THE FAITH WE THINK

P. Dale Neufer

At the heart of the Christian faith is the desire for a reasonable faith, one that can be clearly discerned and decisively lived. Jesus urged his disciples to love God with all their *minds*. Paul encourged his friends in Rome not to be conformed to this world but to be "transformed by the renewal of your mind. . . ." The thirst for a discerning faith, however, will not be quenched by appeal to reason alone. Near the turn of the century one philosopher wrote that "life is richer and deeper than speculation, and contains implicitly the principles by which we live."[1] On the other hand, another philosopher in more recent years has written that in religion "knowledge is preferable to ignorance. Whatever inhibits human thinking or detracts from its worth is denied by this. Whatever encourages or adds to the efficiency of human thinking is affirmed and accepted."[2] In differing degrees then, reason is seen as having a crucial, though not exclusive, role to play in the search for religious truth.

In this article I propose to explore briefly the role of reason in religion with the hope of showing reason's continued importance in searching for a thoughtful, livable faith. First, I will survey the central role of thought in our makeup as human beings. Then I will discuss how we might make this search, despite our limited knowledge, and in the process develop a view of imperative faith. Lastly, I will consider the role of religious truth and how to test an imperative faith that can be thoughtfully declared and creatively lived.

I. I Am, therefore, I Think

The statue of "The Thnker" by Auguste Rodin displays more than simply a nude man in a pensive mood asking himself, "Let's see, where did I put my clothes?" Clothing has been a basic necessity for a long time, but likely no longer than the human awareness of the power of thought.

Thinking simply is a way of arranging ideas in the mind. When in *Camelot* the aging King Arthur seemed to be in the way of everyone, someone said, "Arthur, you've got to stop thinking thoughts!" This continues to be a tall order for both king and commoner. Remember in childhood the game of trying to think about *not* thinking? Survival as human beings is an option only for those who learn to plant and irrigate creative thought, who find new ways to rekindle the soul in each new circumstance. Experiences, like a stream, keep flowing through life, but devoid of the power of thought, life will be little more than a dry river.

Many like Hamlet have hinged their being or not being on relentless pondering leading to more deliberate, if not more intelligent, action. René Descartes

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[1]Borden Parker Bowne, *Theism* (New York: American Book Company, 1887), p. 18.

[2]William H. Bernhardt, "Truth in Religion," *The Iliff Review* (Fall, 1965), p. 33.

offers the dictum, "I think, therefore I am." Jacob Bronowski suggests that the reverse of the Cartesian formula may well be closer to the truth, namely "I *am*, therefore I *think*." He argues that the power to think developed from the propensity in human beings to respond more slowly to impulses compared with other animals, thereby enabling the human being "to get at what the message says and to separate it from the emotional charge which the message also carried."[3] This capacity in time led individuals to develop foresight, then simple tools, then internalization of thought, and finally a language which helped them not only in hunting but in separating themselves from the whole world around them. Over a long period of time the human being became the *thinking* creature.

Every time I see the sign with the word, "THINK," I want to ask someone, "Think about *what*?" Thought does not occur in a vacuum, nor are thoughts written on a clean chalk board of the mind. Thoughts are the continuing outgrowth of the mental process consisting in perceiving or apprehending a changing world through the limited, often fallible, human senses. We all live in the same world, but we see it from uniquely different vantage points. The difference between perspectives varies from one person to another, but the great difference is in the perceiver.

The ideas of the mind may be perceived in three dimensions of depth, of breadth, and of height. First, the *depth* of a perceived thought, as memory, enabled the hunter long ago, for example, to have the advantage over larger, often swifter animals. The hunter could remember previous hunts and thereby profit from both the successes and the failures. Ideas of the mind with *breadth* have the capacity to relate often disparate ideas in various combinations or new syntheses. This capacity opens the windows of the mind and drives back the shadows of uncertainty by making the mind more perceptive to the novel experiences of each new day. The dimension of *height*, as the ability to perceive the emotional content of an idea, adds satisfaction if not ecstasy to thinking, like the thrill of solving a math problem after struggling with it for a long time, or the joy of sensing an ultimate meaning to life from visions of ever new heights through serious reflection and meditation.[4]

Life offers most people a multitude of experiences, such as peace and conflict, integration and separation, friendship and loneliness, growth and decline, health and illness, life and death. Experiences of satisfaction, wholeness, meaning, joy, transcendence, are all shared by many of every age. Courage to change or to accept the unacceptable, to love or to hate, to serve the self or to serve others, to believe or to doubt, to win or to lose — all these and many more experiences are familiar to daily human life.

We are particularly interested in the experience of religion in life, especially the role of reason in religion. When religion is broadly defined to take into account all kinds of human experiences, three general features may be discerned: the

[3]*The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 31.

[4]See Badley Hanson, *The Call of Silence: Discovering Christian Meditation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1980).

experience or event itself, a reinterpretation of thoughtful response to the experience, and the integration of the event into the flow of life through meaningful expression. The event itself may be a private, inner experience, or a shared, public experience. It may be reinterpreted along broad categories of meaning as the world, God, and salvation. These responses to life experiences may then be integrated with ongoing experiences, leading to both inward reverence and receptivity as well as outward expressions of adjustment, appreciation, commitment, and caring. The process of experiencing, reinterpreting, and integrating interacts constantly in a continuing search for meaingful life.

Through the thinking process, in short, we human beings rise above the human limitations of time and space as we deal with the seemingly endless possibilities of life. The religious experience is enriched by remembering, relating, and involving ourselves in the past, the present, and the future. Greater understanding accrues through continuing reinterpretation and the integration of these exepriences with a continuing life of thought and action. Threatening experiences as they appear may be met more maturely, and the appreciative experiences the more deeply felt and cherished. The key is the role of the mind in the continuing search for a viable faith enabling us to experience, reinterpret, and integrate. How we make this search with our limited knowledge, the kind of faith we need, will be discussed next.

II. Faith as Belief, Faith as Trust

Simply living from day to day makes everyone a believer of sorts. No one is sure what lies around the next corner. Sensing this, we can freeze in our tracks while life goes on, or barge blindly ahead at greatly accelerated risk, or try to go home again, which may not be as easy as it sometimes seems. Some form of faith is needed, whether a scientist working on a hunch or a seer following a vision. Faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," seems to be a daily necessity. Long ago Elijah had a belief that the God of Israel would come in fire at Mt. Carmel — and on time! Einstein in this century had to believe in his own new axioms by which he in turn challenged some older ones held by others. In contrast, if Hitler had believed in a theory held by Albert Einstein, a Jew, about the splitting of an atom, this one belief might have changed the outcome of World War II and altered history for centuries.

Now faith may be affirmed in two ways, as a declaration or as an imperative. We may say, for example, "Tomorrow will be a rainy day." Unless we are a rainmaker or a meteorologist, the declaration is likely to make little or no difference if, in fact, tomorrow is sunny. On the other hand, if we affirm, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," this is more than a simple cognitive declaration. It is an affirmation of faith-for-sure, a volitional imperative calling for response in the believer, not simply in what is perceived.

The processes of religious thinking involve not only cognitive but volitional effort. When Abram left the land of his birth for a new land promised by God, his

response involved not only his cognitive powers of hearing the message, planning the trip, and surviving on the fringes of the Arabian desert, but his volitional powers of following the call to fulfillment. Or, when Jesus called his disciples to follow him, their decisions were both cognitive and volitional. On the other hand, the rich young ruler was to be drawn by the teachings and personality of Jesus yet he failed willfully to make the life-changing decision.

Imperative or volitional faith may also be of two kinds: the belief that is held without question or the belief firmly held that is nonetheless open to further questioning in the light of old and new experiences. Faith of the first kind refers mainly to an assurance given (*fides*), as a binding contract, or a confession to be maintained as authoritative. Faith in the second sense places emphasis on faith as an ongoing trust or confidence (*fiducia*) while still in the process of testing, like the trust of the prodigal son's father, or the scientific testing and retesting of an hypothesis.

The first clues about the world for a newborn infant come usually from parents or their surrogates. Since what they do for us from the start, from bottles to diapers to shelter and comfort, is necessary for our very survival, they easily and quickly become our authority figures. Somehow we learn to trust them without question. Thus early on we are prone to affirm an unquestioning faith with a blind assurance.

While many persons go through turbulent adolescent years by questioning all kinds of authority, many also continue to feel the need for given assurances, for an unquestioning faith first found perhaps in their parents. Schleiermacher defined religion as a feeling of absolute dependence. For many, such feelings are held without question. This human situation may be like that of an individual who has fallen over a precipice and is clinging to a precarious ledge. To fall means certain death. What do we do as human beings if, say, there is a single rope dangling within reach? Will we refuse to reach for the rope since we do not know *for sure* whether the rope will hold? No, in actual life, some say, we will grasp the rope in "blind faith."[5]

Others, however, hold that there are alternative faith answers. Some say that in reality there are usually several "ropes," not just one, from which we can choose, hence the need for reason in the faith situation.[6] Others react like the more skillful cliff climber who will look around for all alternative means of escape provided by *nature* as well as human nature. Here nature may be seen to be most helpful when viewed as "dynamic, inter-related, evolutionary, and open-ended."[7]

The last two alternatives place greater emphasis on both faith *and* reason as a continuing search for an imperative faith.[8] Here, there are no sacred shrines we

[5]Cf. Stanley Romain Hopper, *The Crisis of Faith* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1944), p. 183.

[6]L. Harold DeWolf, *The Religious Revolt against Reason* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), pp. 149-150.

[7]Harvey H. Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1969), p. 147.

enter blindly, no tenets of faith to be held without question. Faith imperatives are affirmed with humility while waiting and watching for more light. Being able to take the next step, however imperfect, becomes more important than passively waiting for the Perfect Map. Assumptions are put to the test not simply to play the game of destructive criticism, but to open the way to greater knowledge. "Our little systems have their day," wrote Tennyson, "they have their day and cease to be." Through an imperative faith one seriously searches for the new, untried but trusted assumptions that are then tested in the crucible of life.

An imperative faith as continuing trust functions on three interdependent levels: the relational, the evaluative, and the expressive. On the relational level the believer relates all assumptions, dreams, and hunches to life itself, without a "blessed assurance" of the outcome, like the farmer who plants in the spring, perhaps with borrowed money, in order hopefully to harvest the fruit of his labor in the fall, or the research scientist who invests years, perhaps a lifetime, on proving or disproving an hypothesis. They are also like the runner who runs with perseverence, looking ahead to the perfector of faith, not simply one who only expects Perfection.

Imperative faith as continuing trust also offers a more thoughtful understanding of life through a critical evaluation of all experiences. Again, the farmer measures the harvest and evaluates his farming with all of its contingencies in the light of the yield. The scientist constantly criticizes his conclusions in order to gain new knowledge. The runner thinks over the last race in the light of a "personal best" or some public record. Likewise in religious thinking we simply test our actions in the light of our present understanding of life and the world, God, and salvation. A viable faith is hammered from the brute facts of human experience, however incomplete and tentative, in the face of continuing experience. Each evaluation has its day and is made ready for the new tomorrow by testing in the light of all new data.

The continuing critique of faith is enhanced through expressions of faith in both worship and work. We respond to life situations by adjusting to the unyielding factors of life and by appreciating the true, the good, the beautiful, and the bountiful. Life experiences provide a refreshing basis for new relationships and new evaluations.

Thus an imperative faith as continuing trust includes not only intellectual effort but the volitional response in open minded searching, in serious critical evaluation, and in expressive faith through religious devotion and duty.

III. Testing of Imperative Faith

A serious searching for an imperative faith leads then to a time of testing, something like a mason who built a church steeple of stone than capped it with a large, stone cross. When he had the cross in place, over one hundred feet in the air, he straddled it and waved to his coworkers on the ground. The testing of faith claims is equally precarious.

[8]See W. H. Bernhardt, "Truth in Religion," pp. 32-35.

When Pilate asked Jesus *what* is truth, he might have done better by asking *where* is truth to be found, as did the Hebrew sage centuries before: "Whence then comes wisdom. And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:20) Testing for truth begins with the *where* of life, in life's ongoing experiences.

If we define religious truth as the name we apply to established facts and legitimate inferences that have been drawn from them, we have first to make all fact claims to correspond as clearly as possible to the given events and to the more congruent facts that are generally held to be reliable. The aim is not to determine what is perfect Truth but simply to discover the verifiable uncertainties of life with the hope of increasing our efficiency of knowledge. Unverifiable certainties always remain enticing, but if we succumb to them, we simply become the blind leading the blind. As intelligent creatures seeking a more thoughtful faith, we must knock on the door of tomorrow with a good, hard question mark.

While all human experience is relevant in the search for Christian truth, we can find at least four important, interdependent sources: Scripture, tradition, personal and corporate experience, and reason. The Bible, a broad thick slice of human experience, provides primary data for Christian thinking. Christian history and tradition offer another important source, including personal memories, the rich heritage of church traditions over the centuries, and a variety of experiences of God's grace manifest in and through Christ. The third source includes knowledge gained from empirical sciences as well as insights from the more subjective, inward human experiences. Reason, as the fourth means of searching for truth, employs recognized standards of reliable thinking as consistency, clarity of terms, impartiality, and verifiability. While some dimensions of experience transcend the scope of careful reasoning, appeal to these various sources will lead to a more cogent and credible understanding of the Christian faith.[9]

The role of reason in the testing of faith claims has been a special issue since the beginning of this century, starting with early liberalism seeking to expand reason's role. Hopes ran high then for a gradual intellectual and practical evolution of our society into the Kingdom of God. Stubborn theological problems like natural evil were forthrightly addressed and solutions offered. Discussions between scientific and religious thinkers were recorded in a swarm of books during the first quarter of this century.

Following World War I, however, a religious revolt against reason set in, first in Europe and then in this country. The poignancy of war, for one thing, led to a more serious analysis of the human predicament. The writings of Kierkegaard, Luther, Calvin, Augustine, Barth, Brunner, the Niebuhrs, Paul Tillich, and others were prominent in the revolt. New theological trends began to flourish under the banners of neo-orthodoxy, religious existentialism, and Protestant conservatism. These trends were many faceted but among them was a common thread of conviction that an authoritarian faith was needed to cope with the rise of political authoritarianism in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

[9]See *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), pp. 75-78.

The religious revolt against reason has been described as more of a retreat to commitment, a pulling away from being able openly and honestly to question all assumptions, a movement stressing commitment to the use of the best rationalistic methods possible in defense of unquestioned assumptions. While sandtraps are always nearby whenever searching for truth in religion, greater clarity of truth claims can only be advanced through logic, sense observation, forming hypotheses, and testing them in the crucible of human experience.[10]

Instead of retreating to a blind commitment or a shouting match between various hardened truth claims, it seems far better to return to critical examination of reason's role in religion. This means, among other things, going beyond holding to truth based on some evidence but without absolute disproof. Excessive claims have been made in the name of such empirical examination, like the existence of angels.[11] Antony Flew also has pointed out in his comments on the popular parable of the gardener how such reasoning leads to ambiguity and meaninglessness of terms.[12]

Any serious search for religious truth needs then to include thoughtful observation of all human experience, past and present, public and private. Several important sources of knowledge in Christian experience include the Bible, traditions, experience past and present, and reason. Adequacy of conclusions are sought, not propositions held without question in a continuing search for reliable knowledge and approximate truth. So James Russell Lowell:

> New occasions teach new duties,
> Time makes ancient good uncouth;
> They must upward still and onward
> Who would leap abreast of truth.

The faith we think thus suggests some tools by which to dig more thoroughly for hidden truths of the past and to be more prepared to sift for new truths in present and future experience.

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[10]William W. Bartley, III, *The Retreat to Commitment* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1962), pp. 146ff.

[11]L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953, 1960), pp. 128-129.

[12]John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), p. 227.