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Reasons of Faith

The Scriptural teaching concerning God's infinite and spiritual essence ought to be enough, not only to banish popular delusions, but also to refute the subtleties of secular philosophy.
—JOHN CALVIN

Reasons of Faith"—the two terms themselves (so far, "of" has remained relatively free from the fires of controversy) spark passions and debates, from past to present, that cause contenders quickly to choose sides and to profess allegiances.[1] The reaction is due, in part, to the subject matter under scrutiny when these words appear together.

Just what do we mean when we use the terms *faith* and *reason* together? The literature is not abundantly clear, and there remains some confusion regarding the answer to that question. One promi-

1. For the best collection of historical material on the faith/reason debate, see Paul Helm, *Faith and Reason*, Oxford Readers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

nent description of the relationship between the two is the following (we'll call it *FR*):[2]

> [*FR*] The major theistic traditions draw a distinction between religious truths that can be discovered and even known by unaided human reason and those to which humans have access only through a special divine disclosure or revelation. According to Aquinas, e.g., the existence of God and some things about the divine nature can be proved by unaided human reason, but such distinctively Christian doctrines as the Trinity and Incarnation cannot be thus proved and are known to humans only because God has revealed them.[3]

Perhaps *FR* will suffice for now as a general description of the relationship of faith and reason. When discussing *faith*, what we primarily refer to is any truth, or belief in a truth, that is beyond the ability of reason to prove. When we use the term *reason*, we refer to any truth, or belief in a truth, that is or can be known without the aid of any source external to it. As noted, *FR* itself finds its focus in the genius of Thomas Aquinas.

For example, according to Thomas, "there are some truths [about God] which the natural reason . . . is able to reach."[4] If that is the case, then it is assumed that natural reason can infer certain truths about the true God without the aid of faith and outside the context of regeneration. In this case, a universal use and application of reason is available to all without discrimination, by which we can prove God's existence and perhaps some aspects of his character.

What role, then, does faith play in such a construal? As indicated in *FR*, faith is the means by which we believe truths (of Christianity) that are beyond reason's pale. "Some truths about God exceed

2. To simplify, from here on, *FR* will include the notion that there are religious truths known by unaided reason and other religious truths known only by revelation.

3. Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 607.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1957), 1:63.

all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune."[5]

It is this general structure, a structure articulated in *FR* above, that has formed one of the primary (perhaps even the predominant) contexts in which the terms *faith* and *reason* have been discussed.[6] In order to see more clearly the tension between the two, we need first to review a little history.

Reforming Reason

The view of *FR*, historically speaking, ought not be seen as the only approach to the debate between faith and reason. It is certainly the case, as noted above, that Thomas Aquinas set out the general parameters of *FR*. Thus there are a few centuries of historical precedent for its tenets. But we should not think that we can draw a straight line from Thomas's view to present discussions, as if there has been historical uniformity with regard to the debate. The fly in the ointment of continuity between Thomas and present discussions is the intervention of Reformed thought. The Reformation brought with it, not only a reform in theological thinking per se, but a reform in the way in which theology relates to philosophy, and thus in the way in which we think about the relationship of faith to reason.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin sets up for us, and for theology since his time, a framework in which to discuss theology—the so-called *duplex cognitio Dei*, or the twofold knowledge of God: knowledge of God the Creator and knowledge of God the Redeemer. Within this *duplex*, Calvin discusses some of the ways in which we have knowledge of God the Creator. For example, Calvin begins book

5. Ibid.

6. This is not exactly true. The faith/reason discussion, in the context of Christianity, goes all the way back to the ancient church and is prominent in such figures as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and especially Augustine. It also plays a key role in the theology and philosophy of Anselm. In order to avoid the entire history of the discussion, however, we begin with Thomas because it was in him that the debate seems to have its historical epicenter.

1, chapter 3 of the *Institutes* with a consideration of the *sensus divinitatis*. He begins:

> There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity [*divinitatis sensum*]. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.[7]

Further on he says:

> Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds. Indeed the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. . . . I only say that though the stupid hardness in their minds, which the impious eagerly conjure up to reject God, wastes away, yet the sense of divinity, which they greatly wished to have extinguished, thrives and presently burgeons. From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end.[8]

Consistent with this discussion in Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500–1565) produced the most extended treatment and explanation of natural theology (which, as we will see, is now called philosophy of religion) during the Reformation period. Though Vermigli was trained in the Thomistic tradition (e.g., one of his teachers was Juan Valdes of Spain), in his *Loci Communes* (posthumously published in 1563) his theological focus is more Reformed than

7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM, 1960), 1.3.1.

8. Ibid., 1.3.3. More on the *sensus divinitatis* and its relationship to epistemology later.

Roman. He denies, for example, Thomas's *analogia entis*, in which Thomas sought to show that there was a metaphysical coincidence between the being of God and the being of everything else. Vermigli held that God was "other than men" in the nature of his simplicity, goodness, righteousness, wisdom, and so forth.[9] Because of this view of God, Vermigli did not think it possible to understand who God is simply by applying the tools of the mind. God was of a different order of being than anything else. So, the only way truly to learn of him and of his creation was by way of God's revelation. Thus, a true natural theology could only be constructed within the context and confines of faith, which alone is able to understand and grasp God's revelation.

For Vermigli, then, natural theology had significant theological limits. This is, as we will see, important with respect to the doctrine of God per se, as well as for apologetics. Regarding the doctrine of God, Vermigli notes that the purely philosophical doctrine of God as Creator is at best marginally useful since to know God rightly one must have faith.

Vermigli went on to develop an important distinction in the context of the discussions of natural theology, a distinction that follows Calvin's discussions. There were, according to Vermigli, two kinds of knowledge of God that rightly belong under the rubric of natural theology. There is, first of all, what we might call the *implanted* knowledge of God—what theologians called the *cognitio insita*. This was knowledge that God himself *implanted* or *inserted* into each creature made in his image. The second kind of knowledge of God was called the *cognitio acquisita*, the acquired knowledge of God.[10]

9. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 172.

10. Francis Turretin (1623–87) was very obviously dependent on Vermigli at this point. He notes as well that there are two aspects to natural theology: "The orthodox, on the contrary, uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions) and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively)." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–97), 1:6.

It is important to understand in this regard that, with respect to the *cognitio insita*, Vermigli, Turretin, and others wanted to distance themselves from the standard philosophical notions of "innate knowledge," on the one hand, and a kind of *tabula rasa*, on the other. Philosophically speaking, the idea of "innate" knowledge, particularly after Descartes, carried with it a notion of autonomy. That which was innate was thought to be ours simply by nature, without regard to any Author of nature who might have given such a knowledge to us. At the same time, a *tabula rasa* understanding of our minds would render men with an excuse in their standing before God. That would be in direct conflict with what Paul says in Romans 1 and 2.[11]

The emphasis among most of the Reformed during the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries was that this *cognitio insita* was present in us because of who *God* is, and what *he* had done.[12] It was not defined as in any way autonomous (though some would call it innate); it was only there because God had given it. As given, it was knowledge that was intuitive, immediate, non-ratiocinative in its apprehension of God.

We should realize, however, that this Reformed distinction, as explicated in Calvin and others, has been obscured by the forces of the Enlightenment,[13] which began to change the terms of this discussion altogether. The change of terms with regard to natural theology was brought about because of the Enlightenment's insistence on autonomous reason.

11. Note Turretin: "The mind of man is a *tabula rasa* not absolutely, but relatively as to discursion and dianoetical knowledge (which is acquired necessarily by inferring one thing from another); but not as to apprehensive and intuitive knowledge. For even according to Paul, the work of the law is in such a manner written in the hearts of the Gentiles that they do by nature the things contained in the law." Ibid., 1:9.

12. For a modern, clear presentation of the distinction between implanted and acquired knowledge of God, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 59–91.

13. By "the" Enlightenment here, I simply mean to include what some have called the "Age of Reason," beginning roughly around the eighteenth century, and having many precursors and many contours. The primary aspect of the Enlightenment—its focus and emphasis on the power and magisterial place of reason—is the central aspect of any of its permutations and is our primary concern here. See Jonathan Irvine Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

According to Richard Muller, from the mid-eighteenth century on, with the influence of Christian Wolff (1679–1754) and others, reason, even among some in the Reformed orthodox tradition, was thought to be the *principium cognoscendi theologiae*—or the foundation of knowledge for theology—such that natural theology and related notions began to be defined differently than they were just a few decades earlier. Under the influence of Enlightenment thinking:

> Natural theology could be viewed as the basic theology upon which a system could be built and to which certain revealed but rationally explicable data could be added. This idea of reason as the foundation of theology becomes the normative view of [some] eighteenth-century Reformed writers. . . . The presence of this rationalistic perspective in eighteenth-century theology, therefore, marks the end of genuine Reformed orthodoxy, at least in those systems that adopt it as the basic perspective for theological formulation.[14]

It was the influence of rationalism, which has its focus in the Enlightenment, that served to undermine Reformed orthodoxy generally and to change the categories of the debates on faith and reason. The Enlightenment, therefore, resulted in a loss, not an advance, of orthodox theology.

Though the focus of the debate about natural theology prior to the Enlightenment centered on the relationship of the *cognitio insita* and the *cognitio acquisita*, part of the problem with the debate since the Enlightenment is that there has been some confusion about the meaning of natural theology itself.

The Enlightenment influence has caused some to reformulate the terms of natural theology. It has caused some to understand that, while there may be a *cognitio insita*, in which we all have some inkling of a divine Creator, there is also and more importantly (for natural theology) a *cognitio acquisita*, which employs natural reason

14. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725: The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 192–93.

to ascertain the existence and perhaps something of the character of a god. Thus, *FR* above, as well as apologetics since the mid-eighteenth century, and, as we will see, the concerns of philosophy of religion, have their focus in an Enlightenment reinterpretation of the *cognitio acquisita*, a reinterpretation that seeks to ground such knowledge, not in revelation, but in reason alone.

Because of that focus, it has been tempting for some to read Calvin's discussion in book 1 of the *Institutes* (on the knowledge of God the Creator) as making a clear distinction between the *cognitio insita* and the *cognitio acquisita*. Some have been tempted to think that the *cognitio insita*, whatever its use, plays a minimal role in natural theology, while the *cognitio acquisita* becomes the focus and content of developing a theology—based on reason—from nature alone, without the aid of special revelation. Specifically, just to use one example, Edward Dowey in his work *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* reads Calvin as developing a distinction between the *sensus divinitatis*, on the one hand, and our experience of the world, on the other, a distinction that corresponds to the two different kinds of knowledge, *insita* and *acquisita*, respectively.

Thus, although the *sensus divinitatis* may be implanted within us, our experience of the world is that "on the basis of which," says Dowey, "the mind of man says 'therefore' with respect to God."[15] A post-Enlightenment read of Calvin, therefore, would want to see, for example, Calvin's *Institutes* 1.3 (and 1.4) as dealing specifically with the *cognitio insita* and 1.5 as dealing with the *cognitio acquisita*. It seems, however, that this reading of Calvin is suspect.

In the quotations from Calvin above, in which he discusses the *sensus divinitatis*, Calvin is treating the knowledge of God as *implanted* in us. Some would conclude that this is his *only* concern in this chapter. Some would say that Calvin has clearly in his mind at this point *only* the *cognitio insita*. But, in this same context and chapter, he says this: "Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned

15. Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, expended ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 74.

by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will."[16] This notion of a "perception of God" is typically reserved for discussions of the *cognitio acquisita*. So, for Calvin to interject it here would be unnatural if what he had in mind were a clear distinction between the *implanted* knowledge of God, on the one hand, and the *acquired* knowledge of God, on the other.

In chapter 5, he does make a distinction between the *kinds* of knowledge of God: "Lest anyone . . . be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him."[17]

It might be thought, as Dowey implies, that since Calvin makes a distinction here between that which God implants and that which he reveals through his works, then the way to God through the revelation *in his works* is by the right use of reason. The way to discover God in his works is by using reason properly. So the task of natural theology (or philosophy of religion), as well as the task of apologetics, is in using those works to reason toward a *cognitio acquisita*.

It is instructive, however, to notice again Calvin's language in the *Institutes* 1.5. Speaking of the revelation of God through his works, he says, "Upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance."[18] And later he says:

> There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and

16. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1.
17. Ibid., 1.5.1.
18. Ibid.

> ignorant persons, *so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them*.[19]

This sounds more like a kind of immediate awareness than a process of discursive reasoning. Calvin adds, "How detestable, I ask you, is this madness: that man, finding God in his body and soul a hundred times, on this very pretense of excellence denies that there is a God?"[20]

There seems to be no way legitimately to distinguish between God's revelation implanted in us and that revelation that comes through our experience of the world. In both cases, the knowledge of God is given to us by God, and it is given to us in such a way that it is clearly seen, understood, and thus it renders us without excuse before him.

It seems altogether likely, therefore, as we compare *FR* above with our glance at Reformed theological discussions on these matters, that current contexts of debate on the place of faith and reason have been wide of the mark since the Enlightenment. There has been, since roughly the eighteenth century, an underlying assumption of reason's capability to know God on its own ("unaided reason"), an assumption that is at odds with Reformed orthodoxy.

It is the categories of Reformed orthodoxy prior to the Enlightenment, therefore, that give us better clarity in our discussion of faith and reason. Given those pre-Enlightenment categories, both the *cognitio insita* and the *cognitio acquisita* were elements of natural theology, but—and this is all-important—natural theology itself was defined in terms of its relationship to faith.

In other words, a distinction developed after (and based on) Calvin with respect to natural theology between two *kinds* of natural theology—a distinction that was obscured and virtually erased after the Enlightenment. The distinction was between a *theologia vera* (true theology) and a *theologia falsa* (false theology). The former, *theologia vera*, was also referred to as *theologia naturalis regenetorum* (natural theology on the basis of regeneration). That

19. Ibid., 1.5.2, my emphasis.
20. Ibid., 1.5.4.

is, natural theology could *only* be true theology if developed by and in the context of the regenerate (faith), since only then would it be based on God's revelation in Scripture.[21]

Unbelievers, on the other hand, must inevitably develop a *theologia falsa* since they will always and by nature twist and pervert the knowledge of God given both within them and without them. This is the case because reason does not have the ability in and of itself to ascertain truth with respect to God and his existence. It must be governed by faith. So, says Calvin, "Hence it appears that if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god."[22]

From Theology to Philosophy

In our now "enlightened" context, the terms *faith* and *reason*, when discussed together, fall under the rubric of philosophy of religion. As was mentioned, this is terminology used to designate an old, old task, that of *natural theology*. So, with respect to the tasks philosophy sets for itself, *philosophy of religion* is fairly new terminology. That is, it is a subset of philosophy, coined toward the end of the eighteenth century as a substitute phrase for what used to be called natural theology.[23]

21. See Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 180ff.

22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.12. Note also Calvin's comments on Acts 17:28: "And though so soon as they begin to think upon God, they vanish away in wicked inventions, and so pure seed doth degenerate into corruptions; yet the first general knowledge of God doth nevertheless remain still in them. After this sort, no man of a sound mind can doubt to apply that unto the true God which we read in Virgil touching the reigned and false joy, that All things are full of Jove. Yea, when Virgil meant to express the power of God, through error he put in a wrong name." John Calvin, *The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection*, CD-ROM (The Ages Digital Library System, 2002). As we will see later, Paul's use of pagan poets is not because those poets got it right, for surely Aratus's reference to Jupiter renders the statement false, but rather was because Paul knew the statement to be a product of the suppression of the truth.

23. We should note here that, generally speaking, natural theology reaches all the way back from the pagan gods of Old Testament times through to the present pagan religions. In the West, natural theology can be seen as far back as the fourth century BC, during which time philosophers began to speculate on the unifying principle of the universe,

During the beginning stages of these philosophical investigations in the West, the more common term initially used was *natural philosophy* (since there was no categorical distinction made, as is the case now, between matter and spirit). Natural philosophy sought to discover, through nature and the use of reason, the one unifying principle of life and of everything else. Later on, philosophers and theologians of the medieval period labeled this kind of endeavor, *metaphysics*, or *wisdom*, or *holy teaching*, or just *theology*.

The fact of the matter is that philosophy of religion, as a subfield of philosophy, became established as an academic specialty because philosophy as a whole was no longer engaged with questions about God or about religious beliefs about God. Though the actual discussion of the issues with which philosophy of religion deals—issues such as the existence and nature of God, faith and reason, miracles, death and immortality, and so on—has in the last few decades moved more to the center of philosophical debate, particularly in the analytic tradition of philosophy, the "subset" mentality still persists and is likely here to stay.

By the late eighteenth century, philosophy of religion was thought to consist of a set of questions, inquiries, theories, or truths that were both accessible to philosophy and helpful to or even needful for Christianity. The phrase itself was popularized in part by John Caird (1820–98), in his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (1880).[24] To help us understand the concerns of philosophy of religion we may look briefly at Caird.

Caird hoped to use absolute idealism to defend Christianity. Absolute idealism, in its various forms, sought to transcend the experiential world to some "thing" that would make sense of those experiences. Caird's book, which was influenced to a great extent by Hegel, in many ways clarified the agenda of philosophy of religion to the present day. Caird begins:

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ascribing to that principle attributes of immutability, indivisibility, unity, transcendence, goodness, and so on.

24. Caird was one of the proponents of absolute idealism, a view on which Cornelius Van Til was a renowned expert and which he sought, from the time of his dissertation onwards, to refute.

> A Philosophy of Religion starts with the presupposition that religion and religious ideas can be taken out of the domain of feeling or practical experience and made objects of scientific reflection. It implies that, whilst religion and philosophy have the same objects, the attitude of the human spirit towards these objects is, in each case, different. In the one they are present to it in an immediate way as objects of devotion or spiritual enjoyment; they come before it at most only in the form of outward fact or of figurative representation. In the other, they become the objects of reflection or intellectual apprehension, and are finally elevated to the form of pure or speculative thought.[25]

Caird goes on to argue that, while "feeling" is a kind of knowledge, any knowledge worthy of the name must pass out of the immediacy of the sensible world and enter "that colder yet loftier region in which reason opposes itself to its object, breaks up the natural harmony wherein no contradiction of thought has yet betrayed itself, and advances to the search after a deeper and indissoluble unity."[26]

In a statement that seems to identify philosophy with religion, Caird goes on to assert that "the peculiar domain of philosophy is absolute truth."[27] One of the interesting points about Caird's contention for a philosophy of religion is his understanding of the nature of philosophy with respect to religion: "According to this view, then, there is no province of human experience, there is nothing in the whole realm of reality, which lies beyond the domain of philosophy, or to which philosophical investigation does not extend."[28] Then Caird asks:

> But can this high claim of philosophy be justified? Before we yield ourselves up to its guidance, must not philosophy be asked

25. John Caird, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, The Croall Lectures; 1878–79 (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1880), 1.

26. Ibid., 2. One will notice similarities here to Dooyeweerd's *Gegenstand* relation. See Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, ed. William S. Young, trans. David H. Freeman (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969).

27. Caird, *Philosophy of Religion*, 3.

28. Ibid., 5.

> to prove that there is nothing presumptuous in this assertion of its universal authority? Before we admit the pretensions of reason to treat thus of all things in heaven and earth, to regard nothing as too high or sacred to be subjected to its inquiries, must we not, as a preliminary condition, ask it to give us satisfactory proof of its capacity to deal with them?
>
> It may be answered, in general, that the only way in which philosophy *can* prove its rights is by philosophising. The capacity or incapacity of reason to deal with any object or class of objects cannot be determined by a preliminary inquiry, for this, if for no other reason, that the inquiry could only be conducted by the faculty which is impugned. *If the incapacity is asserted on external authority, it is only reason itself that can judge of that authority and pronounce on its claims*.[29]

This, of course, brings up the age-old question of the relationship of philosophy to theology, a question to which we will turn shortly. It should be noted for our purposes here, however, that, according to Caird, it is the province and domain of reason to pronounce on its own capacity to judge authoritatively. This, as we will see, is in part what brings discussions of faith and reason to fever pitch. Before we ask about the truth of Caird's bold statement, let me attempt to clarify.

How does *FR* relate to Caird's pronouncement that it is up to reason to judge of its own legitimacy and of faith's? To put Caird's comment above in its best light, Caird seems to be thinking of reason simply as a faculty, a tool that is used in any and all thinking, conceiving, and similar acts. As a faculty, then, reason is a *sine qua non* of *all* thinking, even thinking about faith and reason. *FR*, however, seems not to be referring to such all-inclusive categories, but rather sees reason as a mode of truth- and/or belief-acquisition.[30]

So which is it? Is reason simply the faculty that pervades every conscious moment, or is it more specifically a mode of acquiring truth? For our purposes, it is best to see the terms of the faith/reason

29. Ibid., 4, emphasis mine.

30. From here on, we'll use notions of truth and belief as synonyms, recognizing that the two are quite distinct in reality.

debate as best described in *FR*, though Caird's analysis cannot be far from the center of the discussion either. Suffice it to say, at this point, that *FR* is and remains, generally speaking, the common view among philosophers of religion (and whatever natural theologians there might be) today.

The Contemporary Context

Perhaps an example or two from the contemporary scene will help set the agenda for our discussion in chapters to come. The current controversy over faith versus reason could be summarized in one word—*evidence*. Whatever position one takes or has taken with regard to the relationship of faith to reason will be determined, centrally, by the way in which one thinks about evidence generally and, more specifically, the way in which one thinks about evidence relative to faith.

For example, the history of the controversy surrounding natural theology has to do primarily with the way in which one thinks about evidence for the existence of God. The question is *not*, we should note, whether one thinks there are, or are not, evidences for God's existence. It is, rather, just exactly how one construes the notion of evidence itself with respect to God's existence.

Before setting those options out, they should both be seen against the backdrop of what has been called the "evidential objection to belief in God." This objection claims, in its milder forms, that it is irrational or somehow unacceptable to believe in God except on the basis of evidence of some kind. In its stronger form, the objection claims that, given that there is no evidence for belief in God, to hold such a belief is to embrace a falsehood. How might one respond to this objection? Generally speaking, there seem to be two options available.

In response to the evidential objection, one view would attempt to demonstrate by way of syllogistic or evidential proof that the existence of God is properly concluded from evidential premises that we all can accept. So, for example, Thomas Aquinas's famous "five ways" seeks to prove the existence of God, as well as his unity, from universally accepted or acceptable premises—premises such

as, "Everything moved is moved by another."[31] This is a premise, surely, that anyone with eyes to see and a mind to think should have no trouble affirming.

But there is another side to the current debate (a helpful thing to have in debates). There is a side that seeks to answer the evidential objection, not on the basis of universally accepted premises, but on the basis of what might be called an "acceptability thesis." An acceptability thesis obtains when any position seeks to argue for the rationality of (in this case) belief in God on the basis of something other than universally acknowledged premises. One can readily see how this latter view would be more at home in a postmodern world and culture. An acceptability thesis, by definition, argues for the acceptability of a belief, not because such a belief has attached to it any kind of universal obligation, as if all *ought* to believe, but because, given something peculiar to one's own situation, or context, or personal story, it is perfectly proper to believe such a thing. Because, in part, of its conducive character to the current culture, the acceptability thesis has become the most predominant response to the evidential objection.[32]

The acceptability thesis comes in two main varieties. The first variety is sometimes called "Wittgensteinian fideism," owing to its dependence on Wittgenstein's notion of "language games." For example, in his essay, "The Groundlessness of Belief,"[33] Norman Malcolm argues that one's belief in God, because it is embedded in religion, which is its own "form of life," needs no more justification than does science, which itself is another form of life. This does not, of course, mean that *if* one believes in God, then God does in fact exist. It only means that one's belief in God, since it needs no ground, is perfectly acceptable within its own context. Says Malcolm, "The obsessive concern with the proofs reveals the

31. This is one way that Thomas seeks to prove God's existence. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1:85f.

32. It is probably more accurate to say that the wide *acceptability* of the acceptability thesis is due in part to the culture in which it is presented. It is certainly not the case that many offering such a thesis are doing so because of the culture.

33. Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. 4th ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 391–99.

assumption that in order for religious belief to be intellectually respectable it *ought* to have a rational justification [evidence]. *That* is the misunderstanding. It is like the idea that we are not justified in relying on memory until memory has been proved reliable."[34] Our belief in God, therefore, to put it in Wittgensteinian terminology, is just one part of our religious "language game" and thus is justified by virtue of what it is.

Alvin Plantinga has taken similar tenets of Wittgenstein's and Malcolm's but has situated them differently in order to argue for the same conclusion. The response to the evidential objection is not (or at least need not be) to answer the objection on its own terms. Rather, we may respond by reminding the evidential objector that, contrary to his own basic tenet, we all hold other beliefs that are not in need of evidence in order to be deemed rational or justified. In other words, the evidential objector has, and must have, beliefs that are assumed to be rational and (in that sense) justified even though there has yet to be a good argument for them—beliefs such as "I had an orange for breakfast this morning," or "I did not begin to exist just five minutes ago," or "I, like you, am a person." Surely, if we all have beliefs for which there are no evidential arguments, and if we can have and hold those beliefs rationally, then a belief in the existence of God is perfectly acceptable (though there may be no evidence available for such a belief) if I so choose to believe such a thing.[35]

In the first response to the evidential objection, it is assumed that reason is not in need of faith in order to make its case against that objection. In the second response, it is assumed that belief (or faith) carries, in some way, its own warrant-conditions with it; it is acceptable because of what it, itself, *is* in the context of its own peculiar function.

So, the discussion concerning faith and reason, in its current context, has to do with arguments of acceptability with regard to

34. Ibid., 397.

35. This has been the primary thrust of Plantinga's epistemological development (of which more later) since the late sixties. See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

beliefs or truths that are either beyond (in Malcolm's case) or, perhaps, beside (in Plantinga's case) other beliefs or truths we might accept or believe to be rationally acceptable. The relationship of faith to reason, then, is determined according to the status of "faith-truths" rather than, as in times past, according to the status of reason and its inherent abilities.