THE BASIS OF BELIEF

by Allan W. Anderson
Professor, Religious Studies
San Diego State College

One hears much these days about the "crisis of belief"--and little wonder. The crisis has been with us for some six centuries. And the end is not in sight. In fact, the crisis bids fair to grow much worse before a resolution to it can be found. Six centuries of habituation to disbelief in transcendentals and the denial that universals have a real existence represents a spiritual disorder that will not be healed overnight. If one must choose between a life-style founded on the reality perceived by the intellect or one that rests on the belief that reality is that which we perceive by the senses only, his decision will determine his destiny.

The issue here is far graver than the question of "meaning," whatever our cultural thirst for that might be. Quite simply, the issue turns on whether we will affirm or deny the being of objective truth. The question of meaning is without meaning, in any intellectual sense of the word, if it is not referred to its criterion, namely, the existence of any independent reality which measures meaning. The alternative is to make experience the criterion of meaning and thus fashion man as the measure of all things. We are self-condemned to this posture when we deny whatever transcends experience. Substitute experience rather than truth as the criterion of meaning and inevitably appetite usurps reason; and the world is grasped as basically savage and alienated.

The words "estrangement" and "alienation" are so commonplace in our time that only the philosopher and theologian who remain devoted to our culture's classical vision of being will pause to call the use of such words to account. Those of us who are professionally concerned in the life of the academy are well aware of the price one pays for holding publicly to the metaphysical and biblical conviction that: 1) the world at its core is essentially good; 2) this transcendent goodness is abidingly available to all men of good will, since time does not affect things of the highest value. This, the oldest of civilized convictions, is today scoffed at by learned barbarians as medieval or, in their view worse, antedeluvian. And though they seem to have their dates right that against which all dates are intelligibly measured and finally judged, namely, the eternal, somehow airily escapes them. Comically, in their infinite passion for and devotion to infinite progress they overlook how that within any infinite series no point is privileged above another. This oversight renders their claim that the present age is the one of highest development about as convincing as the self-inflation of a blowfish. Such lusting after the infinite is but one of many current symptoms of the disease we call "the crisis of belief."

We must be careful how we regard the word crisis in this phrase. If it means that we are uprooted from the basis of belief and float about, blown by

every wind of doctrine then "crisis" points to a disease, a fatal sickness that finally annihilates the possibility that we shall ever understand anything. Simple-mindedness will counsel us to leave it at that, and urge us to drop all further inquiry in the conviction that intellectual inquiry is the vanity through which we contracted the disease in the first place. Now simple-mindedness is nothing if not babblesome. Immediately it prattles of an ancient remedy. One has only to screw himself up with continuing muscular efforts of the will to believe and believe what he somehow has come long since to disbelieve. But the disease has never yet yielded to such quackery.

Fortunately, the word crisis bears another meaning which holds much promise. It is found in Kierkegaard's observation that man, regarded as spirit, is always in crisis, i.e., "always in a critical condition." In part, he means by this that upon every instant a man must be deciding always for the claim of the Eternal--on penalty of losing his self. That this requires faith and its corollary belief, who would deny? Yet, seeing this as the case is far from possessing the faith and believing. One can see it as the case while in process of losing his self--something, perhaps, no one will notice. Kierkegaard says ironically "About such a thing as that not much fuss is made in the world; for a self is the thing the world is the least apt to inquire about, and the thing of all things the most dangerous for a man to let people notice that he has it. The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. is sure to be noticed."

If the crisis of belief is understood in this respect, then we might be in a fair way toward inquiring into the basis of belief, i.e., its ground. At least, to begin with, we should have taken the matter seriously--itself no mean accomplishment during a crisis of belief when supercilious reserve is cultivated as a virtue and seriousness laughed off the stage.

The ground of belief is properly distinguished from the necessity for belief. Moreover, it is also to be distinguished from psychological and epistemological considerations, such as the part played in belief by motivation and validation--important as these are for a comprehensive grasp of belief's activity. In a short statement, such as this, perhaps it will suffice to distinguish between the necessity for belief and the basis or ground upon which belief is established.

The necessity for belief can be simply stated. Belief is necessary because our knowledge is finite and subject to becoming. It can be increased or slip from our grasp. Aristotle shows in the Metaphysics (II, 1, 993b7) that in the case of singular and contingent things that are far removed from our senses, it is necessary to depend upon another person's testimony for an adequate report of them. He calls this a defect in the knowable things themselves. There is also a defect on our part, in our intellect. St. Thomas Aquinas comments on Aristotle's observation of these two defects (Exposition of Boethius on the

Trinity, III, 1.) St. Thomas says that due to this defect on our part we are insufficiently equipped at the start for the study of divine and necessary things even though they are the most knowable in their own nature. We must necessarily move from things less knowable in their nature to those which, in their nature, are more knowable and primary. But in order to do this we must have some acquaintance with those divine and necessary things which are not apparent. This, he says, cannot be done without believing.

It remains the case, as every learner knows, that he must at first believe what only later he will grasp as known. There is no exception to this in any branch of formal study. Is it any wonder then that the prophet Isaiah declared: If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established (Isaiah 7:9)?

With this step it should not be too difficult to make our way to the basis of belief. But we shall need first to pause briefly over another philosophical distinction. It is this: the cause that produces effects is different from that which grounds them. One would hardly claim that the artist is the ground of the picture he has painted, though he is its efficient cause, its producer. The picture and the man possess different natures. In order to discover the ground of a thing we must look to its nature, and the principle intrinsic to it.

Belief is an activity whose nature it is to prepare for later knowledge. Belief has always an object, it is always belief in something to be known. It has, then, something to attain regardless of time elapsed to attain it. Since belief cannot in and of itself convert itself into knowledge, but acts to make one ready to receive knowledge, it is dependent upon knowledge for its being. More precisely, belief depends for its activity upon the force of the things we learn later. These "later things," as final cause, draw belief to its consummation in knowledge. Clearly, belief is not belief in knowledge, but in things to be known.

We have now come upon the basis, the ground of belief. Shall we say it is the immanent power by which we make ourselves ready to receive the things we are waiting to know? But, as such, this basis for belief is necessarily a grace and will not indicate the natural principle intrinsic to the act of believing. Matters left here will likely lead to that confusion which theologizes in philosophy and philosophizes in theology.

The old saw, seeing is believing, causes no end of mischief for an inquiry like this. It is just not possible for one and the same person to be believing what at the same time and in all respects he is seeing to be true. The certitude proper to believing is not caused by the rational evidence we perceive in the natural light of reason. Belief requires an act of will. It is consent to remain confidently making ready to receive the thing to be known. Consent is a free act and cannot be coerced. The consent in belief can be discontinued at any moment, as happens when one tires of waiting confidently before the thing to be known. For this reason we are exhorted to pray without ceasing to

hold on to that which will confirm itself to us if only we will consent to affirm it.

The principle intrinsic to belief is precisely this consent, for which we are responsible, since it is the basis, the formal cause of belief and, as such, proper to its nature.

At this point theology comes forward, in its own right, to complete what philosophy has begun. It will point us to the Author and Finisher of our belief in the sovereign and highest Good. It is He who draws us to consent to make ourselves ready to receive things beyond all that we can ask or think. And in this preparation we are continually perfected.

To this end St. Gregory of Nyssa exhorts us in the full beauty of his discourse: "We should then make every effort not to fall short utterly of the perfection that is possible for us, and to try to come as close to it and possess as much of it as possible. For it may be that human perfection consists precisely in this constant growth in the good." (Contemplation on the Life of Moses, B-301C)