

Olli-Pekka Vainio. *Faith in Certain Terms*. Routledge Studies in Analytic and Systematic Theology. Routledge, 2024. vii + 167 pp. \$190 (hbk); \$56.99 (pbk).

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In *Faith in Certain Terms*, Olli-Pekka Vainio offers an extensive analysis of the relationship between faith and certainty in the Christian tradition. In particular, Vainio examines certainty both with respect to religious beliefs (How certain can Christian believers be about their beliefs in God?) and matters of assurance (Should Christians doubt the assurance of their salvation?). Vainio sees the two topics as being closely related, with the former pertaining to matters of theological epistemology and the latter having a pastoral dimension. Vainio approaches this study as a theologian with a background in historical and analytic theology. The outcome of Vainio's study in his analysis of faith and certainty is twofold. First, he offers a fallibilist account of theological certainty and assurance; second, he concludes with an account of faith as a cognitive practice. Vainio's study is ambitious. In my estimation, the results are mixed. On the one hand, it offers a unique and fruitful contribution to the analysis of certainty in the Christian tradition. On the other hand, the account of faith is underdeveloped and runs the risk of being too constrained by his analysis of certainty and the epistemic framework within which the project is developed.

The book consists of six chapters. After stating his approach and other preliminary material in the introduction (ch. 1), Vainio identifies several issues that "should influence the way we approach epistemological issues in theology" (6). In chapter 2, he reviews these preliminary considerations. For instance, he observes that there are important differences between idealized epistemology in philosophy (as understood within the historical development of epistemology) and the way knowledge is construed in the biblical tradition. He notes that the latter is more oriented toward the knowing subject than the formal requirements of knowledge (e.g., the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge in contemporary philosophical analyses). In summarizing the chapter discussion, Vainio offers tenets that will guide his analysis of faith later in the study. In particular, he contends that our conceptualization of faith should "[be] based on the relevant biblical narratives," "take into account the proper role of epistemic authority," "take into account the processual nature of belief formation," "include Christ among the believers," "[be] sensitive to the reality of doubt in the lives of the faithful," and "[be] able to withstand outside critiques of irrationality" (19).

In chapter 3, Vainio offers a historical and theological survey of the concepts of doubt and certainty in the Western Christian tradition. The survey begins with the early church, proceeds to scholasticism and the Reformation, and concludes with a review of confessional differences on the topics of certainty and assurance. In Vainio's words, the "survey yields two results that may appear challenging to some theological traditions" (146). These challenges concern the certainty of faith and assurance. Namely, "we cannot have infallible certainty of faith" and "we cannot have anything stronger than conjectural certainty of salvation" (146).

In chapter 4, Vainio reviews the philosophical literature relevant to his study. This includes the literature on the nature of faith, philosophical analyses of certainty, and the epistemological literature on fallibilism. First, he reviews two prominent taxonomies of faith from William Lad Sessions (1994) and Robert Audi (2011). In so doing, Vainio identifies some features of faith that are pertinent to his analysis of the certainty of faith (78). After briefly reviewing various philosophical accounts of certainty (e.g., epistemic certainty, psychological certainty, and moral certainty) and identifying several problems with the existing definitions, Vainio rules out epistemic certainty because it is too strong a view to hold (i.e., it entails that there is no counterevidence to one's beliefs). Instead, he opts for some combination of the components of psychological and moral certainty. Psychological certainty "refers to a high level of internal conviction that one has about [their] beliefs" (79). Moral certainty "refers to an internal conviction, which is high enough to produce action" (79). It seems Vainio is after the action-producing component of moral certainty and the internal conviction facet of psychological certainty.

Vainio then turns to the work of Lara Buchak (2014) to help him generate his definition of the certainty of faith. On his view, "S has certainty of faith when S has an evidence-based conviction that p is more probable than its alternatives and that S has sufficient reasons not to look for further evidence" (84). In concluding the chapter, Vainio examines how his definition of the certainty of faith links up with fallibilism in contemporary epistemology. In summary, he argues that the certainty of faith should be construed to reflect fallibilist religious certainty. This essentially means that a person can be justified in their belief(s), have sufficient reasons not to look for further evidence, and not be epistemically certain about their belief(s). In other words, the "certainty of faith allows the possibility that one's belief . . . be false, even if this is not taken to be likely" (97). For Vainio, this has important ramifications for the certainty of assurance because "if the certainty of faith is to be understood in fallibilist terms, then . . . second order certainty [i.e., assurance] [should also] reflect this ideal" (146).

In chapter 5, Vainio discusses the nature of doubt, its place in the life of faith, and the relation of doubt to the certainty of faith. In addition, Vainio identifies other features of faith that enable it to co-exist with the reality of doubt in the minds of believers. Vainio argues that faith, even in its weaker forms, can still exist alongside doubts (as the lives of countless believers demonstrate). In beginning the chapter, Vainio identifies four concerns that guide his analysis of the life of faith. Namely, faith needs "to be sure about its object," "to be related to the natural limitations of the human life of [the] mind," "to be open to criticism," and "to be rational" (106). These concerns make faith something difficult to possess but also help portray faith as something that comes in a variety of forms.

Vainio then reviews a classical Lutheran definition of faith, whereby faith consists of knowledge (or understanding), assent, and trust (107). In this definition, knowledge pertains more to a sense of understanding or an ability to "grasp the meaning" of the object of faith. Assent "refers to the attribution of a positive truth value towards the object of faith" and trust means that the person of faith submits themselves to the object of faith (107). For Vainio this Lutheran definition and articulation of faith does several things. First, it conveys that faith has "cognitive, epistemic, psychological, and motivating components" (108). Second, it helps highlight a component of faith that is consistent with various forms of doubt. For instance, doubt in the narrative of Scripture does not always pertain to a lack of epistemic certainty; it can also concern a person's wavering in their commitment to the object of faith. As a result, doubt need not concern "the epistemic middle component [(i.e., assent)]" (112). Instead, it can persist unconsciously as fear (for example) (112). The chapter

concludes with a discussion of how believers can increase certainty and assurance in the life of faith.

In the book's final chapter (ch. 6), Vainio examines two challenges to the certainty of faith. Regarding the first challenge, he discusses how we can attain certainty in faith if beliefs are formed in ways that cannot be attributed to us. The second challenge pertains to belief change over time, worldview formation, and the fickleness of our convictions. Here, Vainio contends that we should approach our understanding of these changes with conviction, as changes that aim at the improvement of our belief systems (137).

Before concluding with his account of faith, Vainio reviews various debates about cognitive accounts of faith, particularly between doxastic and non-doxastic accounts of faith. It seems Vainio's sympathies lie with doxastic accounts (that the cognitive component of faith entails belief, perhaps even necessarily so (137–45)). Nevertheless, Vainio contends that we should not approach an analysis of faith in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead (and following J. Kvanvig (2018)), he expresses interest in a more functional account of faith or an account of faith through "an analysis of practices" (144) and the role that faith plays in the life of the believer. For Vainio, all of the philosophical and theological analyses in prior chapters culminate in his definition or account of faith. Drawing from his review of the philosophical debates about non-doxastic vs. doxastic accounts of faith, Vainio identifies three summary intuitions (one "realistic" and two "affective"), which help summarize his account of faith (138–39, 147). First, "faith has an object X that can be spoken about" (147). This is his "realistic intuition" about faith (138); it draws together insights from chapters 4, 5, and 6. Second, the object of faith, X, "is viewed positively" (147). This is his first affective intuition about faith; it primarily draws together insights from chapters 4 and 6. Third, "faith serves as a basis for thinking, will, and action" (147). This is his second affective intuition, and it similarly draws together insights from all prior chapters. In conclusion, Vainio admits that the account may be broad and "anticlimactic," but its virtue is that it is ecumenical and "can be applied to any tradition and creed" (147).

Vainio's work is at its strongest in its development of an account of certainty within the Christian tradition. The historical and theological survey of the concept of certainty (and doubt) is thorough, original, measured, and insightful. I appreciate Vainio's insights on the challenges of uniting different confessional views on certainty throughout theological history. His account of fallibilist religious belief fits well with his historical overview of conjectural certainty (from the Roman Catholic tradition) and the qualifications he makes about the certainty of assurance (drawing from the Protestant tradition). These insights and analyses alone make the book worth recommending (even despite my concerns about how these considerations are used to develop his account of faith).

Vainio's study is thoroughly interdisciplinary in its combination of insights from theology, philosophy, biblical studies, etc. Such work requires establishing enough conceptual parity across disciplines when talking about topics like certainty, faith, belief, and knowledge. This is no small task. In my view, Vainio demonstrated this conceptual parity better at various points than others. For instance, the analyses of certainty and doubt from various disciplines are thorough and successful (e.g., chs. 3 and 4), incorporating linguistic insights from ancient languages (biblical studies) and theology. Conversely, I found a similar demonstration of parity between cross-disciplinary discussions of faith to be lacking.

Relatedly, I think the major thesis of the book would benefit from an extended conversation on the relationship between faith and belief. To my knowledge, there is no explicit summary analysis of the matter, and we are left to piece together Vainio's views over the course of the monograph. At various points, Vainio seems to use the terms 'faith' and

'belief' interchangeably. For example, consider the chapters on theological epistemology and fallibilism (especially ch. 4). Vainio's analysis of the certainty of *faith* seems to be reducible to considerations about the certainty of a person's beliefs or credences. Elsewhere (ch. 5), Vainio analyzes 'devilish faith' or "*fides diabolica*" (113) in reference to James 2:19, which states, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." On Vainio's analysis, "the demons have both understanding [or knowledge] and assent, but not trust" (113). In this case, Vainio is illustrating that one can have belief (even full-blown certainty) without faith; as such, the absence of trust—i.e., the motivating and psychological component—makes faith impossible. As the quote details though, there is a quick interchange between the terms 'faith'—i.e., 'devilish faith'—and 'belief' (again, with the implicit presumption about faith's entailment of 'belief'). To be fair to Vainio, the greater context of this discussion is a "historical definition of faith that is typical to the Lutheran tradition" (106). Vainio offers this definition of faith both to examine what the components of faith are and to highlight examples of how faith can be defective (but, in some cases, remain faith nonetheless). Here, belief is not an explicit component of the Lutheran definition, but it seems most applicable to the 'assent' component as the "epistemic component" (108).

With respect to an analysis of 'faith' from biblical texts, Vainio notes that the Greek does not have separate words for our English terms 'faith' and 'belief' (108). Instead, when interpreting the term *pistis* (and its cognates), one has to infer the meaning of 'faith' or 'belief' from the context of a given passage. Citing Teresa Morgan (2015), he claims that "*pistis* primarily means loyalty and faithfulness" (108). However, this summation does not entirely capture Morgan's view. Rather, Morgan argues, "the *pistis* and *fides* [lexica] are fundamentally relational concepts and practices centering on trust, trustworthiness, faithfulness, and good faith" (Morgan 2015, 503). More recently, however, Morgan has argued that "*pistis* means mainly not 'belief' but 'trust' and [as such] . . . it is not fundamentally cognitive or propositional" (Morgan 2020, 218, n. 40).

While Vainio does not discuss Morgan's other work, recent findings in biblical studies and classics do complicate how we convey ancient understandings of the relationship between faith and belief (and especially the extent to which we allow those understandings to inform our own). I'm not sure how Vainio would weigh these considerations in the scope of his study. However, given the centrality of trust in these ancient understandings of *pistis* and the importance of trust as a component in his own Lutheran definition of faith, I am surprised that discussions of trust do not seem to feature as prominently as discussions of belief.¹

I have one final consideration to offer concerning Vainio's analysis of faith. Despite the epistemological merits of Vainio's account of certainty (i.e., the fallibilist account of Christian belief), I worry that the account runs the risk of portraying faith as something that is too

¹ On this point, I am inclined to show my cards a bit more. Faith for Vainio seems to always entail a propositional attitude about the truth of its object. In other words, whenever *S* has faith in *P* for *X*, *S* believes that it is true that *P* will *X*. However, faith as trust need not always be reducible to propositional beliefs about whether it is true that the object of faith will be trustworthy (for example). Faith need not have a three-place propositional rendering (*S* has faith in *P* for *X*). For instance, it could simply have a non-specific two-place structure *S* has faith in *X* (e.g., an 'I-thou' rendering), and we could think about the trust of faith in terms of alignment, whereby the person of faith acts in ways that promote their loyalty, obedience, or trustworthiness to the object of faith (or that the two are united or aligned, as opposed to the person of faith always having second-order beliefs about the object of faith as if faith were always reducible to alethic concerns (i.e., modalities of truth)).

cognitive to apply to every person of faith at every stage of their faith development. In other words, I'm inclined to think that Vainio's focus on certainty of belief may render a picture of faith that is too epistemologically sophisticated (e.g. 97–98) to apply to all stages of a person's life of faith. As a result, some aspects of this account of “the certainty of faith” seem somewhat inimical to Vainio's preliminary considerations about what should guide an analysis of ‘faith’—especially biblical conceptualizations of knowledge as focused on the embodied subject, centered on understanding, oriented around practices and the imitation of exemplars, or submission to authorities (ch. 2). There are times where Vainio's fallibilist account of Christian ‘faith’ more closely resemble formal definitions and requirements for the justification of one's beliefs than a rule that could guide the life of faith at any and every point of faith's development. To be fair, Vainio does discuss the practical and participatory nature of faith (116), but further discussion on the certainty of faith and an explicit detailing of its connection to those initial considerations that guide the life of faith would have been more in line with what he terms his “account of faith as cognitive practice” (ch. 6). In keeping with these considerations, there is perhaps an opportunity for Vainio to develop parts of his account of faith in connection with existing studies on faith and practice. Terence Cuneo's *Ritualized Faith* (2016) comes to mind. While Vainio does mention the last chapter of Cuneo's work as an example of an Orthodox study of faith, there are other chapters that deal with faith, liturgy, and practice that could be further developed alongside Vainio's project (especially Cuneo's chapters 4, 7, 8, and 9).

All things considered, Vainio's monograph is a welcome addition to ongoing conversations about faith and theological epistemology in philosophy and theology. His research on certainty in the history of theology is insightful and will generate fruitful conversations on these and similar topics from a Christian theological and philosophical perspective. Although I have expressed concerns about Vainio's account of faith and the influence of the epistemic facets of the project, this study is worth the engagement and original in its attempts to bring together many disciplinary insights to inform our understanding of faith and its relationship to certainty and assurance.

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