

Faith and Reason in Christian Perspective

It appears to me that one of the first things a faithful theologian needs to do is to straighten out the confusion brought about by the world's separation of faith and reason. This relationship is so vital to a biblically fastened worldview that to neglect it will involve the believer in a host of conflicting beliefs and practices. For it is just here that the negligent Christian theologian will be attacked.¹ To the average man in the street, "faith" is that "I really hope so" attitude that many people employ when their circumstances get tough. It is that blind trust that things will turn out all right in the end. Faith thus defined is the opposite of reason. "Reason" deals with the cold hard facts, so it goes, and is what we have to use in the "real world" – in business, in science, in education.

One Christian writer has put the matter in the form of a question: "Is it rational for us to believe in God? Is it rational for us to place our confidence in Him and his revelation to man? Can a person believe in God without performing a sacrifice of his intellect?"²

According to many people, faith and reason are polar opposites. Faith deals with hopes and aspirations and dreams and 'religious stuff', while reason concerns itself with the facts of day to day experience, the world in which we live and do science learn about what is and what is not so. As the late Harvard paleontologist, Stephen Jay Gould stated it, in what has become a mantra among secular scientists, "religion tells us how to go to heaven; science tells us how the heavens go." To put it in less deceptive terms, "religion

deals with gods and heaven and pixies and UFO's; while science (which knows these things are non-existent) concerns itself with what is so." Gould even thought up a nice anagram for his concept: NOMA, or "non over-lapping magisteriums".³ Secular science gets all the facts; faith gets all the pink elephants. Or as one astute critic observed,

The power to define "factual reality" is the power to govern the mind, and thus to confine "religion" within a naturalistic box. For example, a supposed command of God can hardly provide a basis for morality unless God really exists. The commands of an imaginary deity are merely human commands dressed up as divine law...[N]aturalistic metaphysics relegates both morality and God to the realm outside of scientific knowledge, where only subjective belief is to be found.⁴

It is because of misconceptions such as these that the matter deserves more attention than it gets. We must begin by defining our terms. Gould and his followers are so impressed by their formulation of the issue because they have defined *faith* away while reconstituting *reason* so that it mirrors their own opinion of themselves and what they think they are doing. The first thing that any person should do, therefore, is to know what he means when employing specific terminology.

I will define *reason* along with theologian-philosopher John Frame as, "the human ability or capacity for forming judgments and inferences."⁵ This is employing the word in a descriptive sense. Frame goes on to narrow the definition down to a normative sense "to denote correct judgments and inferences."⁶ The important thing to notice about Frame's definition is that it houses no built-in biases against supernaturalism. While being itself a perfectly good description it does not contain anything in it with which the secularist can control the debate.

Faith, meanwhile, may be accurately defined as “persuasion of the divine truth,” upon which we rightly presume when we renounce all self-dependence, and upon which all our hope is based.”⁷ Carl Henry provides a perceptive yet succinct definition when he calls faith the “knowledge based on and issuing from revelation.”⁸ Within this definition it is important to realize that such faith is impossible without the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. Hence, we are not concerned with a general religious belief, but in a living faith which has “its object, basis, and origin” in a relationship “between a human being and God.”⁹ This faith is *dependent on revelation* and can come to certainty through a Divine in-working by means of the Word of God.

We may add one more definition to those given above, this time from the Scots worthy, Hugh Binning: “Faith is the soul’s testimony to God’s truth; the word [i.e. the Bible] is God’s testimony.”¹⁰ To hearken back to a previous set of posts, the Divine *Logos* who created and structured the world and created us to interpret the world through Him via the Scriptures, has given faith as the *mechanism* by which the two are brought together.¹¹ Thus, faith is not opposed to reason; but in fact it is served by reason. We see this taught in Hebrews 11:3, “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word God, so that the things which are seen were not made by things which are visible.” As the “we” in the verse refers to saints, the understanding is available only on the basis of faith (cf. vv. 1 and 6). Since the verse refers either to the created spheres, or, most probably, in view of the historical references in the chapter, to the program of history itself, and it takes the prerequisite of faith to comprehend, then, patently, a Christian view of knowledge places faith before reason. Or as the Puritan commentator William Gouge put

it, “Faith is in the understanding.”¹² Therefore, the teachings of the Bible should act as the “control beliefs”¹³ of the one who has come under the sway of the Bible.

Revelation and Reason

Having brought into the discussion the necessity of Divine revelation as the presupposition of faith, we are faced with the question of how reason relates to this revelation. My answer to this question will have to be provisional for now. I hope to post separately on this subject in the future.

If faith truly appropriates the truth about God then it is clear that it can have no proper function apart from Divine revelation. As “faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), it responds to matters above the reach of the inductive sciences (1 Cor. 2:10 etc). Hence, from a Christian point of view, it is essential for man to have proper faith if he is to know his creational environment fully.

Naturally, this is not the position of the unregenerate, nor, if what we have said above is true, can it ever be. This is for the simple reason that, according to Van Til, “Their epistemology is informed by their ethical hostility to God.”¹⁴ A century ago Herman Bavinck, following the work of C. P. Tiele, noted that every religion claimed as part of its identity, a form of revelation.¹⁵ He noted that each religion, if it were to sustain itself, needed some source of explanation (of immaterial reality) beyond human reason.¹⁶ But

once English Empiricism had gained prestige, “reason gradually gained for itself the power to pronounce on the content of revelation as well.”¹⁷

The lesson is easy enough to discern. Though the Enlightenment project housed various theories and explanations of knowledge, the central pillar of all Enlightenment epistemology was the persuasion that the parameters of knowledge about reality were circumscribed by the rationality and intelligence of man. Bavinck remarked that, “Materially the gospel could not be anything other than the truth of reason.”¹⁸ There was no place left for faith. This is the “dead-end” down which most secular thought has come.

Even though both Rationalism and Empiricism as philosophical movements have been held up to withering scrutiny, they still enjoy a healthy adherence, particularly the latter, with its support of “the scientific method.” As for Kant’s attempt at fusing these two schools of thought together in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, we should remind ourselves that he only “saved science” from the potential ravages of Hume’s skepticism by subjectivizing it, while at the same time “saving” religion and ethics by making them impenetrable to pure reason. But as the historian Will Durant asked,

What had the [Critique] really done? It had destroyed the naïve world of science, and limited it, if not in degree, certainly in scope, - and to a world confessedly of mere surface and appearance, beyond which it could issue only in farcical ‘antinomies’; so science was ‘saved’! The most eloquent and incisive portions of the book had argued that the objects of faith – a free and immortal soul, a benevolent creator – could never be proved by reason; so religion was ‘saved’! No wonder the priests of Germany protested madly against this salvation, and revenged themselves by calling their dogs Immanuel Kant.¹⁹

Today non-Christian thought, though it more and more disavows the bombastic overconfidence of the Enlightenment, is just as aimlessly lost without a center as it has always been. Futility is the inevitable outcome of all non-revelational, or, better, anti-revelational thought (Rom. 1:21-22).²⁰

The Myth of Epistemological Neutrality

What I have said above shows that there is no place of neutrality, no universal 'buffer-zone' where all people, no matter their control beliefs, can come together to assess the facts without bias. This is emphatically the case between the Christian believer and the unbeliever in Christianity, whatever else he may believe.²¹

This is not to say for a second that there is nothing the believer and the unbeliever have in common. What we are saying is that when a Bible-believer and, say, a Muslim, or an atheist look at a fact, they may well agree on what the fact is (e.g. the midday sun), but they will not agree on the meaning of the fact. The Muslim will believe that the sun is there because Allah, his wholly transcendent and ineffable god, has determined it to be there. The atheist believes that the sun is there due to a series of momentous blind chain reactions dating back to a singularity some 15 billion years ago. The Christian-theist, on the other hand, sees as part of the creation and ongoing immanent providence of the transcendent²² Triune God of the Bible, the redeeming God of grace.

One need only give a little thought to the issue of neutrality if he is a Christian. For *as a Christian* he sees the world. He is certainly not neutral. He is for Christ and the Bible (Matt. 12:30)! As Jochen Douma accurately puts it, “Choosing the LORD always means making a choice that excludes every other possibility.”²³ And what is true of the Christian holds true for the non-Christian, for the Bible declares that he is far from being neutral either (Eph. 2:1-3). “Theologically, the point can be expressed this way: when people forsake the true God, they come under bondage to idols. When they reject the true standard, they adopt a false one.”²⁴ This, at least, ought to be understood, but here is where the howls of protest are heard – howls emanating from conservative Christian scholarship no less.

¹ To give one example, this sharp dichotomy is a main plank in the atheistic arguments of George H. Smith’s, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989). Just read any atheist and you will discover the same approach. Many unbelievers think that the dichotomy between faith and reason is basic to why they can remain in their unbelief. Given the standard dichotomy I think they are correct.

² John P. Newport, *Life’s Ultimate Questions*, (Fort Worth, Scripta Publishing Co, 1994), 415.

³ We shall not tarry at this point to discuss the relationship of Theology to Science. But outside of a Christian-theistic description of the world science would be impossible.

⁴ Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin On Trial*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 161-162.

⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 329.

⁶ *Ibid*, 330.

⁷ Edward A. Dowey, Jr, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Third edition, 1994), 154. The initial definition is from Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. 2:14.

⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 2.57.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1.568.

¹⁰ Hugh Binning, *Works*, (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, [1858] 1992), 32.

¹¹ Cf. Bavinck, 1.231.

¹² William Gouge, *Commentary on Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1980 reprint), 762.

¹³ The term “control beliefs” is borrowed from Nicholas Wolterstorff’s important little book, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 70.

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1955), 190.

¹⁵ Bavinck, 284-285.

¹⁶ Ibid, 286

¹⁷ Ibid, 288

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, (New York: Pocket Library, 1954), 275.

²⁰ This assertion will have to stand on its own here, but will be demonstrated (DV) in the future.

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 225f.

²² Notice that I have deliberately linked the immanence of God with His transcendent nature. This is done in contrast to the “transcendence” of Allah, which as formulated, makes that god utterly incomprehensible, and so vulnerable to the skeptic’s charge of being unknowable. A totally incomprehensible deity is one we cannot speak about. If we cannot say anything about him we may as well not think about him at all! A correct doctrine of God’s transcendence will include His immanence, and thus God’s incomprehensibility is not total. For more on this subject see John M. Frame’s essay, “God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence,” in John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *God’s Inerrant Word*, (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1974).

²³ Jochen Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 18.

²⁴ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 126.