

## Rejecting Reason?

*Jonathan Gallagher*

*Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his Reason. —Martin Luther.*

Many Christians support their beliefs by denying that faith can or should be logical or reasonable. Some even take it so far as to express the idea that faith is by nature irrational, and that the fact that beliefs do not make sense to the logical mind is proof of their truthfulness. The cry that “religion shouldn’t make any sense” may not always be said so clearly, but is often inherently expressed in pious platitudes that suggest that matters of faith are beyond our minds and comprehension. Beliefs are just not meant to be reasonable.

Some have said it very bluntly, especially Luther, the great Protestant reformer. His attack on reason is amazing:

“Reason is the Devil’s greatest whore; by nature and in manner of being she is a noxious whore; she is a prostitute, the Devil’s appointed whore; whore eaten by scab and leprosy who ought to be trodden under foot and destroyed, she and her wisdom.... Throw dung in her face to make her ugly. She is and she ought to be drowned in baptism.... She would deserve, the wretch, to be banished to the filthiest place in the house, to the closets” (E16, 142-148). “Reason is contrary to faith. Reason is the whore of the Devil. It can only blaspheme and dishonour everything God has said or done.” (E29, 241).

Such a position well illustrates the antagonism some Christians have for any attempt to place faith under scrutiny. This kind of hostility may perhaps come from a desire to protect the valued aspects of faith, to make sure that what brings such meaning and assurance to life is not compromised in any way. But to try to remove Christian beliefs from discussion, to say that they have to be merely accepted with no discussion or examination as to their truthfulness, is a reckless rejection of the God-given gift of reason. For how else can we decide what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false? Luther again:

“For reason is the greatest enemy that faith has: it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but—more frequently than not—struggles against the Divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God.”

“There is on earth among all dangers no more dangerous thing than a richly endowed and adroit reason.... Reason must be deluded, blinded, and destroyed. Faith must trample underfoot all reason, sense, and understanding, and whatever it sees must be put out of sight and... know nothing but the word of God.”

Incredible! Such a denial of reason and logic stuns the mind, for it leaves no other option. While we can agree that a skeptical and hostile approach to religion can mask its

contempt by saying it is only appealing to reason, to demand that “faith must trample underfoot all reason, sense, and understanding” is to adopt a far more dangerous position.

For if there is to be no mental involvement, no component of logical decision making, but rather a blind, unthinking acceptance, then on what basis is any such choice made?

The problem with such an attitude is it that it leaves Christianity open to the charge of complete subjectivism—for if beliefs are not supposed to be logical and are affirmed merely by appeal to feelings or mental sensations, then every expression of faith is equally valid. That’s the common anthem of complete pluralism: “whatever works for you,” “there are many paths to faith,” “all religions have the truth” etc. There can be no examination of the correctness of any belief, since all beliefs are equally true. Yet by such a definition there is no truth, for how can mutually contradictory beliefs all be true?

This attitude also leaves believers at the mercy of religious authoritarianism, for the Church and its leaders are the unquestioned definers of faith. In this sense, beliefs are no longer believed, but are assented to as required dogma. Faith becomes a set of indisputable and mandatory statements that are dictatorially enforced, the rules demanded to be part of the club. If that is the definition of faith, then clearly reason and discussion have no place—in fact they are to be denigrated and destroyed.

So we arrive at the place where true faith is seen as complete and unquestioning loyalty, where right is wrong and wrong is right, if the Church says so:

“We should always be disposed to believe that that which appears white is really black, if the hierarchy of the Church so decides.” Ignatius of Loyola, Exercitia Spiritualia.

The mind no longer is of use, except to accept without discussion. This is where the reckless rejection of reason leads—to a congregation of robots following the dictates from the hierarchy. A long way from the God who says, “Come let us reason together...”

As Thomas Jefferson said, “Man, once surrendering his reason, has no remaining guard against absurdities the most monstrous, and like a ship without a rudder, is the sport of every wind. With such persons, gullibility, which they call faith, takes the helm of reason, and the mind becomes a wreck.”

Wrecked minds, believing absurdities most monstrous... Is that how we wish to be seen as Christians? Yet that is the case if we wish to deny the use of our minds in analyzing beliefs...

As Galileo put it during his famous trial by the Church authorities: “I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.”

This was the real point of contention in the trial—did the Church have the right to demand compliance and obedience in the face of reasonable evidence? Galileo believed

in using the “sense, reason and intellect” that God has given to all of us, and not “to forgo their use.”

In contrast, Galileo’s prosecutor Cardinal Bellarmine wanted to deny reason, and used force to impose the traditional beliefs of the Church. In a woefully inappropriate comment, he said that “To assert that the earth revolves around the sun is as erroneous as to claim that Jesus was not born of a virgin.”

Here we see the fear that to agree that a traditional concept was in error would compromise the whole system of faith, and as a result the Church authorities refuse to accept the possibility of being wrong. Bellarmine again:

“To affirm that the Sun... is at the center of the universe and only rotates on its axis without going from east to west, is a very dangerous attitude and one calculated not only to arouse all Scholastic philosophers and theologians, but also to injure our holy faith by contradicting the Scriptures.”

The key phrase here is “calculated... to injure our holy faith.” The use of reason based on evidence is viewed as an attack on the holy faith, as if the Church hierarchy thought that if they conceded on this point, then the whole system of Christian faith would collapse. The result was the adoption of an obscurantist approach. The Church did not want to know of Galileo’s discoveries, prevented him from publishing his findings, punished him for his temerity to challenge the faith, and hoped the whole problem would simply go away.

Later the Church honored the faithful prosecutor, the “defender of the faith,” and he became Saint Robert Francis Romulus Bellarmine (1542-1621).

And when Copernicus explained his similar ideas on cosmology, which the Church took to be a challenge to Scripture and faith, Reformer John Calvin was moved to comment: “Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?”

Still today, there are those who continue to defend their faith by the denial of reason and evidence:

“The earth is flat, and anyone who disputes this claim is an atheist who deserves to be punished.” (An Islamic religious edict [“fatwa”] issued in 1993 by Sheik Abdul-Aziz Ibn Baz in his position as supreme religious authority, Saudi Arabia. Cited in the *New York Times*, February 12, 1995).

Just as damaging are the statements of Christians on the supremacy of “unreason,” as if this denial of the mind was so helpful in establishing the truth:

“And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again; the fact is certain because it is impossible. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. When we come to

believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe..." Tertullian, Prescriptions against Heretics.

Absurdity and impossibility are given as reasons for faith. This is the unhinging of reason—and note the consequences. No need of research, or of believing anything else—because there is nothing else needed. Such a head in the sand attitude—or is it a completely headless attitude?—speaks ill of the God who created our minds, and who gives us reasons and evidence, rather than compels compliance.

Such a definition and “argument” for “faith”—for believing what you know ain’t so, as Mark Twain so bluntly put it—explains why many have come to reject Christianity. If by definition faith is non-sensical, then why believe? Tragically, the stance taken by some Christians in “defending” the faith with appeals to “un-reason” has completely destroyed its credibility for some thinkers. That is not to accept that misrepresentations of Christianity by those who claim to speak for the faith are the single cause of atheism or agnosticism. However, there is some validity to the charges brought against Christianity by those who are appalled at Christians who deny reason, logic, evidence, investigation and so on.

The result? Anti-Christian writers such as Voltaire, Nietzsche, Ingersoll, and Mencken who attack the foolishness of those who refuse to allow reasonable investigation of faith, and who resort to what can be seen as superstitious credulity.

“Nothing can be more contrary to religion and the clergy than reason and common sense,” writes Voltaire, who concludes “Every sensible man, every honorable man, must hold the Christian sect in horror.”

As a result of this denial of reasonable faith, Nietzsche, whose father was a Protestant minister, sees in Christianity a disavowal of reality: “In Christianity neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point.” Consequently, “I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, petty—I call it the one mortal blemish of mankind.”

An extreme over-reaction, no doubt, and his cruel philosophy cannot be put down to the mistakes of Christian defenders. Yet there is a lesson here in what can happen when faith and reason are torn apart, and faith is defined in terms of unthinking acceptance...

Seeing the same kind of argument, Mencken pointedly attacked such illogical “unreasoning”:

“Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the impossible.” While we may flinch at such a harsh depiction of what we value so highly, this is what some Christians have claimed as the basis of their faith—the more illogical, the more impossible, the clearer the faith... That is why Mencken confessed, “Religion is

fundamentally opposed to everything I hold in veneration—courage, clear thinking, honesty, fairness, and, above all, love of the truth.”

This may hurt us who wish to speak well of the truth as it is in Jesus, who value the truth above all else. For us, we believe, the truth shall set you free. But we have not done truth any favors by denying that it can be examined and questioned, investigated and explored. To suggest that we can dispense with such processes belittles faith rather than safeguards it. In the exact opposite of the desired outcome, the dismissal of inquiry and the examination of evidence for faith has led to a rejection of faith and an identification of Christians as irrational and absurd bigots who play on emotionalism and gullibility. For example: “Just as Christianity must destroy reason before it can introduce faith, so it must destroy happiness before it can introduce salvation.” George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*.

In response, Christianity all too often replies with a defensive and combative attitude, making statements that appeal to an internal authority based on circular reasoning:

“Clearly the person who accepts the Church as an infallible guide will believe whatever the Church teaches.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.

Believe, or else. Down through history, majority faiths have used the “civil arm” (read persecution, torture, and murder) to destroy opponents. The ultimate consequences of “unreason” in the sphere of faith is intolerance, discrimination and brutality—for it is of no importance that people should die, but that the faith should be maintained pure and unassailable. Whatever the belief, “A religion which requires persecution to sustain it is of the devil’s propagation.” Hosea Ballou.

Yet that is where irrational faith leads. For why should anything make any sense? If faith has no need to relate to logic or reason, if it is all a mysterious paradox that cannot be understood, if belief is best when it makes no sense at all—then illogical acts must surely fit the need. A tragedy for the gospel of Jesus, the one who came to show us the truth, to explain it all in simple terms, and to demonstrate what it fully meant in his death and resurrection.

More than anything else, Jesus asked for careful consideration of his message, for investigation and understanding. All his words and actions are full of meaning, explanations of the spiritual realm through parables and illustrations. Jesus has nothing to do with blind faith—in fact he categorically rejects blind guides. He seeks for our understanding, our realization of our need, and our assent to his answers. This is no irrational faith—it is based on the truth Jesus came to reveal at such incredible cost, the evidence provided by God Himself.

It is truly foolish, and completely reckless, to abandon the mind that God has given us. Luther’s command that “Reason should be destroyed in all Christians” can only lead to spiritual chaos, since we cannot compare one concept with another or investigate the truth of religious claims. Nor did Luther so thoroughly practice his own command—for why

would he preach or write books? How did he proceed—from one unsubstantiated thought to another, completely at random? No, he used reason and argument in his works.

For what is the alternative? How do we make any meaningful decision if we do not use our minds, arguing from cause to effect? If we reject reason, then there is no argument at all about anything, for any opinion is as valid as another, and cannot be contested, for there is no way to argue except to throw one illogical view against another.

In such a scenario, the faith claims of Jim Jones of the People's Temple in Guyana or David Koresh of the Branch Davidians in Waco or Marshall Applewhite of Heaven's Gate in San Diego are equally illogically "valid," if faith does not need to be examined or investigated by reason.

As Christians we are called to give an evidence for our faith, a reason for the hope that is in us. (1 Peter 3:15). This is not the product of fanciful tales or "cunningly devised fables," (2 Peter 1:16), nor are we swept about by every passing "wind of doctrine." (Ephesians 4:14). We use God's great gift of thought to explore in our own limited ways the mind of the infinite, for we are made in the image of God in our minds also. For God is a God of freedom, of choice, of demonstration, not some pagan perversion of a fickle god who acts randomly and at whim.

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5). For "we have the mind of Christ." (2 Cor. 4:16 NIV). Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5)—not an irrational mind that operated without logic and meaning, but one full of investigation, of analysis, of the careful weighing of the evidence.

God is a God of order, of purpose—a God who is not illogical, but one who admires thoughtful consideration and invites our investigation. How foolish to throw all that away for some fanciful ideas of faith that have no basis in reality.

To recklessly reject reason, the gift of God, is to turn away from God's truth to worship you know not what and to exchange the truth of God for a lie (see John 4:22, Romans 1:25). Professing ourselves to be wise, we become fools, and end up in chaos (see Romans 1:22).

May the Lord help us to come to an intelligent faith in Him, grounded in His word, and based on the evidence He has so graciously provided.

© Jonathan Gallagher