certain of W than of T^* .) This appears to be just the result MacDonald is looking for: we have epistemically justified certitude about W , a distinctive consequence of Christianity, without the need for justified certitude about T .

This rejoinder is, again, quite tempting, and it nearly pulls off the rescue. But it relies on a false premise. In order for W to be a consequence of T^* , W must be entailed by T^* , and it is not. The fact that $EP(T)$ exceeds one-half does not entail W . Granted, since T entails W , T^* does entail that $EP(W)$ exceeds one-half, but (like many propositions) W can be false even though epistemically probable.¹⁴ Thus, contrary to the rejoinder, W is not a consequence of T^* . Indeed, in calling W a distinctive consequence of T , I am committed to the claim that the only propositions entailing W are propositions entailing T (T itself is, of course, one such proposition). I see no reason to doubt that claim.

Furthermore, this fact about the logical relation of T^* and W suggests a crucial disanalogy between (a) the Christian's certitude regarding W and (b) the certitude of the parent (in MacDonald's example) who thinks there's a reasonable chance that his house is on fire. In the case of (b), we have something like the following propositions:

(F) The house in which my children are sleeping is on fire.

(F*) I judge there to be a reasonable chance that F : $EP(F)$ is at least one-third.

(C) I must try to get the children out of the house, whatever the cost.

While, in the case of (a), T^* does not entail W , in the case of (b) we pretty clearly do have an entailment between the analogous propositions, F^* and C . In (b), I think most parents would agree, F^* entails C , even where C is construed as an objective moral obligation (attaching to any parent in those

¹⁴ Here's a simple example: while you agree to look away, I flip a coin three times and secretly record the results. It may be false that the coin landed heads-up at least once, even though on the evidence available to you that outcome is epistemically quite likely ($EP = 7/8$).

circumstances). Since for the parent, presumably, $EP(F^*)$ is virtually 1, if F^* entails C then the parent is not only epistemically permitted but required to be (virtually) certain of C . Thus MacDonald's point: the parent can be justifiably certain of C without being certain of F itself.

But the analogy between (a) and (b) breaks down right there. Even though F^* entails C , that fact in no way helps T^* to entail W . MacDonald's example is supposed to show how the Christian's certitude about W , in the absence of certitude about T , is just as reasonable as the parent's certitude about C in the absence of certitude about F . But since T^* does not entail W , he can't get from the Christian's justifiable certitude regarding T^* to justifiable certitude regarding W .

These findings underscore a simple fact: contrary to MacDonald, one cannot rationally be certain that she ought to obey the distinctive commands of Christianity¹⁵ unless she's equally certain that Christianity is true. Any rational person can be certain that the following *entailment* holds:

(T) If Christianity is true then I ought to obey its distinctive commands.

But she mustn't be certain that the consequent of T holds unless she's also certain that the antecedent holds.

As MacDonald presents it, then, the volitional certitude of religious believers must include epistemic certitude about the truth of their religions. The former will be unjustified (or irrational) unless accompanied by the latter. Moreover, a believer's volitional certitude will not, of course, be justified unless his epistemic certitude is itself justified: if the believer is unjustifiably certain of the truth of Christianity, then his consequent volitional certitude will also be unjustified.

MacDonald concludes:

[T]he certitude... characteristic of Christian faith is volitional rather than epistemic. And since volitional and epistemic certainty can come apart, I hold it to be possible, and in fact quite typical, for Christians to manifest volitional certitude of the sort I've described while at the same time judging the probability of Christianity's being true to be well below 1. Moreover, it seems clear that those who are in this mixed epistemic-volitional state need not be guilty of any epistemic or moral impropriety (30).

We've seen, however, that MacDonald has not succeeded in pulling apart the two kinds of certitude. In order to be rational, the volitional certitude he describes must come attached to the very sort of epistemic certitude which, he suggests, is seldom justified.

MacDonald's account of religious certitude is nearly right. He wisely recognizes that the Aquinas-Stump line does nothing to justify epistemic certitude on the part of believers. But his defense of volitional commitment

¹⁵ Or, in MacDonald's phrase, that she must 'pursue the ends identified by Christianity' (MacDonald, 29).

lands him in essentially the same trouble: his account cannot justify religious certitude either.

Since neither account succeeds, I'm tempted to press the conclusion that certitude plays no essential role at all in religious belief. For religious belief, like any sort of belief, needs epistemic justification in order to be rational (and I see nothing about the nature of religious faith that entails its irrationality). But if religious belief is to be rational it cannot have as an essential feature a propositional attitude that looks to be epistemically unjustifiable. That is, I would join Basil Mitchell, Richard Swinburne, and many others in concluding that religious faith can be entirely genuine without being subjectively certain. But I have rejected here only two defenses of religious certitude, and so I won't press the more general conclusion.¹⁶

*Sage School of Philosophy,
Cornell University,
Ithaca, N.Y. 14853*

REFERENCES

- Alston, William P. 'Level Confusions in Epistemology', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, v (1980), 135–50.
- Banner, Michael C. *The Justification of Science and the Rationality of Religious Belief*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1990).
- Gutting, Gary. *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. University of Notre Dame Press (1982).
- Newman, John Henry. 'An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent', in Gerald D. McCarthy (ed.), *The Ethics of Belief Debate*. Scholars Press (1986).
- Stephen, James Fitzjames. 'On Certitude in Religious Assent', in McCarthy (*op. cit.*), pp. 147–69.
- Stump, Eleonore. 'Faith and Goodness', in Godfrey Vesey (ed.), *The Philosophy in Christianity*. Cambridge University Press (1990), pp. 167–91.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Carl Ginet, Norman Kretzmann, and members of the Cornell Philosophy Workshop for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.