

The late medieval controversy over faith vs reason illustrated in William of Ockham's critique of Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274)

Aquinas engaged in controversy with a group of philosophers at the University of Paris in the late 13th century. They were known as Latin averroists. Because they were influenced by the version of Aristotle's philosophy presented by the medieval Arab philosopher Averroes in his extensive commentaries on the works of Aristotle. The Latin averroists were particularly impressed by Aristotle's argument that God as first cause of the universe must be both eternal in his nature and eternal in his effects. Accordingly, the universe must have always existed. So, the universe was never created. It exists by absolute necessity because it is the necessary effect of a necessary being.

The averroists were especially impressed by the fact that the argument is not only sound but is absolutely compelling independently of any particular religious commitments one might or might not have. One might believe in God by faith alone, but faith is not absolutely necessary in order to have a correct belief in God. Logical reasoning alone is sufficient for a correct belief in God.

At best, faith is a merely temporary basis for believing in God if, for example, one has no access to (or one is too young for) the kind of formal education required to understand the rational proofs.

This position was deeply disturbing to orthodox Christian theologians. It implied that the truths of the Christian religion revealed in the Bible were not strictly necessary for anyone to obtain knowledge of God. Although these truths may have been revealed by God to human beings who eventually wrote them down, anyone could have discovered them without any awareness of these writings.

The institution of the church is also not essential for human salvation according to the averroist position. Anyone can have a correct belief in God by means of the use of his own reason even if there never had been a church or theologians or clergy. Philosophy alone is sufficient for gaining such correct beliefs. Reason is sufficient for the highest goals of human life.

Worse, it implied that the central doctrine of Christianity, the Atonement for human sin by the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was not necessary. People could have learned of God and understood their relation to God without the sacrifice of his only son.

Still worse, it implies that God does not have any interest in particular individual human beings. He is simply infinite intelligence and power, eternally sustaining the universe without any plan or goal. On this conception of God, God's eternal act of sustaining the Universe is absolutely necessary. God does not act freely. One cannot have a personal relationship with such a being. Praying to such a God makes no sense. One does not need revelation, church, clergy or repentance. Sin is merely ignorance and can be overcome by gaining philosophical wisdom.

Aquinas argued against averroism and presented a different view of the relation between faith and reason (theology and philosophy).

His solution depends on distinguishing between the following types of proposition.

1. Philosophically demonstrable truth (e.g., in arithmetic, geometry and astronomy)
2. Articles of faith (e.g. that the Son of God had a human body and was crucified and resurrected).
3. Preambles to articles of faith (e.g. that God exists)

Aquinas tried to show that reason and faith do not conflict and that apparent conflicts between them can be resolved in such a way that a proper role is preserved for both.

It appears that Reason and faith conflict on the question of whether the universe was once created or has existed from eternity.

Aquinas tried to prove that neither creationism nor eternalism can be strictly proved to be necessarily true. Aristotelian arguments for the eternity of the universe are not successful as proofs because the premises on which they depend are not self-evident necessary truths.

The same goes for theological arguments for the creation of the universe.

Since neither alternative is rationally necessary, the question may be decided on the basis of revelation as contained in scripture. Scripture contains the revealed truth that the universe had a first beginning. Since there can be no rational proof that this proposition is false, we are free to believe it by an act of faith without violating Reason.

In this way, Reason can function harmoniously with Faith by providing valid demonstrations that the universe did have a beginning. These are arguments that are not proofs in the strict sense because some of their premises are not necessary truths, being derived from facts given to sense perception. Nevertheless, they provide support for the conclusion that something not perceivable by the senses does exist (i.e., God)

See the handout on Aquinas' Five Ways.