
FAITH, REASON AND VULNERABILITY

Michael Pearson

The biblical account of our origins affirms that we were created in God's image, which among other things involved being given authority over the animal kingdom. Indeed many thinkers have asserted that it is precisely the possession of mind that distinguishes us from the animal kingdom and renders us human. It is in the capacity for intelligent decision-making, the ability to accept responsibility, the facility for expressing thought and emotion symbolically, that our supreme value lies. Our rationality is our claim to uniqueness.

However, elsewhere in the biblical record we are informed that we possess another capacity which renders us distinctively human; this is the capacity we call faith. This faith is exercised in our attempts to reach out to God in response to his overtures towards us, and to a lesser extent to reach out in our intimate human relationships.

But these two capacities which do so much to make us the special creatures we are, do, on occasion, come into conflict. Indeed it might be said that this conflict is itself uniquely characteristic of the human condition. Our desire to trust, to form relationships, is tempered by our critical rational faculties. These two capacities sometimes pull in different directions; they vie with each other for our loyalty.

As many thinkers have observed over the centuries, the classic ex-

ample of this is the story of Abraham and Isaac. In the intimacy of his relationship with God, Abraham sensed that he must make a sacrificial offering of his son, Isaac. Yet such an action seemed to run counter to all canons of logic and codes of morality. What sense could it possibly make to slaughter the son long promised? Surely such an action could only do gross violence to a sensitive conscience! Commitment on the one hand, and logic on the other seemed to dictate entirely different courses of action.

A conflict of this sort confronted me in my undergraduate years at the University of London. I did so much want to believe. Yet all the rational procedures in which I was daily being trained urged caution. I must submit all ideological options which presented themselves for acceptance to the closest scrutiny. I wanted to believe but equally I did not want to be duped. I did not want to discover later in life that my desire for security had misled me. I did not want my desire for comfort to distort my picture of what was true.

What follows is an abbreviated account of how I have sought to

reconcile the conflicting claims which presented themselves. It is tentative but it is alive.

Defining Our Terms

First we must define some terms for the purposes of our discussion. It matters little if in general practice you wish to use the following words differently. We need to be clear on how the terms are being used here. I want to contrast *believe* and *know* by affirming that in order to be said to know, the object of our knowledge must be true. One may, however, believe anything however fanciful and unsubstantiated. Similarly we need to distinguish between *proof* and *evidence*; evidence is that which tends to corroborate a particular claim, whereas proof is unassailable. *True* is an adjective which indicates that a proposition accurately describes an individual's psychological state; many people are *certain* about things which clearly appear to us to be untrue. Lastly we might compare *doubt* and *unbelief*. Unbelief is that state of mind which rejects a claim as being untrue; doubt (derived from the same root as *double*) denotes a two-mindedness that considers two or more options as candidates for our acceptance.

With these linguistic matters out of the way we can now proceed to our argument. I want to argue that in all the important pursuits of life, including religion, we cannot know; we can only believe. We

have no proof; we must remain content with evidence. We cannot come to the place where we can demonstrate a claim to be indisputably true, but we can be certain about it. We have to acknowledge that there is an element of doubt, but we can resist unbelief.

Interpreting the Evidence

Some may feel that such a proposal is unduly tentative, that it does not seem to allow the kind of wholeheartedness that the gospel demands of us, that it in some way diminishes commitment. Not at all! In all the important pursuits of life the matter is as I have described it. In politics a prime minister and a leader of the opposition party will disagree not so much about what the facts are as to how to construe them. In the areas of morality and aesthetics the essential difference between opposing camps will derive from how they interpret such evidence as exists. In economics, monetarists (free market economists) and interventionists, faced with the same profile of a nation's fiscal health, will come to radically different conclusions about the appropriate cure for those national ills because of the preconceptions which they bring with them.

Educators support different kinds of reform basically because of their differing views of the nature of man. Administrators conflict over policy decisions because of clashing views about priorities.

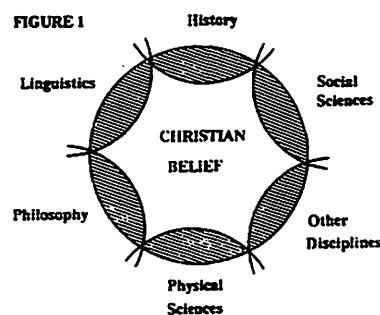
And so it is in matters of religion. People who live and work in all these areas are much more like jurors in a court of law hearing the evidence and reaching a judgement which is informed but possibly flawed, than they resemble a scientist running an experiment in a laboratory and coming up with some statistically reliable claim. These are all areas in which people have to make judge-

ments and commitments, and have to face opposition and sometimes have to die because they challenge the conventional wisdom. The case of Copernicus who rejected the Ptolemaic conception of the universe is a classic example.

Our problems over the relationship of faith and reason in religion derive partly from the spurious authority which we are prone to confer on science. We are inclined to think that the scientific enterprise consists of the discovery by experimental means of atomic facts which can then be laid on the mountain of knowledge, a monolith which will endure forever. But this is to misunderstand science. It comprises rather the establishment of raw data, which must then have a construction imposed upon it. The explanation of that data which demands our acceptance is that which leaves the fewest anomalies. But anomalies there will always be. Science thus always involves the act of interpretation and thus is essentially no different from moral discourse, economics or politics. We are therefore unwise to try to make our religious claims as "respectable" as we assume scientific ones to be. Rather, we should recognize that scientific statements share in the same subjectivity as those in the areas of religion, morals or politics.

Some people, whether the religiously devout or those in the scientific community, will undoubtedly be unhappy about this model because it allows us to "know" far fewer things than we should like. Perhaps it makes us feel insecure. Yet it seems to me that all the important pursuits of life involve our imposing a construction upon that raw data which confronts us in such a way as to leave the fewest anomalies. Or, to put it another way, it demands in us the formation of a world view.

Let us now apply this model specifically to our Christian belief. If we imagine our Christian belief to be represented by a circle, then we have to acknowledge that certain areas of rational activity, certain academic disciplines supply us with evidence which we have to take into consideration, accommodate within our world view. (Figure 1)



The claims made by Christians impinge on many areas of human enquiry; Christians must take seriously evidence provided by these disciplines.

Philosophy poses awkward questions whose validity we have to acknowledge. As adherents of an historical religion, Christians have to take cognisance of the weight of evidence provided by historians. We must acknowledge that social scientists have important contributions to make to our understanding of the origin and maintenance of religious behaviour. Evidence from philology tells us important things about the dating and construction of canonical books. And so on.

It is our job to sift the evidence that presents itself to us, partial though that may be, and accommodate it in our world view. We have to see where the weight of evidence lies; we have to be ready to make modifications to our world view. If our view of the world is substantially accurate we have nothing to fear from this sort of investigation. This procedure has the virtue of allowing us to encounter disturbing pieces of

evidence from a particular discipline without its unduly unsettling our whole belief structure. There will always be anomalies. Our conviction depends on the weight of evidence. It does demand, however, that we be prepared, in principle at least, to relinquish our belief system should the evidence throw up so many anomalies that it no longer makes sense to retain our former view of the world. This is reasonable since it is no more than we ask of other people.

It is at this point that we have to encounter the objection that this approach will lead to a tentativeness in belief which somehow wars against the idea of being "born again." But it seems to me that anybody who is sufficiently committed to the business of finding and maintaining a coherent view of the world is unlikely to fall prey to half-heartedness. The Bible exhorts us to "test all things and hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21), which is not at all the same thing as "testing some things and holding fast that which is traditional."

Making Commitments

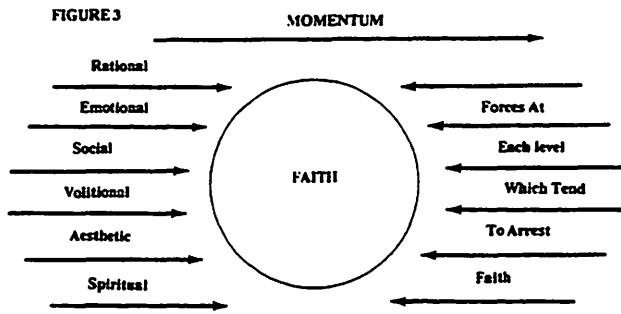
Here we must take a significant step. It is an important part of being rational to recognise that many judgements and commitments that we make, we make on grounds that are far from rational. We may make very plausible rationalisations of our intuitive, emotional and volitional responses but we must admit deep within ourselves that we are far less rational than we pretend to be. An important part of intellectual growth involves making intuitive leaps of the imagination.

Our commitment to a particular religious way will depend a great deal on our emotional selves. In the case of the Christian it will depend on whether the way of

Jesus, and the particular manner in which that is articulated in our own church, satisfies our deepest longings. Here, the emotional verges on the aesthetic: we have to ask ourselves whether the picture of the world painted in the Scriptures is aesthetically satisfying. Further, we have to ask whether the particular embodiment of it in our own church is, in our judgement, appropriate and pleasing. We must also satisfy ourselves that the kinds of ethical imperatives for which Jesus stands are acceptable to us. And if they are in principle, we must ask ourselves whether they are also acceptable

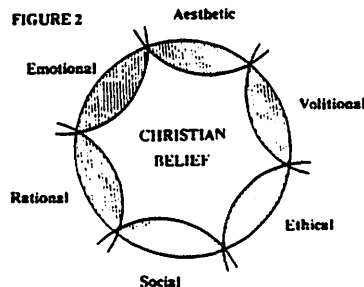
In other words, we must ask ourselves whether the way of Jesus "fits" us, rather in the same way that a preferred coat suits us. Not that it is entirely comfortable but that it is "us", we have chosen it as ours.

Let me offer another model which seems to incorporate all that we have said thus far. Our Christian faith can be likened to the momentum of a ball when it is rolling in a particular direction. (Figure 3) The momentum of faith is sustained by impetus from our intellect, our emotions, our wills, our social selves and so on. However, the momentum is



Faith is the response of our whole being.

in practice. Part of our faith then, lies within our volitional selves, for example, in our willingness to be disturbed, to serve rather than to be served, and so on. Faith is also in part a social phenomenon, and we must therefore ask questions of our social selves. Does the ambience of our particular church satisfy us? And so on. (Figure 2)



The rational is just one of a number of levels at which we respond as we live the life of faith.

reduced when it encounters resistance from various sources. Intellectual objections may create friction and thus reduce the momentum of faith. All kinds of other inner reservations, the desire for acceptance, the unwillingness to exert the will and so on, may diminish the momentum of faith.

Our faith then has various components: intellectual, emotional, social, volitional, aesthetic, ethical and perhaps some others. Faith is a preparedness to act in a certain direction, our willingness to act as if our view of the world is true.

And yet, there is one component of faith which cannot be resolved into any other, a component which I have called "spiritual." I believe that God's

Please turn to page 27

Faith, Reason . . .

Continued from page 13

good Spirit is ceaselessly at work seeking to generate the momentum of faith in all men and women. Sometimes the Spirit will satisfy our intellects, sometimes he (for want of a better personal pronoun) will nurture our emotions, sometimes he will galvanize our wills. Through our reflective reading of the Scriptures, our prayer life, our sharing with others our religious convictions, our worshiping in the company of fellow believers, we allow God's Spirit to maintain the momentum of faith. Sometimes, however, he will act independently of all these. But he will leave no channel unexplored to generate in us that response of trust which we call faith.

When two young people first feel attraction to each other, they will each, unless they are the kind who wear their hearts on their sleeves, cautiously reveal some of their affection in the hope that the other will reciprocate. In this way, they will gradually edge toward greater openness and trust. To do otherwise would be to make themselves vulnerable.

Yet the God of Christianity is a vulnerable God, one who does wear his heart on his sleeve, so to speak. And since we are created in God's image, we too are called to vulnerability. We are called to the vulnerability of sustaining our belief sometimes in the face of plaintive paradoxes which cry to be resolved, of maintaining our trust sometimes in the face of emotional hurt, of engaging the will when we seek respite.

Taking Risks

The life of faith is the life of vulnerability, which brings with it both joy and pain. The life of Jesus is ample testimony to that.

We must choose our own certainties. There is no other way. And remarkably God trusts us enough to do it.

The One who created in us the capacities to reason and to exercise trust does not leave us to ourselves to exploit our potential. He has provided for us the wherewithal to develop our faith—the evidence of the Scriptures, the witness of his good Spirit in human beings, the life of Jesus, the Word made flesh in our friends, the intricate design of the cosmos, our experiences both painful and happy. But he has chosen not to leave the matter unambiguous. There is evidence to weigh, there are judgements to make, there are commitments to be formed. And in the final analysis we have to accept responsibility for our choices: they must truly be ours.

As for me, I have chosen to follow the way of Jesus. Or rather I continue to choose his way, for at times the grip slackens and has to be tightened again. In the face of new evidence—personal, rational or of whatever nature—which a genuinely open mind must always be ready to consider, I must reassess my commitment and choose again to follow the way of Jesus. This is the way to the ideal rightly cherished by Adventists—personal wholeness. The approach I am suggesting involves risk, but then discipleship always did.

We each have to make decisions in their way no less momentous than those which Abraham confronted. Do not be afraid to "examine all things and hold fast that which is good."

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