

SOME REFLECTIONS ON UNBELIEVING

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The canonisation in Rome of the first Australian saint, St. Mary of the Cross MacKillop, on Sunday, 16th October, on the one hand has led to unprecedented manifestations of joy and pride on the part of her supporters but on the other has occasioned a spate of negative appraisals, ranging from the banal to the vitriolic. While some comments have simply been in bad taste, many reveal a deep antagonism towards religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular. The reason for this is in some cases quite obvious, even malicious, but in many instances it



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stems from ignorance and grave misconception about many aspects of the case. At the risk of stating the obvious, it would seem to me to be appropriate to offer a clarification of some of the main issues involved.

The meaning of canonisation

Canonisation does not mean, as some seem to imagine, that the person so honoured is made a saint, whereas others not so chosen are not saints. Canonisation does not create saints. Clearly many people, perhaps in our own experience, have led lives of great dedication to others and of utter selflessness. We are quite justified in calling them saintly people, even though they are not canonised and never will be. It is well enough known that in the New Testament ordinary believers in Christ were called saints even while they were still living.

Sainthood is not limited to the canonised, nor is it exclusive even of those who are not Christians. In the patristic age St. Justin named Socrates among those considered to be saints before the coming of Christ on the grounds that his astounding wisdom had to be the mark of the Spirit of God, from whom all true wisdom comes. Simply put, canonisation means an official declaration by the Pope that the person presented as a saint is included in the *canon* (catalogue or list) of the saints in heaven.

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The history of the process of canonisation is interesting and sheds light on its meaning.¹ In the early years of the Church martyrdom was seen as guaranteeing direct entry to heaven among the saints of God. Its importance lay in the intimate transformation into the death and resurrection of Christ that it brought about, for to become a martyr (literally to become a 'witness') meant transcending selfishness entirely and becoming like Christ Crucified and in close union with God. Indeed it was seen as the perfect way to such union.

Furthermore, the belief that martyrs were united with God as special friends because of the sacrifice of their lives for their faith led to them being venerated as powerful intercessors with God. It followed as a matter of course that, being so close to God, they are worthy of veneration and that their help may be invoked in prayer.



Mary MacKillop. Courtesy 'yaruma', flickr CC

faith and consequently could be venerated liturgically had to be made by the bishop of the locality in which the martyrdom occurred. From there the veneration often passed to other churches with the approval of their bishops.

A similar development occurred over the centuries in regard to others who were not martyrs, ranging all the way from those who professed their faith before tyrants despite torture of all kinds to persons who had lived a holy life and died a holy death in Christian peace. The lives of such persons resembled the heroism of martyrs and could in fact be seen as a kind of martyrdom. However, it remained true always that it was unlawful to give public veneration to these holy people without ecclesiastical approval, just as it had been for martyrs. Of course, the seal of approval of the local bishops rendered such veneration lawful only for the regions over which they had jurisdiction. For the veneration to be universally recognised in the whole Church the approval of the Bishop of Rome was required, since he alone enjoyed universal jurisdiction over the Church as a whole.

A further development took place as the centuries passed. Because of the abuses that sometimes occurred due to the indiscretions of popular fervour or to the carelessness of individual bishops,

However, the popular acceptance of martyrs as objects of veneration and invocation in prayer did not mean that there should not be some sort of control of this veneration once it became public. Approval for public veneration was not granted indiscriminately. What happens in the social body needs to be regulated by the authority in charge of that community. Public veneration and liturgical celebration by the community are not purely private matters. The decision that the martyr had in fact died for his/her

¹ What follows summarises the main points of the article by C. Beccari, 'Beatification and Canonisation', in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol, 2 (New York: Robert Appleton and Company, 1907). See *New Advent*, October 2010 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02354b.htm>>

the Pope finally intervened to curtail the rights of individual bishops in this matter even in their own regions. After many years of theological discussion, in the 17th century the Vatican restricted the immemorial rite of canonisation to the Holy See alone.

Several strands pervade this brief historical sketch: public acclaim of the holy life of a deceased person, the need for authentication of this holiness by the local bishop or pastor before the holy person can be accorded public veneration and intercessory power in the community as special friends of God², and finally, in regard to the universal Church, the express approval of the supreme pastor, the bishop of Rome.

In the current usage of the Catholic Church³ then, canonisation is the solemn decree of the Pope declaring that the life of this person has been marked by the practice of heroic virtue and that therefore he/she is worthy to be included in the canon of the saints. This declaration is made only after sainthood, brought to attention by common repute, has been proven by cogent arguments, closely scrutinising the would-be saint's life-style, actions and writings. Such investigations often continue over many years, 85 in the case of Mary MacKillop.

What of belief in miracles?

Any talk of miracles tends to be met with cynicism or at least a disclaimer of belief in them.

Since the canonisation of Mary MacKillop brought to public attention the fact that in the canonisation process miracles are required in order to establish beyond doubt that the person canonised is in heaven, the whole question of miracles has become a matter of public debate. A great deal of the negative criticism that has emerged reveals not only a profound ignorance of the role of miracles in the canonisation process but, more generally, a scepticism about the very possibility of miracles. How often have we heard it said in recent times: 'I am not a believer'? This may refer to a person's disbelief in miracles, or in some instances it may go further and mean disbelief in God. In the latter case the issue of miracles cannot arise.

Scepticism about miracles is nothing new. Because of their presuppositions, philosophers such as Spinoza, Hume and Schleiermacher thought that miracles were impossible because they contradict normal human experience or are outside the course of nature. This impossibility, according to the Rationalist School, extended to the Gospel miracles of Christ, which, they allege, are merely 'tales' containing perhaps some deeper spiritual meaning.

1) Before addressing the possibility of miracles, it is necessary to be clear about what is meant by the term, as confusion about this underlies a lot of the current attitude to miracles in the Australian community. In popular usage the word 'miracle' is given a very loose meaning and seems to be applied to any happening out of the ordinary or any answer to prayer, as for example the 'miracle' of the release of the 33 Chilean miners without taking account of the dedication and expertise of the rescuers, or the 'miracle' of the survival of a very premature baby without acknowledging the efforts of medical and hospital staff.

² Fundamentally, belief in the presence of saints with God and their power of intercession on our behalf with God is based on the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, which is included in the Apostles Creed, dating from the 5th century CE. Vatican II states: 'The Church has always believed that the apostles and Christ's martyrs, who had given the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood, are quite closely joined with us in Christ.... The Church too has devoutly implored the aid of their intercession. To these were soon added those who had imitated Christ's virginity and poverty, and finally others whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and the divine charisms recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful' (Lumen Gentium, n.50)

³ The process is similar but is more informal in the Eastern Orthodox Church

For Christians the meaning of miracles must be sought in the Christian Scriptures. Three important clues are found in several passages.⁴ ‘Men of Israel, listen to what I am going to say: Jesus the Nazarene was a man commended to you by God by the miracles and portents and signs that God worked when he was among you, as you all know’ (Acts 2:22. See also 2 Corinthians 12:12 and 2 Thessalonians 2:9). Three terms are employed to characterise the impression Jesus made by what he did on those who saw and heard him.



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The term *miracle* (*dunamis*) stresses an action that can be explained only by the power or dynamism of God, namely, as the cause of the action. *Portent* or *Wonder* refers to the impact of this event on those who are witnesses. Often the crowds were amazed and astonished by the works of Christ (e.g., Mark 2:12, 4:41, 6:51, etc.). This term *wonder* is never used alone in the New Testament but always in conjunction with some other term that suggests something far greater than a mere spectacle. The most important of these three terms used to refer to Christ's miracles is *sign*, that is, an instructive revelation about God. Sign focuses on the deeper meaning of the miracle. A miracle is no idle spectacle, but is designed to teach.

A miracle in the New Testament is thus at one and the same time a visible manifestation of the power of God, an awe-inspiring happening and an instructive revelation of God.

In the Gospel accounts the miracles of Jesus are presented as real events, not myths or fantastic happenings. They are performed to meet someone's need, not to satisfy idle curiosity. They are demonstrated over nature, over sickness and disease, and over the forces of evil in the world. Most important of all, the Gospel miracles are inextricably linked with faith. ‘If I do not perform my Father's works’, Jesus stated, ‘put no faith in me’ (John 10:37; see also 15:24). Many without faith either cannot or refuse to believe that a miracle has happened even though they have witnessed the event. Indeed, says the Gospel, Jesus was unable to work any miracles in his home country because of lack of faith in him (Mark 6:5).

‘At the very least’, says the theologian Richard McBrien, ‘something significant and impressive occurred in the life and ministry of Jesus, over and above his preaching and teaching. He had an impact upon people – the sick, the troubled, the bereaved – in a way that clearly set him apart from his contemporaries. Indeed, he himself pointed to his good works as moments in which the

⁴ An informative source here is Bob Deffinbaugh, ‘The Meaning of Miracles (Mark 4:35-41), created 06/01/2004, published on Bible.org – Worlds Largest Bible Study (<http://bible.org>). See also Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, Vol.1 (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1966), p. 325-328

power of God operated in him and through him.’⁵ The Gospel miracles, among his other works, engage people to make a decision about Jesus Christ. His claim to be one with God was either true or just the posturing of a lunatic or a liar. Certainly the Church of the New Testament believed that Jesus performed miracles as signs of the revelation of God in him. This was also the belief of the Church in post-biblical times, as was taught by First Vatican Council in its *Constitution on the Catholic Faith* (chapter 3).⁶

11) If the term ‘miracle’ is not bandied about loosely but is understood strictly in terms of the meaning presented in the Gospels, then much of the current scepticism regarding the possibility of miracles occurring today will evaporate. A miracle as a manifestation of the power of God and as an awe-inspiring happening that tells us something about God, is a rare event in human experience that defies human explanation and so can only be accepted if one has faith.

The possibility of miracles follows then as a consequence of faith in God. If one believes in a Creator God, who is all-powerful, caring and compassionate towards his creatures, then one can hardly doubt that such a God, if so desired, can intervene in human affairs to overrule, suspend or modify the ordinary course of nature. God may sometimes intervene directly in answer to prayer or the intervention may at other times be occasioned by the intervention of a saint, who is acknowledged as an intimate friend of God.



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Reference has already been made to the teaching of the Catholic Church on the Communion of Saints. In explaining the implications of this teaching, Vatican II says: ‘It is fitting, therefore, that we love those friends and fellow heirs of Jesus Christ, who are also our brothers (and sisters) and extraordinary benefactors ...and (citing the words of the Council of Trent) “suppliantly invoke them and have recourse to their prayers, their power and help in obtaining benefits from God through his Son, Jesus Christ”’.⁷

Philosopher and theologian, Barry Brundell, writes:

The rejection of miracles is a consequence of rejection of the notion of a God who transcends the physical world and has the power to intervene in the course of events in the physical world. For the believer in that kind of God the possible is not

⁵ *Catholicism*, p. 327

⁶ Vatican II also acknowledges this belief when it says: ‘The miracles of Jesus also confirm that the kingdom of God has already arrived on earth’ (*Lumen Gentium*, n.5)

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, n.50

restricted to the actual – the boundaries of human experience and expectation are not the final horizon. Thus the debate about miracles is a debate about what we may hope for and what is believable. And this debate is a debate between those who believe in God and those who do not – between believers and atheists.⁸

111) Public misconceptions about miracles and their possibility have been manifest in many media reports in regard to the miracles required by the Church for the canonisation of Mary MacKillop.

One misconception is that Mary has been made a saint *because of* the miracles claimed as due to her intercession. This is a distortion of the truth. Mary is a saint, not because she can work miracles but because of her heroic virtue manifest during her lifetime in her concern for the poor, the marginalised and the little ones, and for the need of the Gospel among them. Miracles are simply confirmative of her holiness and her union with God in heaven.

Another misconception, apparent in the criticisms of Richard Dawkins and others, is that the Church's claims about miracles are scientific, or in other words that the Church asks science to confirm, not just



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that there has been the cure of an organic illness, but that Mary MacKillop is responsible for the cure. The Church does not do this at all.

As Brundell points out, 'all the authorities ask of science is for them to give assurance that there is no medical explanation for the cure. That is not at all the same thing as to claim that the Church's procedure is scientific, or that the Church is misappropriating science in any way. After the medical conclusion is in, then faith comes into play.'⁹ As has already been shown, the possibility of miracles is necessarily linked with faith in an omnipotent and all-loving God. Only after all other plausible explanations have proven inadequate (and this is a scientific matter), can it be concluded that this healing of disease, this cure, is attributable only to God and that it is indeed a work of God. This is an issue of faith. Miracles are not invoked as proofs prior to faith; they are consequent on faith.

Faith and Reason

Underlying all the debate concerning canonisation and miracles, it seems to me, reverberates the perennial problem of the relationship between faith and reason. Many have seen, and today continue to see, faith as an irrational response on the part of gullible people, easily led into unthinking acceptance of specious proofs for the existence of God. Religious beliefs are thus reduced to philosophical arguments. Dawkins even makes the claim that the existence of God is

⁸ Barry Brundell MSC, 'The Day of the Atheists', *Compass*, 2010-2, p.10

⁹ *The Day of the Atheists*, p.9

a supremely scientific question, based on scientifically verifiable evidence.¹⁰ Such views betray basic ignorance of the nature of faith and its relationship to reason.

It may bring some clarity to the question if a comment is made on three different but interconnected aspects: faith, theology (faith seeking understanding) and beliefs.

1) Faith

For the believer, God is not the conclusion of a syllogism, or the terminus of a chain of reasoning, a mysterious being whose existence is proved by rational argument or laboratory tests or scientific experiment, and only then believed in with faith. For the Christian, faith is something very personal. It is not even primarily belief in truths or statements about God (these are beliefs, which come after faith). Faith is a personal giving of oneself to a personal God, a knowledge that implies trust and total commitment of oneself in response to God's gracious initiative. It is a personal response to God, but one that needs to be activated within a given community of faith.



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In the Synoptic Gospels the act of faith is directed to God the Father and to Jesus himself. It is trust in and acceptance of Jesus as the one whom he claimed himself to be (see Mark 8:27-30). Aquinas speaks of it as 'a thinking assent', a knowledge that has God for its object, a knowledge that is also a total surrender of mind and heart to God.¹¹ For Aquinas God is the source of faith, the goal of faith and the motive for faith arising from the interior acceptance of the word of God revealed in Christ.¹² We cannot 'reason' to faith, we cannot earn faith; it is an entirely free gift of God.¹³ It is never the end-product of a process of reasoning or scientific demonstration. It transcends human reason.

True, St. Paul says that faith comes through hearing. People 'will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will never have a preacher unless one is sent'

(Romans 10:14). And the word of Christ is also 'preached' through the teaching and example of parents, teachers and significant others in a person's life. However, all external evidence - preaching, scientific demonstration, miracles, etc. - is not sufficient motive for the assent of faith. Rational arguments can be persuasive but the

¹⁰ See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), pp.58-61

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qq.1-7

¹² *Summa Theologiae*, q.2, art.2

¹³ *Summa Theologiae*, q.2, art.3

assent of religious faith can be motivated only from within, from the Spirit of God moving a person to believe.¹⁴

External evidence and argumentation are important in that they establish that faith is not unreasonable. As Aquinas says, ‘If an adversary does not believe in anything revealed by God, no proof from reason can establish for him the truth of faith; all that reason can do is to refute any rational arguments against faith...., (for) clearly reasoning against faith is not proof but no more than arguments that can be (rationally) answered’¹⁵. We cannot reason to it, but religious faith must always be consonant with reason, not irrational, for that would make faith an inhuman thing. St. Paul again urges us to worship God ‘in a way that is worthy of thinking human beings’ (Romans 12:1). As mature thinking beings, believers are convinced that, even though their faith is not ultimately based on rational arguments, it is not irrational for them to believe in God and in God’s Son, Jesus. Faith is in no way the act of a naïve, gullible, easily led individual.

2) Theology

Theology depends on and grows from faith. It is the more or less systematic articulation of the faith experience one has of God.¹⁶ Faith exists always and only in some theological form, however embryonic that may be. According to the famous definition of St. Anselm (d.1109), it is ‘faith seeking understanding’.



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The believer tries to come in a more or less sophisticated and critical way to a better, clearer and more refined understanding of his/her own faith in God and in Christ.

This is a reasoning process, but here the process is the work of reason *illuminated and enlightened by faith*. Beginning his three-part classic on theology with a discussion on the scientific character of theology, which he concludes to be the queen of all sciences, Aquinas inquires into its use of reason and argues: ‘Theology does not use reason to prove its principles, since these come from the articles of faith, but it proceeds from these principles to demonstrate other realities’.¹⁷ It uses reason, therefore, not to prove faith itself, which can come only from the Spirit of God, but to demonstrate other things that flow from faith. Thus, for example, it takes up philosophical arguments in proof of

what can be worked out by reason as sources now illumined by faith of theological conclusions

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.6, art.1. The first Vatican Council confirmed this when it stated: ‘No-one can consent to the preaching of the Gospel, in a way that leads to salvation, without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit’ (Session III, c.3)

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.1, art.8

¹⁶ Richard McBrien considers the following questions in fuller detail in *Catholicism*, vol.1, pp.46-61

¹⁷ This is the main point of article 8 already cited

about God, about Christ, about the Church. Christian theology has a long tradition of drawing from contemporary thought patterns and cultures to express, explain and defend the faith: from the Greek philosophy of the 4th and 5th centuries, from Aristotelianism in the Middle Ages, and from Existentialism and other philosophies in our own day.

Theology must come from the experience of faith. It is the articulation, the interpretation, of faith, one's own faith or the faith of one's community of faith. Without faith it ceases to be theology and becomes a sort of philosophy of religion, simply a reflection on the faith commitment of other people.

3) Belief

A belief is a formulation of the knowledge the believer has of God through faith. 'If theology is faith brought to the level of self-consciousness, then belief is theology in a kind of snapshot or frozen state.'¹⁸ Beliefs may be peripheral to faith or vitally important for its survival, they may be private or broadly accepted in the community, they may be erroneous or officially approved as binding on the whole Church. Some beliefs have stood the test of time, others have been superseded as no longer relevant to changed circumstances.



Sydney crowds watch St Mary's canonisation. Photo "betta design", flickr CC

At one level of belief there is the authoritative sources of Christian Tradition (the Bible, the writings of the Fathers and doctors of the Church), at a second level

there are doctrines and

dogmas coming from the teaching authority of the Church, at a third there are liturgies, at a fourth there is catechesis, and so on.

McBrien is of the opinion that Catholicism is in crisis today partly because even many Catholics fail to grasp the differences between faith, theology and belief, for *faith is not theology; theology is not belief; faith is not belief.*¹⁹

Conclusion

Two observations will serve to round off these reflections on unbelieving.

First, there is a delicate balance between faith and reason. Over the centuries this balance has not always been achieved. When rationalism became popular with many in the 19th century, some Catholic scholars argued against the movement but in the process conceded too much to reason, maintaining that reason could work out all the truths of divine revelation. As might be

¹⁸ *Catholicism*, p.27

¹⁹ *Catholicism*, p.75

expected, this semi-rationalism led to a reaction called Fideism, which downplayed the role of reason in human history and conceded too much to faith. Cardinal John Henry Newman was one of those who opposed this trend.

A similar imbalance occurred some 40 or 50 years ago in the ethical field. A movement called 'autonomous ethics' arose in Germany and elsewhere, focusing very much on the autonomy of the individual in the discovery of morality, to the neglect of the revelation of God as far as the content of ethics is concerned. As a reaction to this stress on the role of reason in ethics, a movement called 'faith ethics' arose, which was at pains to integrate the Bible and the Christian Tradition into ethical reflection. What was at issue was the distinctiveness of Christian morality. The two dimensions, faith and reason, need to work together and that is why Christian ethics today is recognised as being 'founded on the natural law (of reason) as illuminated and enriched by divine revelation (faith) (Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, 1968). Hence the emphasis in Catholic moral theology on 'reason illumined or informed by faith' as the inspiration and motivating force of ethics.

Secondly, it should be recognised that many unbelievers are sincere in their inability and their desire to believe in God. They are not militant nor do they attempt to impose their unbelief on believers. They follow their conscience and they do not impugn others who also follow their conscience in their belief in God and in Christ. They do not attempt to force their unbelief on believers or to convert them to secularism. By the same token believers, whilst they do not agree with their attitude, should respect them and their freedom of choice, and be prepared to co-operate with them for the good of the community.

Both the believer and the unbeliever perhaps have more in common than they realise. In this context the words of American philosopher Michael Novak make the point well:

The serious nonbeliever and the serious . . . believer share a hidden unity of spirit. When both do all they can to be faithful to their understanding and to love, and to the immediate task of diminishing the amount of suffering in the world, the intention of their lives is similar, even though their conceptions of what they are doing are different.²⁰

²⁰ Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p.191