William K. Clifford, in his classic essay, “The Ethics of Belief.”

Held that “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

This is a statement of the ‘evidentialist requirement’ for belief (= one must have sufficient evidence to justify – epistemically and ethically - any belief.)

This entails the ‘evidentialist objection’ to (God) belief (= there is insufficient evidence to justify – epistemically and ethically – God beliefs)

When there is insufficient evidence to justify a belief (in God) Clifford and subsequent evidentialists assert that one must ‘suspend judgment’ (= not have a belief either way)

But: What is ‘evidence’?
   What is ‘sufficient’ evidence?
   What sufficient evidence supports the truth of Clifford’s assertion/acceptance of evidentialism?

Or, is Clifford’s statement an expression of personal ‘decision’ and ‘pre-philosophical convictions’?

William James, in his classic essay “The Will to Believe,”

Held that it is sometimes rationally permissible (as well as personally desirable) to believe in something because one wants to believe, wills - decides to believe, based upon one’s “passional nature.”

His requirements for such “willed beliefs” are:

   1. It must be an issue where reason cannot decide one way or the other - where there are good reasons / evidence both against and for acceptance of a belief. (And for and against its denial) = an ‘Ambiguous’ Issue

   2. Belief must be a “Live Option.” It must be something that is psychologically possible / plausible for a person to believe.

   3. Belief must be a “Forced Option.” The circumstances must require that one make / live a choice one way or the other regarding the belief issue.

   4. Belief must be a “Momentous Option.” The belief, or lack of belief, must be of great importance – not a trivial issue.
In general, I do not try to convince anyone of anything; I am satisfied if I can get my ‘opponents’ to appreciate the merits of the positions they oppose. . . . For I hold that in any adopting of a position there is an ineluctable element of de-cision, etymologically a cutting off of reflection and an engaging of the will. At the end of the day one must decide what one will believe and how one will live. You will never find some argument, or set of arguments, that definitely establishes your desired conclusion, or justifies your way of life, and if you think that you have found that argument or set of arguments, then you have decided in favor of that argument or set of arguments without realizing that you have done so. If nothing else, you have decided to leave off investigating the matter.

William Vallicella
“Maverick Philosopher”
“[P]re-philosophical convictions [play a central role] in the development of knowledge. What I will call the ‘foundationalist’ conception of philosophy, which demands an argument from uncontroversial premises, rejects the introduction of convictions as irresponsible. But one of the most important results of recent philosophy has been the inadequacy of this foundationalist conception, a result that opens the door to a positive role for pre-philosophical convictions.” (5)

“My conviction is what I truly and deeply believe, what, in my most honest self-assessment, I can scarcely think of giving up because it is rooted in practices of thought and action central to my conception of myself. (240)

“Convictions ... can be judged viable or not depending on the success of the persuasive elaboration of these pictures. Also, established philosophical distinctions are essential means for clarifying and evaluating convictional claims. Accordingly, though convictions are initially held independent of philosophical arguments, their intellectual validity requires that they pass the test of philosophical scrutiny.

“As thinking beings, we need to reflect on our convictions – deriving their implications, giving them more precise expression, defending them against objections, even revising or eventually rejecting them. Philosophy is our model for such reflection ...” (229)

“Nonetheless ... the fact remains that convictions of one sort or another are woven into the fabric of our thinking, and there is no realistic hope that philosophy can replace all convictions with rigorously argued conclusions from obvious premises. Accordingly, we should think that philosophers will think out of one or another set of convictions.

“[T]he mere fact that I am entitled to my convictions - as basic beliefs or as derived conclusions - does not mean that my self-understanding of these convictions is unquestionably adequate.... it does not follow that [a conviction] can be taken as a literal expression of truths about the world.” (235)

“Given our convictions as a starting point, philosophy serves as an essential guide to developing, or even (if they conflict with other convictions) rejecting those convictions.” (239) [Convictions are not ‘dogma’ – MWW]

Gary Gutting, What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytical Philosophy.
(Cambridge University Press, 2009)