

Faith and Reason: A Perennial Problem

The intensity with which the question of the relation of faith to reason is being considered today has scarcely a parallel in history. It is small wonder that the layman is beginning to ask whether man's progress at this point must always be Penelope-like, each generation unraveling what the former had done, and beginning over. Nor is it reassuring to him to learn that little agreement has been reached concerning even the meanings of the basic terms employed in the investigation. But since the question is still an open one, there is no reason to apologize for one more editorial dealing with it.

The Faith-Reason problem is, basically, the modern form of the ancient conflict between religion and philosophy. Plato saw the conflict as between the poets (especially Homer and Hesiod, who were the spokesmen for traditional Greek theology) and the philosophers. The conflict, however, becomes more acute when theology has come to connote, not the heroic poetry of a people, but a body of authoritative religious teaching, claiming to grow out of a concrete historical setting, and proposing to challenge many of the accepted conclusions, not only of philosophy but also of experimental science.

It is difficult to avoid the observation, that some contemporary thinkers have been extreme in their assertions that the current modes of scientific understanding of man and his world are to be equated with the necessary and final conclusions of reason, and as such can be viewed only as antithetical to faith. This assumes a finality to scientific assumptions which is difficult to square with the usual definition of 'reason'. This definition is two-

fold: reason is both the capacity to discover truth by thinking, and the ability to relate this truth to concrete action. As such, it is scarcely to be linked finally with any scientific approach to reality, since science has its fads and makes its false starts.

This raises the more important question, is there any *semper, ubique, et ab omnibus* of reason? The stereotype of the eighteenth century rationalist is held to have thought so. More recently positivism has denied that such a *Reason* ever existed or will exist. All we can expect, it asserts, is a substitution of the term 'warrantably assertible' for 'truth' and a constant modification of conclusions in the light of further scientific inquiry. Some will inquire whether this is not a rather naïve reliance upon the techniques of science. But however we may think of this, it seems clear that the classic rationalist assumption, that the conclusions of reason, once achieved, are of perennial and unchanging value, can no longer go unchallenged.

How, then, are we to think of reason? If it is not an instrument for discovering a complete system of perennial and final truth through its exploration of its own logical harmony, and if on the other hand it is naïve to equate it with scientific inquiry, then what can be said for it? Possibly the answer is to be found through the observation that both of these solutions are too simple.

Several contemporary movements have come to our aid at this point. While it is impossible for most of us to give a blanket vote of confidence to the newer psychology, we must acknowledge gratefully the challenge to simple rationalism which has come from its assertion that the human ego

is subject to both challenge and deception by the processes which lie below the level of recognized consciousness. In the light of this, it is difficult to assert without explanation the sovereignty of reason, even though we assert against Freud, that morality (and hence responsibility) can be found at every level of mind. Any hypnotist will tell us that, whether the mind be rightly divided into conscious and unconscious and/or subconscious, or whether it exists in varying degrees of consciousness, morality is present along the entire mental scale. In any case, reason can scarcely be credited with the achievements and possibilities with which eighteenth-century thought was inclined to invest her.

The second blow which contemporary thought has dealt to the classical view of reason is that which comes from the dialectical movement. This asserts that the antinomies which occur in thought when we begin to think *existentially* arise from the basically dialectical character of our elementary principles of thought. This in turn can be interpreted in one of two ways: possibly it grows out of the antinomy which appears when the finite faces the Infinite; or possibly it goes more deeply still, to the nature of reality. In other words, possibly Przywara is correct in interpreting the whole of reality in terms of essential polarity.

In any case, rational thought is dialectical in character. This being true, even philosophizing is far from being the simple affair that some have thought. It was Kant who called the attention of modern philosophy to this fact—a fact of which Plato was well aware, and which he set forth in the *Parmenides*. The meaning of this for our present discussion is, that reason must, in the light of more recent insights, accept a humbler and more disciplined place than her adherents have claimed for her in her feud with faith.

It is evident, of course, that assert-

ing the limitations of reason as an instrument for achieving truth is one thing; and offering a solution to the problem of reason and faith is quite another. At this point, however, both common fairness and clarity demand that some attention be given to the current understanding of what is meant by 'faith'. At one extreme stands the view held by Auguste Comte. His three stages of human culture may be illustrated as follows: the period of faith was that age of humanity in which simple creatures traced their steps in the snow of theology. The age of metaphysics was that which skated somewhat unimaginatively upon the hard bits of ice which remained when most of the snow had melted. The age of positivism (extending until the present) is the age of critical labors in the sunshine which has evaporated both the snow of theology and the ice crust of metaphysics.

Modern empiricism is not far different from earlier positivism in its view of faith, which amounts to a confidence in the techniques and conclusions of experimental science. This given, the area of knowledge is confined to those subjects or conclusions which are referable to the five senses for verification. Empiricists of this thorough-going character are frank in insisting that all we know of man and his world contradicts the teachings of traditional religion in general, and historic Christianity in particular. At best, faith is an escape from life's hard necessities, essential perhaps to the unlearned, but valuable only as it satisfies certain emotional needs—needs which will evaporate with the increased spread of scientific knowledge.

At the opposite extreme stands an uncritical fundamentalism, which makes sweeping assertions concerning matters of which it knows little or nothing. Without even taking the pains which thinkers of the Middle Ages exercised to develop their view of a *duplex veritas*, uncritical funda-

mentalism assumes as *given* that religious truth, interpreted in its own facile manner, is completely and easily reconcilable with truth in all other areas of human life and knowledge. This minimizes the entire problem of struggle which is involved in the matter of interpretation of the Bible. Rejecting the latitudinarian view which theological liberals have taken of Paul's famous metaphor: "For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," (II Corinthians 3:6) uncritical fundamentalism seeks to solve the problems which arise in interpretation at the level of *the letter*, this being frequently attempted without even taking recourse to the Scripture in the languages in which it was originally written.

Between these two extremes stands the Crisis Theology, with its prior division of the field of knowledge into two areas, and its subsequent assertion of the non-rational character of religious truth. It is probable that most of us reared in the Anglo-American intellectual tradition can scarcely bring to the dialectical approach a proper sympathy of mind. Perhaps if we in America possessed something parallel to the *Nibelungenlied*, and had learned from our earliest years to enter sympathetically into the spirit of some such national epic, we could then comprehend better the idea of super-existence (*Urgeschichte*). As things stand, we tend to view such concepts as impossible-because-illogical; our exaggerated practicality prevents us from understanding what Barth and Brunner are trying to say.

This writer is not suggesting that the dialectical theologians have the right answer to the problem of Faith-Reason. He is simply acknowledging that some of the language-forms in which these men couch their views are such that most of us do not properly understand them. What contribution, then, can we expect to find in their system (and the crisis theology seems to be hardening into a semblance of

a system) which will correct our extremes, and which may point the way to a solution?

But some reader will object, that we have prejudiced this newer theology, and have given no good reasons for doing so. The chief objection to the dialectical theology seems to be, that it has carried its principle of dialectic too far. It is one thing to say that the nature of mind (and perhaps also the nature of reality) demands a movement of alternation in the reasoning process. It is quite another to say that the entire world of thought is a house radically divided. Again, it is one thing to assert that the knowledge upon which faith rests is something less than absolutely certain (from the point of view of pure intellect), and that faith is the link between such knowledge and religious certainty. It is quite another thing to assert that faith accepts as true that which is rationally absurd. That which is deeper than human consciousness is not necessarily irrational.

More specifically, it seems that the approach to the Bible which the dialectical theologians make is no more adequate than that taken by uncritical fundamentalists. The former overload the rôle of 'spirit' in interpretation, and fail to do justice to the historical matrix in which the Scriptures are set. The latter place an uncritical (and therefore exaggerated) emphasis upon the 'letter' and become wooden in their approach. Neither seem able to make the necessary allowance for a spirit of tentativeness which is essential to the solution of a problem which has so many places of openness, and so many points at which tension is inevitable.

In short, the Faith-Reason controversy is too complex for any easy solution. So long as the God of faith transcends the sphere of any determinate being, the mind of man can only approximate a knowledge of Him. Even a Revelation of Him will at some points be, necessarily, set in terms

which will be above our powers of thought. But this is quite different from asserting that such a Revelation is basically irrational.

Both the dialectical theology and uncritical fundamentalism seem to be outgrowths of moods of impatience. Such moods are understandable, particularly in times like these. Both movements have something to say; either seems preferable to the solution offered by scientific humanism. Fundamentalism is strong in its contention that the truth of Revelation is inseparable from the accuracy of the historical setting out of which the Bible came. It deserves to be heard as well for its insistence upon the possibility of a literal supernatural invasion of the natural order by the Creative Cause.

The dialectical theology has, on the other hand, made a valuable contribution to the exploration of the problem in hand, in its assertion that not all will be easy going in the understanding of the ways of the Infinite. At the same time, it appears weak in its inability to distinguish between what is factual, and what is the cipher in God's self-expression to men. The problem of religious knowledge, especially in its relation to the question of the objective truth of Christianity, cannot be solved apart from some more adequate comprehension of this question. And we venture that if and when such a solution is achieved, it will be found to leave us a Bible which is much more acceptable as historically accurate than most moderns now believe.

—H. B. K.

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