
When Believers Think

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Teaching university courses in religion, I find my greatest challenges coming from two contrasting sorts of students. Some students feel that their religious convictions are so obviously true that they need no examination at all. Others insist that religion is so obviously false that it does not deserve serious consideration.

I encountered two students years ago who epitomized these opposing attitudes. "Dan" was a tall, dark ministerial student, who hated every class he took from me, and the program unfortunately required him to take several. He disliked thinking seriously about religion, and his disdain for the process was obvious. He sat in the middle of the classroom with a look of studied boredom on his face. He never took notes, never asked a question, never spoke except to complain that theological ideas were nothing but mind-games played by misguided people.

"Dave" was equally disenchanted with his courses from me, but for entirely different reasons. Convinced that religion had nothing to recommend it to thinking people like himself, he openly ridiculed anyone who believed the stuff. And he accused those who defended it, like me, of rationalizing a hopeless position because they were either unwilling to think or else afraid to let people know what they really believed.

As these extremes demonstrate, the relation between faith and reason must be defined with great care. In response to both the Dans and the Daves in my classes I always present religion as something that both needs and deserves careful investigation. I argue that faith and reason are much closer than

many people think, although there are very important differences between them. In other words, I urge believers to think, and I encourage thinkers to believe.

Reconciling Faith and Reason

The relation between faith and reason is one of the oldest concerns in Christianity, and it is a question that refuses to go away. For centuries Christians generally took the importance of faith for granted and questioned the value of reason. In the modern world, however, the situation is reversed. About 200 years ago a momentous change in Western thought took place, and the burden of proof shifted to the other side. As one of Tom Stoppard's characters puts it, "There is presumably a calendar date—a moment—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, secretly, the noes had it."¹ Today most educated people take for granted the value of reason, while the status of faith is problematic. They call faith to account for itself at the bar of reason, not the other way around. The force of this challenge typically puts believers on the defensive. Consequently, many Christians regard serious thinking as a threat to faith, and they look for ways to avoid it.

The time has come for us to abandon this defensive posture and give the relation of faith and reason another look. The fact is that reason is not necessarily a threat to faith, but a tremendous help to it. For one thing, careful thinking can strengthen religious commitment, once faith is already present. For another, it can open the way for

faith, helping to prepare people for religious commitment. Let's examine both contributions.

According to the Bible, careful thinking plays a central role in religious experience. Several passages describe growth in knowledge as an important element in the Christian life. The letter of 2 Peter, for example, exhorts its readers to "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love."² Acts of the Apostles praises the Jews of Berea, "for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so."³

In Philippians Paul prays that his readers' love "may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."⁴ Colossians contains the similar prayer that its readers will "be filled with the knowledge of [God's] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."⁵

The Bible also criticizes Christians for a lack of intellectual growth. The letter of Hebrews, for example, bemoans its readers' failure to advance beyond a rudimentary grasp of God's word, and urges them to go on to maturity.⁶ Similarly, Paul calls Christians in Corinth "babes in Christ," because they are still of the flesh and therefore unready for solid food.⁷

The New Testament also describes the role of understanding

in the Christian life. It leads to a life of fruitful activity. It contributes to the general upbuilding of the Christian community. And most important, it strengthens faith. Careful thinking increases comprehension, and increased comprehension deepens religious commitment. Colossians 2:2 links together the ideas of knowledge, understanding, and conviction, with the hope that Christians will "come to the full wealth of conviction which understanding brings" (N.E.B.).

Ellen G. White urges Christians to examine their beliefs carefully in order to deepen spiritual confidence and meet opposition and criticism. In fact, she says this is the only way to keep pace with the advancement of truth itself. "We must not think," she states, "'Well, we have all the truth, we understand the main pillars of our faith, and we may rest on this knowledge.' The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light."⁸ She even speaks of heaven as a school where education will continue for eternity, since there will continually arise "new truths to comprehend."⁹

Dealing With Doubt

Besides helping us understand what we believe, careful thinking can also help us respond to questions or doubts about our beliefs. The typical path of personal faith is not a smooth, uninterrupted growth in confidence. There are hills and valleys in every religious experience. Sooner or later, we all meet with trials and obstacles that test our trust in God. When this happens, reason can help us. Finding answers to difficult questions about our beliefs can greatly strengthen our confidence. In fact, many people believe that dispelling doubt is the most important contribution reason can make to religious experience.¹⁰

Besides increasing commitment and overcoming doubt, reason also affects the way we look at our beliefs. Under careful examination the perceived importance of certain beliefs can increase or decrease. Beliefs we once placed at the center of our faith may move to the periphery, and beliefs first thought to be secondary may assume primary importance. Rational scrutiny can also affect the relative confidence we have in certain beliefs. People occasionally discover that some of their long-held ideas are not as well-founded as they earlier thought. And sometimes they find that the evidence to support certain ideas is more impressive than it first appeared.

Careful thinking often reveals that the traditional arguments for our beliefs are inadequate. But it can also lead to the discovery of other arguments that give them a stronger basis than ever. Finally, when Christians think carefully, they sometimes find that the entire dimension of belief becomes less important within their overall religious life. After examining their beliefs, people may discover that personal relationships, sharing the life of the religious community, is more important to them than the specific doctrines they hold.

As these variations in the effects of rational inquiry indicate, there is always a risk involved in thinking seriously about faith. You can never guarantee the outcome. Careful thinking can develop answers to questions, discover further evidence to support beliefs, increase understanding and deepen commitment. But the same activity can also expose inade-

quate arguments, raise questions, introduce doubt, and weaken confidence.

In view of its potential liabilities, some people feel that the benefits of rational inquiry are not worth the risk, and they refuse to entertain questions about their beliefs. In the long run, however, this approach is doomed to fail. Sooner or later, truth will "out," as they say, difficult questions will arise. And if these questions emerge after attempts to stifle the process of inquiry, the threat to faith can be enormous. People who finally start asking questions often suspect those who discouraged them from doing so of deliberately trying to hide something. So, whatever the risks of subjecting our beliefs to serious inquiry, the risks of refusing to do so are greater.

Besides the fact that it won't work—not in the long run—there is a more fundamental reason to reject a protective strategy in matters of faith. Refusing to examine our beliefs is incompatible with the inherent confidence of faith. Faith involves the conviction that you can stake your life on the object of your



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trust. Mature believers do not always feel a special burden to offer intellectual arguments for their faith. But they are never reluctant to examine their beliefs when the situation calls for it, and they never discourage others from inquiring into them. People who refuse to reflect on their religious convictions, and who are unable or unwilling to offer any reasons for their beliefs, convey the impression that they are either not clear about what they believe or that the confidence they profess to have in their beliefs really isn't there.

Although the search for evidence to support religious beliefs ordinarily takes place where religious commitment is already present, careful thinking sometimes prepares the way for religious commitment. Consider the best-known attempts to provide rational support for religion, for example, the classical arguments for the reality of God. They point to the existence of a supreme being who could reach out, if he chose to, and establish a personal relationship with us. The results of this inquiry are minimal, compared to anything like a full-fledged doctrine of God, but they can help to prepare the way for conscious religious commitment. By demonstrating that general human experience contains evidence that God exists, these arguments refute the familiar objection that religion is nothing but a private prejudice or a personal intuition. By thus removing some of the obstacles that prevent people from respecting religion, reason can establish faith as an option for thinking persons.

Important as the contribution of reason is to faith, it would be a serious mistake to overestimate it. Careful thinking can assist faith in several significant ways, but faith is never just a product of rational thought. Logic alone can never take someone all the way from unbelief to the point where trust in God is the only possible outcome.

The Limits of Reason

Several things limit the role that reason plays in faith, foremost among them the facts of experience. The origins of faith are notoriously obscure. People virtually never come to believe through a straightforward process of rational investigation, and it is doubtful that philosophical arguments have ever converted anybody.¹¹ Instead of logical evidence, the factors that lead to faith are largely non-rational in character. They are often vague impressions, the subtle influence of other persons, or the special emotions that certain experiences awaken.

These observations agree with the biblical account of conversion. Jesus compares the new birth to the wind, whose origin and destination are imperceptible. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."¹² If conversion came about through a process of rational investigation, we would be able to provide a clear, step-by-step account of its arrival. But we never can. We can chart the general course of faith development and observe the characteristics it exhibits in different situations and stages of life, but the actual emergence of faith is inscrutable. It always has an element of mystery.

Something that further defines the role of reason in faith is the fact that the quality of faith, the depth of personal religious commitment, is not directly proportional to intellectual ability. Extensive learning does not guarantee a strong religious commitment. In fact, the opposite is often true. People can become less interested in religious matters as they become more educated. We often refer to the "simple faith" of children as an outstanding example of religious devotion, and

a child's trust is typically untroubled by the complexities that occupy older people.

Besides the facts of experience just mentioned, the nature of faith itself limits the contribution reason can make. Faith presupposes personal freedom, and freedom requires genuine alternatives. If trust in God were the only available position, if reason permitted no other possibility, then faith would be nothing more than admitting the obvious. It would not be a free response to God's saving love. Moreover, it would also contradict the giftedness of salvation. If human reason could produce faith, then faith would represent a human achievement, a type of intellectual works righteousness, not a response to divine grace.

The notion that reason can produce religious commitment also conflicts with the degree of confidence characteristic of genuine faith. Faith involves complete confidence. It is the trusting certainty that its object is totally reliable. In contrast, rational investigation never achieves more than a high degree of probability, at least in matters of personal significance. So, rational inference cannot produce the trusting certainty of faith. This is why we think of faith as going beyond the available evidence. It affirms and trusts in more than reason by itself could ever prove.

The fact that reason does not produce faith has important consequences for personal religious experience. Since the results of such investigation are not completely conclusive, there is always room for doubt. We never reach the point where we are so secure in our convictions that we are beyond the possibility of losing them, so close to God that we could never drift away. Just as each development in our experience brings new evidence to support our trust in God, each phase of life presents new challenges to our confidence

in God.

The Bible's most outstanding examples of faith faced their greatest tests as mature believers. Job and Abraham had their faith severely tried after they had been close to God for many years. This supports a point that existentialist Christian theologians have often made. Faith is never a permanent achievement. It is not something we acquire once and for all, but something we must affirm again and again in the concrete experiences of life.

The bottom line is that reason contributes to faith in important but limited ways. By showing that faith is intellectually responsible, reason can prepare the way for faith and it can strengthen faith once it is present. So it is a grave mistake to disregard what reason has to say to religion. At the same time, it is equally mistaken to overemphasize

the significance of reason for faith. Believers have a valuable opportunity and a solemn responsibility to think. But there will always be more to faith than thinking alone can accomplish.

NOTES

1. Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1972), p. 25.
2. 2 Peter 1:5-7. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.
3. Acts 17:11.
4. Philippians 1:9.
5. Colossians 1:9-10.
6. Hebrews 5:11-13; 6:1.
7. 1 Corinthians 3:2.
8. *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), p. 33.
9. *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), pp. 107, 111.
10. In a chapter entitled, "What to Do With Doubt," Ellen G. White encourages people to look for evidence

to support their faith. "God never asks us to believe," she asserts, "without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant" (*Steps to Christ* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, n.d.], p. 105).

11. This does not invalidate the enterprise of formulating such proofs, in spite of what some people think. (See, for example, John Hick, Introduction to *The Existence of God*, John Hick, ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1964], p. 5.)

12. John 3:8.

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