

## OCCC ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL -13 JAN 1991

### TOPIC ONE: DOES FAITH MEAN INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE?

#### I) The Problem

A) Personal Doubt- Does God really exist? How do I know Christianity is really true?

1) Causes:

- a) encounter with pluralism (especially for an over-protected Christian);
- b) recalcitrant experience that is hard to be interpreted by Christian faith, e.g. suffering;
- c) challenge by others' rationalist criticisms

2) Some responses:

- a) Dogmatism. Refusal to acknowledge the problems.
- b) Nagging doubts but suppressed. Problems "shelved".
- c) Anti-intellectualism. "We can't exalt reason over God."
- d) "Fideism". "The only solution is to ask for more faith. Unbelief is a sin. So you must repent."

B) Challenge of non-Christians to justify your faith

Some responses:

- a) The non-Christians are blinded by sin. Their questions are only excuses to cover up their rebellion against God.
- b) We can't reason with them. We can only preach to them.

C) Unsatisfactoriness of the Above Responses

- 1) For the Christian, suppressed doubt may lead to weakening of faith & incapacitation, & fragmentation of different areas of Christian life.
- 2) There may be honest seekers & honest questions.
- 3) The intellectual respectability of faith is prematurely surrendered. The intellectual imbecility of Christians may be a genuine stumbling block to others.

#### II) Two Antithetical Positions

A) Rationalism

- 1) I am using the word in the broad sense. So here it is an umbrella term including both Continental rationalism & British empiricism.
- 2) The central tenet is that the only sources of knowledge are human reason & experience. There is a foundation of our cognitive structure: self-evident truths (e.g. logical principles) & empirical knowledge.
- 3) All knowledge claims have to be justified by these foundational truths either by deduction or induction. Those claims who can't be validated in this way are irrational.
- 4) Usually this position is coupled with a kind of "ethics of belief": it is *wrong* to believe on insufficient evidence. So if faith means such a belief, it becomes the pristine example of "intellectual sin".
- 5) There are Christian apologists who uphold such epistemological positions. They,

however, assert that the existence of God & the authority of the Bible (or the Church for Catholics) can be demonstrated. Such is the traditional project of "natural theology". Thomas Aquinas. Descartes. John Locke. Evangelical apologetics.

6) However it is more common for a rationalist to be a sceptic. Their conclusions are that natural theology is a failure & religious beliefs are unjustified (& for some unjustifiable or even meaningless). So religious believers are committing intellectual sins; they are intellectually dishonest & so on. David Hume. Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian?"

#### B) Fideism

1) Fideism either denies that reason is the *only* source of knowledge or that it is a source at all. The former approach acknowledges the legitimacy of reason in its own realm but denies that it is capable of adjudicating ultimate truth claims. The latter appeals to sceptical considerations & tries to show that reason can't yield any knowledge at all. Knowledge is only possible on faith.

2) The central idea is "revelation". God is the source of reason. How can his revelation be judged by human reason? So divine revelation has to be self-authenticated. Have you ever seen a man using a candle flame to look for the sun? This is absurd. To look for the sun, one has only to *open his eyes!* The only way to deal with revelation is to be humble, to open our spiritual eyes, to repent & to believe.

3) God is a *Personal Subject*, not an object to be manipulated. I-Thou relationship vs. I-It relationship. (Martin Buber) A subject can only be known when he wants to reveal himself. Similarly, through God alone can God be known.

### III) Evaluation of Rationalism

#### A) Shortcomings

1) The problem of justification- threat of infinite regress.

2) The insecurity of the "foundation"- logical truths alone can't give us any factual knowledge but "empirical knowledge" is hardly immune to doubts. Sceptical arguments: dreaming hypothesis, deception by Cartesian demon, brain-in-a-vat, etc. Faith in a broad sense is a condition of rationality.

3) The unduly narrow concept of experience.

4) The problem of induction- unduly narrow concept of reason. cf. "Inference to the Best Explanation".

5) Unrealistic account of science. The role of faith in science.

#### B) Comments- distinguish several aspects of reason:

a) formal reason: principles of logic, reasoning & interpretation.

b) creative reason: the urge to seek unity, coherence, depth, & intelligibility;

c) critical reason: the urge to test, to examine truth claims, to demonstrate consistency, to find adequate evidence, & to debunk. Formal reason seems to be a necessary condition of thought & language. It is a tool & is not antithetical to faith. Both creative reason & critical reason have to be guided by the faith in the power of reason, rationality of reality & the general reliability of experience. So they are not antithetical to faith either. So properly understood reason is not the opposite of faith. Contrarily they are intimately interrelated.

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- 4) The problem of induction- unduly narrow concept of reason. of. "Inference to the Best Explanation".
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B) Comments- distinguish several aspects of reason:

#### IV) Evaluation of Fideism

##### A) Shortcomings

- 1) The problem of the plurality of revelation claims.
- 2) The consequent intellectual fragmentation is far from desirable. Faith should involve the whole person, including his reason. (Mk 12.30- love God with all your *mind*!)
- 3) The Biblical command to "be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1P 3.15). The problem of apologetics.

##### B) Comments

- 1) Yet it is clear that the general position is in accord with the Biblical witness which claims to be revelation. "God has spoken" is the message of the Bible. (cf. Heb 1.1-2)
- 2) Knowledge of God is a kind of personal knowledge. This is an insight not to be lost. (Jn 1.14, 14.6, 8.32; Rm 8.14-16)

#### V) The Third Alternative: Faith Seeks Understanding

- 1) So it seems that we should seek for a balanced position which accords primacy to revelation while reserving a legitimate role for reason. The approach "faith seeks understanding" tries to achieve this. It recognizes that the primacy of religious faith: a) because it is continuous with the various non-religious kinds of knowledge claims which are based on faith alike;  
b) because faith is the only appropriate response to a revelation that holds us captive.
- 2) Yet this faith is not one that disdains reason or claims of experience. Contrarily it exercises fully the capacity of reason:
  - a) it has no fear in using formal reason; Christians welcome clear thoughts, valid arguments, etc. as others.
  - b) by exercising creative reason, faith tries to demonstrate that it alone provides explanation of all the facets of human experience. It alone provides the most coherent & intelligible worldview & achieves the highest kind of unity: experience, goodness, personality integration, community, etc.
  - c) yet it is not dogmatic. Exactly because faith is convinced of itself that it can apply critical reason fearlessly. It shows its "grounds", faces criticisms, compares with other "faiths", & constantly improves itself.
- 3) It recognizes the fallibility & limitations of human reason. There are always problems. Yet a Christian can honestly live with them while seeking intellectual integration constantly. His certitude ultimately lies in the self-authenticating light of Christ's revelation & his continuously growing life in God.

## QUOTES:

1) "Without the belief that it is possible to grasp the reality with our theoretical constructions, without the belief in the inner harmony of our world, there could be no science. This belief is & always will remain the fundamental motive for all scientific creation." (Einstein quoted by Stanley Jaki, *The Role of Faith in Physics*, Zygon 1967:190)

2) "Reason cannot walk by its own light, & must seek the illumination of some principle of interpretation which reason itself does not contain. ... The adequacy of any particular "faith-principle" must be judged by its ability to order the whole range of *data* supplied by the empirical sciences (including theology) in a rational & coherent philosophy of life & the world." (Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics*, p.231)

3) "Reason, which is blind & helpless in questions of ultimate truth until it is illuminated again by the light from which it came, is nevertheless that capacity ... which through divine assistance recognizes the truth when it comes to us; will is the capacity which through divine help acts upon the truth that is thus brought to it in the operation of the divinely enlightened conscience; & the result is ... faith. ... it is when he makes the response of faith that he becomes a truly rational & free being. It is in the response to the address of the rational word of Him who is the Supreme Reason that man learns to answer reason with reason, & thus the divine image & likeness is restored in him. Thus, it is impossible that there should be conflict between faith & reason, when faith is truly response to the source & essence of the universal reason." (Ibid., p.240)

4) "verifying evidence cannot consist in certain predelineated events which we observe. For God is unique; he makes an unconditional claim upon our devotion. To make him prove his existence through the production of happy effects would be to subvert the affirmation; it would be a subordination of God's will to ours rather than of ours to God's. ... The affirmation of God, if genuine, is a practical affirmation which runs out into the activity of integrating one's own will with God's. ... We verify the affirmation of God's existence, therefore, by entering into life-in-God & finding that the life can indeed be lived & lived in all circumstances & that it blesses." (E.H. Henderson, *Valuing in Knowing God: an Interpretation of Austin Farrer's Religious Epistemology*, *Modern Theology* 1985:178-9)