

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Revelation and Reason.¹

IT is often assumed that there must be a cleavage between revelation and reason and therefore an inherent mutual incompatibility between faith, which is the human response to the fact of revelation, and that mode of thinking which characterizes the normal working of the intelligence. A schoolboy is once said to have defined faith as believing what you know to be untrue, but that is plain dishonesty and betokens a youthful cynicism which we may hope is not typical. A more serious problem is implied in Tennyson's words in *In Memoriam*, written in memory of his friend Arthur Hallam (1833).

We have but faith; we cannot know:
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from Thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Faith is here set in opposition to true knowledge, which can come only through the senses. Since religion is concerned with God, who cannot be measured with human instruments, faith can make no claim to be knowledge. Tennyson, however, was too deeply religious a man to cast off religion with contempt. He embodies in himself the whole tragic struggle of Victorian England to hold on to the Christian verities and at the same time to come to terms with the ever increasing triumphs of science in the investigation of the physical and the biological worlds. We are sometimes told that the battle is now over, that science and religion, like the wolf and the lamb in the Isaianic prophecy, are now lying down together in peace. There is reason to think that this optimism is rather premature. It is abundantly evident, of course, that the impulse to seek the truth about the physical world, which lies behind scientific activity, and the impulse to worship must be truly united unless man is to be torn in pieces by an internal civil war.

The first necessity of an adequate discussion of this topic is a careful definition of terms. Reason may be identified with logic in the narrow sense. The Oxford English Dictionary defines reason as the "intellectual faculty, characteristic especially of human beings, by which conclusions are drawn from premises." To logic in the formal sense may be added mathematics, which many have regarded as the rational activity par excellence. Now

¹ An address given before the Torch Club, Hamilton, Ont.

if this is what is meant by reason, it follows at once that certain important data of human experience are removed from its province. Man's experience of God, if such an experience be possible, is certainly not the result of a syllogistic chain of reasoning, but neither is my conviction that love is better than hate. The appreciation and knowledge of beauty is certainly not logical or mathematical in the strict sense, though a drama or a symphony may have an intellectual structure capable of giving a deep satisfaction to the mind's natural love of order and pattern. Moral judgments as to what is right or wrong are not reached by logical or mathematical reasoning, but spring from an intuition that a certain type of life is worth living because it embodies an intrinsic goodness. This intuition of goodness is not capable of demonstration by rational argument. If a man argues that Hitler is a nobler character than Jesus of Nazareth, he cannot be dislodged by logical argument alone from that position. Neither can the person who holds that ragtime is superior to Bach. Thus, if a start is made with such a narrow definition of reason, then no alternative is left but to insist that religion, art, and morality are non-rational or irrational activities, inasmuch as they cannot be either proved or demonstrated or explained in exclusively logical or mathematical terms.

Is it, however, truly rational to adopt a definition of reason which excludes some of the most important activities from the realm of rational activity? Bertrand Russell, for example in the recent *History of Western Philosophy*, tells us dogmatically that all definite knowledge belongs to science. This means that my knowledge that love is better than hate is not reliable knowledge because it cannot be checked in the laboratory or sifted in the test-tube. A man's knowledge of his wife's affection is likewise not genuine knowledge because it cannot be measured, and weighed, and the result expressed in an equation. It is difficult to believe that men will remain indefinitely content with such a meagre and barren definition of knowledge.

A wider definition of reason would seem to be called for, and there is considerable support for this among the great philosophers of both ancient and modern times. Reason may then be defined, with the late Prof. A. N. Whitehead, as that intellectual activity which "seeks to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted." In this broader sense, the highest function of reason is philosophy with its endeavour to find coherence and significance in all the data of human experience, not only those data amenable to logical and mathematical treatment. The philosopher, thus understood, will examine man as thinker, worshipper, lover, artist, and moral being, seeking to take

all aspects of human experience into account and not solving problems by the simple expedient of explaining them away. This attempt at intellectual synthesis distinguishes all the great philosophers. According to this definition of reason, science becomes the working of human reason upon a given set of selected data, abstracted for the purposes of study from the total field of experience. The difference between the philosopher and the scientist is not that one is more rational than the other. It is that the philosopher considers the whole, whereas science considers the part. Such a broad definition of reason would therefore seem to be both legitimate and more helpful than one which would restrict it exclusively to the logical and mathematical activities of the human mind.

What then, of *revelation*? If the ordinary intelligent layman is asked to define the distinction between reason and revelation, he would probably be inclined to say that reason, however defined, suggests man's ability to discover and find out things for himself, whereas revelation suggests something given to man which he could never have discovered for himself by the unaided exercise of his own human powers. There are some who would broaden the term revelation to include almost every increase of knowledge. They would say that discovery and revelation are correlative terms and that either can be used with equal legitimacy according to the point of view from which a subject is approached. The remarkable development of the natural sciences from the Renaissance onwards, looked at from man's standpoint, is an amazing progress of continual discovery by man of the nature of reality as manifested in the physical world. On the other hand, the Christian thinker may claim that it is also a wonderful revelation by God to the enquiring mind of man. It may be granted that this is a fruitful and legitimate method of approach and yet it may still be preferable to restrict the term revelation to those special disclosures by God of his character and purpose, which have given their distinctive character to the so-called revealed religions. There are, of course, those who contend that there are no such disclosures which go beyond the limits of the human mind and that there is nothing man cannot find out if he is given enough time. Let us seek an answer to that position.

To those brought up in the Christian tradition, the term revelation at once suggests certain definite conceptions. The Bible is spoken of as containing God's revelation, or mention is made of a special revelation in a certain Jesus Christ. This revelation is further claimed to be unique in a sense not to be used of any other historical figure. Such a claim must provoke in the thoughtful individual certain fundamental questions :

- (1) What grounds have we for believing that the Bible does give us an authentic revelation of God to man?
- (2) What do we learn from this revelation which we could not, sooner or later, have learned for ourselves by using our native capacities?
- (3) What relation does man's rational thinking bear to this alleged supernatural revelation which transcends man's natural capacities of intelligence and understanding?

By dealing with this last question first, we hope to shed some light upon the other two.

What, then, do we find to be the relation of reason to revelation in Christian and non-Christian thought of the Christian era. As M. Etienne Gilson, the distinguished French thinker and Thomist scholar has pointed out, there have been historically, three different ways of envisaging this problem.

This is the position of those who hold that divine revelation gives man all the knowledge he needs to have, and that it is superfluous, if not blasphemous, for man to seek to extend his knowledge beyond these limits.

Man, according to this school, has in his rational intelligence the capacity to obtain true and reliable knowledge. Anything which falls outside the scope of the rational understanding cannot be knowledge. Therefore there can be no such thing as extra-rational revelation. If there is such a thing, it is a personal matter peculiar to certain individuals and the knowledge thus supposed to be revealed is quite unreliable since it is not amenable to any rational tests.

Since both have their source in God there cannot be an ultimate conflict between the two.

There is a sense in which the primacy of revelation is accepted by all Christians, if by that is meant that God has disclosed Himself to men in a way which goes beyond what man could have discovered by his unaided powers. If the primacy of revelation means the treatment of Scripture as an infallible text-book of science as well as of morals and religion, then it must be rejected as involving a mechanical and unsatisfactory conception of revelation to which the Biblical evidence itself does not compel us. The primacy of reason must likewise be rejected since it rules out of court *a priori* the witness of man's religious experience and even the possibility of a special revelation by God of Himself to men. The solution must therefore lie somewhere in the third view. Can the Christian have the best of both worlds, combining in one glorious unity reason and revelation? The confidence of Aquinas rests on the conviction that the intellect of man has been left essentially untouched by sin and its conse-

quences. If this is the case, then reason is an uncorrupted instrument for the discovery of truth and must be the final arbiter. This apotheosis of reason became detached from its theological setting at the time of the Renaissance and has since produced the humanism of a John Dewey with his extra-ordinary confidence in man's ability to shape and control his environment and human society by purely rational methods and scientific techniques. When Augustine said, "Believe in order that you may understand," he was not taking up a position hostile to reason as such. He was realistic enough to see that faith is a condition of true intellectual understanding of the world, and by faith he did not mean a blind leap in the dark but the acceptance of Christ as the clue to the meaning of history. The acceptance of Christ is not a *sacrificium intellectus*, but the only condition which makes it possible for the mind of man to operate truly within a life no longer disordered by sin. The revelation of God in Christ is not then an offence to reason. It is rather the indispensable clue without which reason must group in vain for the secret of human life and destiny. The clue once found, however, the reason of man will once again prove to be his greatest blessing and glory instead of the source of his misery and his inner confusion.

R. F. ALDWINCKLE.

Self-Harvest, by P. A. Spalding. (Independent Press, 6s.)

This small but informative book gives the uninitiated an entertaining introduction to the English diarists and their work. Mr. Spalding seeks to explain the psychology of the diarists and their motives in writing their journals. He classifies them according to their motives. Numerous extracts from every type of diary add to the value and interest of the book. If there is one small blemish in this otherwise enjoyable book it is due to the author's unwillingness to follow his own advice. Mr. Spalding urges that if we are to appreciate fully the diarists we must discover what was important for them and accept it. He seems able to do this for the amoral or shameless (his own terms) Pepys and Boswell but not for the fanatical, and, it must be admitted, sometimes morbidly scrupulous Puritans.

F. H. COCKETT.