The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Reason and Religion: The Old Argument Revisited

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Abstract

What is the relationship of reason to religious life? Advocates from every tradition of thought, from Tertullian, Kierkegard and Ibn Rushd to Pascal, Bertrand Russell and various ecclesiastical and rabbinical authorities, have attempted to address the perceived tensions between religious and rational modes of knowing. Situating these responses, the author examines how we can reconcile the apparent contradictions that exist between religious life and intellectual inquiry to challenge the presentation of reason as faith's adversary.

Keywords

Reason, religion, science, faith, logic, emotion, intellect, mysticism, dogma, theology, rational, religious, revelation, philosophy.

The Place of Reason in Religious Life

Questions concerning important aspects of the human mind or spirit have a way of retaining the same form over the ages while their matter keeps on changing. The ancient question about the place of reason in religious life belongs to this class of questions. Religious and anti-religious people alike habitually ask this question from time to time, partly because it has a deceptively simple meaning and partly because, although as it stands, it is a vague question, it nevertheless refers to something of vital, burning importance with which every believer, in every religious tradition, has to come to terms with over the course of his religious life. The answers given to the question over the centuries of theological reflection in the major

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This article was originally published in *Africa Ismaili*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (July 1978), pp. 9-12, 29-32 and reprinted in *Ilm* , Vol. 7, No. 3 (Dec. 1981-Feb. 1982), pp. 32-40.

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religious traditions of the world form a limited stock of rather neat and clear-cut alternatives. There are those who have been known to align themselves with a vehement confidence on the side of the 'heart' as against the 'mind'. Tertullian, with his defiant love for the absurd and the unreasonable, and his determination to uphold beliefs which show every tendency to fly in the face of reason precisely because of their absurdity ('I believe *because* it is absurd'), and Pascal, with his concession to the connotations of reason, exhibited in his claim that there are 'reasons of the heart' as well as 'reasons of the mind', but with clear preference for the former, are among the most prominent advocates of this solution in the Christian tradition. Nearer our times we have the striking example of Kierkegaard, now commonly believed to be a major forerunner of modern existentialism, who thought little of any type of faith other than that in which one was summoned to 'leap' with the whole of one's being. In Islam, anti-reason had its fervent exponents within the circle of piety. The *ahl-al-hadith*, 'people of the tradition', early on maintained a fierce antipathy to the attempt of the great Muslim philosophers to assimilate faith within the bosom of reason. The Sufis had their own abhorrence for what they saw as the pretentious claims of reason to ultimate truth, and to the austere rigours of philosophy they opposed a throbbing, intoxicating experience of union with the divine. Indeed, scarcely a decade passes by in the life of any developing religious tradition without one or another major thinker pronouncing a bane on reason.

Reason as Faith's Adversary

The contrary attitude, a celebration of reason as against faith, is met much more rarely within a religious tradition, but it is by no means non-existent. One of its most outstanding examples is to be found in the thought of the Hispano-Arab philosopher, Ibn Rushd. Although Ibn Rushd affirmed the truth of religious revelation, it was for him, so to speak, a disguised — a judiciously disguised — form of truth. Only reason could attain truth in its dazzling purity. However, as the masses, with the teaching and upliftment of whom prophets were essentially concerned, were inherently incapable of soaring to the lofty reaches of pure reason, the prophet characteristically resorted to the strategy (in the successful use of which was to be found the essential hallmark of prophecy) of conveying ultimate truths in the guise of picturesque myths and symbols. The fact that lbn Rushd saw no possibilities of contradiction between reason and faith, and that he loyally upheld the tenets of the Islamic faith, does not abolish the equally noteworthy fact that religious language was regarded by him as a screen which protected the fragile and feeble minds of the masses from the spectacular intricacies of rational discourse. An assertion of total supremacy of reason as against faith is, of course, impossible for anyone who wishes to continue to belong to a religious tradition. In Christianity, the possibilities of such an assertion were significantly more limited than in Islam, as the importance of certain 'miraculous' events, such as the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, was regarded as absolutely pivotal for the faith. Here, as in certain important schools of thought in Islam (and in Judaism) the outcome was usually in favour of some kind of a compromise between philosophical speculation and a response based on faith. Again and again, in each of the major religious traditions of the world, we find a strenuous pull between the poles of philosophical reason and religious faith. Sometimes the brilliance of philosophy proved irresistible, especially for advanced minds of the day. At other

times, the sense of security or the serene assurance of divine favour obtainable through a surrender to the call to believe proved overwhelmingly attractive. The balance of forces oscillated periodically from one pole to the other. And time and again, attempts were made to strike what seemed to be a happy mean between the two extremes. However, the question has never ceased to trouble religious adherents upto our own day. And true to the old medieval pattern, we hear on one hand the advocates of reason pour scorn over the follies of 'blind faith'; on the other hand the upholders of faith continue to look with disdain on those lost in the winding dead alleys of philosophy, while mediators, moved by a spirit of arbitration, endeavour to accommodate the claims of either party and thus simultaneously preserve intelligence as well as passion, sobriety as well as ecstasy, and intellectual respectability as well as emotional fervour and commitment.

Positioning Reason

Yet when we examine closely the whole question of the relation between reason and faith, we become forcefully aware of a confusion of terms. So hopeless indeed is the confusion that I cannot think of a better initial remedy than a rejection of the terms, and their substitution by the several ideas merged together under each term as a result of its indiscriminate use. But I find myself with neither the time nor the space to carry out such an elaborate groundwork. I shall therefore content myself with singling out three different issues which are among those implicitly (and unclearly) present in questions about the blanket categories of 'reason' and 'faith'. If I have given the impression in the paragraphs above that the medieval attempt to hammer out a satisfactory solution to the problem of reason versus faith was not misguided, that in other words, it made sense then to talk about the relation between reason and faith, it is because these two concepts had a fairly definite and a fairly circumscribed sense in that period. When for instance, Jalal al-din Rumi, the greatest mystic poet in Islam, expresses a pungent antipathy to the way of reason (*'aql*) as opposed to the way of love (*'ishq*), he has in mind a *particular* approach to the mysteries of religion adopted by a *particular* group of individuals, namely the Muslim admirers of Greek philosophy. The individuals belonging to this class of thinkers assigned a cosmic place to Reason — which was celebrated as the moving principle of all things — but which meant something very different from what we mean by 'reason' when we use the word in ordinary, non-philosophical or non-academic contexts. Therefore, it is worthwhile for one who feels the temptation to pronounce judgement on this issue to pause and to try to reach a reasonable measure of certainty about the phenomena which, out of habit, ignorance, or sloth — most likely out of all the three elements put together — he unthinkingly labels as 'reason' and 'religion'.

Reason as a Synonym of Science

The first sense in which 'reason' is used as an adversary of faith, or harnessed as its ally, is as a synonym of 'science'. Now science is not an exclusively 'rational' enterprise, in that it is not built out of sheer mental speculation. It proceeds rather on the basis of disciplined observation and controlled methods of practical experiment. It is by no means without significance that in European history those philosophers who earnestly admired the methods

of science and placed in it their cherished hopes for the improvement of the lot of mankind saw themselves as the foes of 'rationalism' — the approach to ultimate truths based on sheer thought, as opposed to practical observation and experiment. But, in a wider sense, science may be said to be 'rational' inasmuch as it is continually provisional and self-critical, refuses to accept dogmatic assumptions, and is least disposed to accept intellectual positions on the mere basis of authority. These features of scientific endeavour have led to its being contrasted with religion which, so it is asserted, is intolerant of open-endedness, is given to dogmatic pronouncements, and places paramount emphasis on the received word and on the reputed authority of tradition. Now whether the fact that the fountainhead of religious ideas is commonly to be found in what is held to be a divine revelation — whether this fact must of necessity lead to an attitude of what is often called 'blind faith' is a question to which my own answer will become clear in the course of this essay. At this point I can only declare my strong conviction that if religion is interpreted or taught in a way in which it actively discourages its adherents from developing their powers of thought and reflection, such a religion is a poisonous and pernicious nuisance, a threat to the moral well-being of its followers and a menace to civilised life in general. Nevertheless, as we look back into history we cannot but admit that religion often took this form, and it is this kind of religion against which science has often found itself compelled to declare war. The history of warfare between science and religion has been responsible for the tendency to regard them as polar opposites of one another. Thus, Bertrand Russell offered this rather neat, and somewhat oversimplified definition of the two disciplines: 'All *definite* knowledge — so I should contend — belongs to science: all *dogma* as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology.' Yet, if science is indeed in search of 'definite' knowledge, and if religion is merely speculative, concerning itself with what cannot be known, even then there need not be a conflict between the two unless and until they claim to give us knowledge about the same things. This is exactly what happened in Europe and led to the bitter quarrel between the guardians of these two branches of human endeavour. For example, medieval Christianity had adopted a definite ancient cosmology, and when the scientists of the Renaissance altered our picture of the world by means of discoveries made through instruments such as the telescope, the Church promptly declared the new science as heretical. Again, Darwin's theory of evolution, based as it was upon a good deal of actual observation, was fiercely resisted by many Christians who found it incompatible with the Biblical account of creation. If religion and science are both essentially concerned with investigating facts about the universe, and if religion sets about doing this with a wholesale appeal to faith and science with the aid of patient observation and with a refusal to take anything for granted, then a conflict between them is inevitable. The prospects of a truce, let alone a lasting resolution of the quarrel, can only be extremely bleak. Nor can there be any real doubt as to which party would be destined to emerge as the eventual victor, given the strategy adopted by both in the pursuit of their common ends.

The Domains of Science and Religion

The truth of the matter, however, is that the whole conflict stems from a deep-seated and fatal confusion about the respective domains of science and religion. Science is concerned with the discovery of facts. Religion is concerned with the discovery not of facts, but of the

significance of facts. Where science investigates, religion illuminates. The physical constitution of the universe is a subject for the scientist, and it is a subject on which the physical scientist is alone pre-eminently qualified to pronounce judgement. But whether reality, of which the physical universe may he held to be a part, is essentially absurd and meaningless, in the face of which man can only cultivate a studied apathy and resignation, or whether, on the other hand, it is such as to lend value and substance to man's highest hopes and aspirations, is a question on which the scientist *qua* scientist can claim no right to issue a verdict. It is the philosopher and the theologian whose task it is to weigh the relative truth of a philosophy which sees reality as no more than 'a sorry scheme of things entire', and a philosophy which, by contrast, sees in ultimate reality a call and an imperative to man to respond to it with solemn hope and love. Again, to take another example, the composition of the human organism and its functioning in health and disease, is a matter for the scientist. But no amount of arduous research in the field of medical science can ever be held to qualify its practitioner to issue an authoritative answer to the question of the value and significance of human life. Whether man is the epitome of creation or mere 'quintessence of dust' is a question to which the only kind of legitimate response is a decision — a decision which, so to speak, implicates one's whole being. And such a decision is *ipso facto* a decision about the nature of reality itself.

There is thus an essential (and not simply a convenient or expedient) difference between what constitutes scientific activity and what answers the religious need in man. But this is truly a difference and not a contrast — not the kind of contrast, at any rate, which would make the two activities mutually incompatible. To be sure, the scientist may also be a religious man, and a man who had no scientific interests, say in his youth, but was deeply and ardently religious from the start, may later come to pursue a scientific career and in the course of it achieve distinction and fame. Indeed, the scientist, if he is an inquiring human being, will also be concerned with wider, philosophical questions — those which arise from his work certainly, but probably more general ones as well. By the same token, the religious man, if he is intelligent, will also be interested in the discoveries of science. But the ultimate values and beliefs by which the man who is a scientist lives are those by which he lives not because he is a scientist, but because he is a man; though the fact that he is a scientist influences the values by which he chooses to live as a man. Conversely, the scientific interests and achievements which a man who is religious may happen to possess are something additional to and distinguishable from (though not contrary to) the religious colouring of his life. This does not mean that the person who has such dual interests draws a strict difference between them in his own mind. The difference I wish to highlight is not a psychological difference — not that is, a difference which is reflected in the personalities of the individuals concerned, but rather a difference in the objective character of these two human activities. And if this difference is borne in mind, the supposed conflict between science and religion loses its force. Only if the scientist has the audacity to pronounce judgements about the ultimate meaning of life on the basis of his scientific prestige, and only if the religious man usurps the authority to make scientific announcements, is the conflict likely to occur. Both these mistakes have been made. Scientists have been known to declare that their discovery of natural laws makes belief in God unreasonable, which is a quite illogical conclusion on their part. Religious individuals have

been known to resist scientific discoveries on the ground that they contradicted the scriptures, forgetting that the scriptures are anything but scientific treatises. Incidentally, the claim which preachers are often heard to make, namely that religious sages have in the past anticipated the specific discoveries of modern science by arriving at these very same findings in the twinkling of an eye, as it were, through superior spiritual power, is also groundless, for it displays the same elementary confusion. What we need to realise, however, without confusing scientific discovery with religious truth, is their close relationship and their close mutual hearing. It is essential, if science were to flourish, that religion should not throttle the spirit which nourishes scientific advancement. In Islam at any rate, this has not been a serious problem. The fact that the Qur'an describes nature as governed by lawful regularities, and the fact that man's right to explore and master the forces of nature is clearly recognised there, causes the spirit of the faith to be conducive to scientific research. It is only a faith which needs to sustain itself on miracles, i.e. interruptions in the normal order of things, which finds itself in contradiction to the spirit of scientific work.

Reason, Faith and Objectivity

I have dwelt above on the relationship between science and religion for the simple reason that when people often talk about 'reason' and 'faith', it is this relationship which they have in mind. But there is also a second sense in which reason allegedly counteracts faith — by 'reason' what is meant here is what can loosely be conveyed through the term 'objectivity' — the ability to distance oneself from one's ideas, and to reflect upon them in a sober, unemotional and dispassionate frame of mind. Now there are religious believers who would argue that such detachment, and such an exercise of one's reflective and intellectual powers, is fundamentally inimical to faith. This conclusion is based on a serious misunderstanding. It is true that religion demands much more than intellectual conviction, but this is not to say that it does not demand intellectual conviction, or that the element which it demands in addition to intellectual conviction is incompatible with it. An illustration from another human experience may serve to clarify this point. It has often been said that love is a kind of madness, that a person who is deeply in love with another human being is on a plane altogether different from that of objective analysis and reflection. That there is a difference between solving an intellectual puzzle and being in love is clear enough. But it scarcely follows from this that one's feelings ought to be totally exempt from reflection and analysis. The very process of emotional maturity involves an ever-increasing ability to put oneself now and then at a distance from one's feelings and to subject them to the scrutiny of one's reflective powers. Such an ability, moreover, need not cripple one's capacity to surrender or to commit oneself to deep emotional response (unless, of course, one's intellectual powers are exercised as an escape from life, rather than as a vital aid to achieving a richer and fuller mode of existence). Hostility to reflective awareness is commonly shown not by those who wish to preserve in their lives the quality of passionate commitment to a cause, but rather by those whose commitment is basically shaky and insecure. It is worth remembering that until very modern times, the best that was thought and said in the world was to a significant extent the product of minds which were deeply religious and which, more often than not, exhibited a strong blend of acute intelligence with a capacity for deep and passionate commitment to one or

another view of life. The longing to have one's innermost and most vital values and beliefs quarantined from the faculty of reflection is born partly out of fear. But it is important to remember that one's commitments do not lose but gain strength and durability from intercourse with other dimensions of one's experience. For it is only through a continuous and reciprocal process of crossfertilisation between thought and feeling, between the power to remain critically aware of oneself and the power to surrender oneself to the finer joys of the human spirit, that one of the greatest sources of human happiness, the sense of harmonious wholeness, of being a total, integrated self, can he achieved.

Reason as a Logical Framework

There is, however, a third sense which those who express doubts and misgivings about ascribing supreme importance to reason in religion seem to have in mind, although this sense is not always clearly defined and articulated. There are certain areas in human knowledge where conclusions are reached without any involvement of one's feelings, of one's will, or one's artistic or poetic sensibilities. Mathematics is a prime example. A mathematical theorem is from the beginning to the end an exercise in logical skill; it entails ability on one's part to deduce conclusions from a chosen set of premises. In the history of some of the world religions, notably Judaism, Christianity and Islam, sections of each of whose followers were influenced by Greek logic, there were individuals who confidently believed that the dispassionate use of reasoning of this sort was a sufficient basis for religious or theistic doctrine and belief. It is this kind of an approach that those who pointed to ways other than 'reason' had in mind. And here they were right. It is forever necessary to remember that religion cannot be based on reason in this narrow sense, not because it has to do with what is commonly and condescendingly called 'emotion' or 'sentiment', but because it has to do with man's total response to reality — not to this or that aspect of reality, but to the whole of reality, conceived as a unity. The religious response, in its most pristine and purest form, embodies an attempt to reach back into that unity which exists before man's consciousness breaks it up by dividing it into subject and object, into 'I' and 'You', and 'I' and 'It'. This ultimate reality is often conceived as 'transcendent', or described as 'He who is above all else' — not because it is a reality spatially above the human habitat, but because it is above, i.e. goes beyond or transcends, all human categories. Being free from and prior to the dichotomy between subject and object, it is therefore also outside the frame of human discourse. When the greatest religious poets and thinkers, and notably the mystics, declared that it was absurd for anyone to try to grasp the divine reality by means of the feeble resources of reason, they were implying not that religion ought to be based on 'blind faith', that intellectual advancement was a hindrance to spiritual life, or that emotion or sentiment was a sufficient basis for entertaining any belief whatsoever, but rather that man must not forget that the categories with which he operates in his daily intercourse with the world cannot lead him to that to which these very categories owe their being, and which therefore effectively transcends them. And insofar as a manipulative, calculating kind of reason is what we usually employ in our everyday dealings with the partial reality around us, a reminder of the inadequacy of human categories in the pursuit of ultimate reality tends to be a reminder of the inadequacy of 'reason'. And the alternative to approaching ultimate reality as though one was

approaching another person or a problem or an event or a situation, is not to rely on 'sentiment' or 'emotion' (for these are equally inadequate), but instead to cultivate a certain fundamental 'openness' of being, a basic condition of receptivity to the light which outshines all other lights.

Mysticism

Here we find ourselves in the region of what is commonly called 'mysticism'. Actually, 'mysticism' is an unfortunate term, partly because of its verbal affinity with 'mystery', which has connotations of anti-rationalism, and partly because of its faddish popularity in the West today. It has served, however, in the past, to highlight a fact of crucial importance to our understanding of man. The attempt to move beyond a patriarchal conception of God who rules the world literally from above, the desire to move beyond mere external observance of religious ritual, and the longing to break free from the bondage of objectifying reason, and to lose as well as find one's self (the two processes are simultaneous) in the primal ground in which subject and object are unified, has asserted itself in all the major traditions of the world. Hinduism and Buddhism, of course, have an inexhaustible richness of 'mystical' expression. In Judaism and Christianity, the mystical tendency was often kept in check by ecclesiastical and rabbinical authorities, but was nevertheless able to assert itself from time to time. In Islam too, the hostility of *shari'a*-minded authorities to the quest for the primal unity of being was relentless, and often brutal, as is shown clearly by the execution of Mansur al-Hallaj. Despite this, Sufism (the conventional name for this approach to reality) broke the fetters of an increasingly legalistic and alienating form of Islam, and was able not only to offset but also to win over the adherents of the *shari'a* to a more intimate and inward quest for the divine. It is as though a universal spiritual need in man asserts itself in all ages and all parts of the world — a sobering thought for those who insist that religious tendencies are an exact expression of material forces at a given moment in history. At any rate, one of the most characteristic features of the mystical approach is that in its forward thrust towards that which precedes division and plurality, and that which thus precedes and transcends language (for the very stuff of grammar is made of division and plurality), it puts language itself under considerable strain. It is by no means a mere accident that the highest expression of the mystical impulse has been in poetry, and poetry of a particular type. It is a type of poetry in which language struggles with itself. And it is precisely because the poet can go no further here except to remain engaged in this struggle that a great light supervenes. It is precisely because language breaks under the strain of being goaded to reach forward to its own ground that a sense of the divine presence engulfing all things descends on the poet. This jubilant despair over language is one of the unfailing, defining characteristics of true mystical expression all over the world.

The Role of the Intellect

Moments of mystical illumination are moments in which man sees reality with fresh eyes. They are moments from which man can derive the impetus to live more richly and deeply than is possible in an overwhelmingly technological world in which man's consciousness is continually externalised and devoted to mastery, control, and manipulation of objects. The

experience of a reality which encompasses and yet transcends the strictly limited reality with which man is in contact in his working life (or in his social life) — an experience which, in contrast to commercial or technological surroundings, is not amenable to control or mastery but is rather the product of what in theological language is called 'grace' — gives man an anchor of serenity in the midst of the travails of existence. But the contrast between this kind of experience and the more restricted kind of exposure to reality which man can have within a strictly technological framework is by no means equivalent to the contrast between reason and emotion, between intellectual rigour and sentimental indulgence, between logical discourse and passionate commitment. To put religious experience at an opposite pole to intellectual reflection is both absurd and dangerous. It is absurd because the very process of speaking about the experience entails reflection, and it is dangerous because it encourages a cavalier attitude to the truth of one's beliefs. It is worth one's while to remember that as the beauty of a great work of art is not destroyed but rather enhanced by critical reflection — which involves an ability at once to step in the shoes of the artist and experience his world from within, and to distance oneself from it and examine it objectively — so does religious experience gain rather than lose from the application to it of one's highest intellectual acumen. It is possible for one to have the capacity to subject one's beliefs and values to unrelenting self-criticism, to have a perennially inquiring mind and yet despite, or rather because of the gift of intellect, to realise that there are dimensions of life other than those which come into play in ordinary forms of thought. It is perfectly possible, indeed, for such a man to bring himself to give a total response to transcendent reality, and to say with Jalal al-din Rumi:

O thou who are my soul's comfort in the season of sorrow,
O thou who are my spirit's treasure in the bitterness of dearth,
That which the imagination hath not conceived, that which understanding has not seen,
Visiteth my soul from thee: hence in worship I turn toward thee.