

# Reflections on the Relationship between Faith and Reason

by Fr Justin Ford

Pope St John Paul II opened his towering Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* ('Faith and Reason') (1998) with this powerful image: 'Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.'

So just as a bird flying with only one wing would fall from the sky, so human beings, if they try to do without faith or without reason, will not rise to the contemplation of truth.

The term *reason* encompasses all the God-given natural powers of the human person to know truth – in particular, as guided by our rational faculty of logical thought and knowledge of universal truths, which we use both in everyday life and in the various sciences.

And by *philosophy* is meant the application of human reason to the 'great questions' – such as the deepest nature of the human person [philosophical anthropology]; of right and wrong [ethics]; of knowledge [epistemology]; of the most general categories of existence such as being itself, nature, causation [metaphysics/ontology]; and God's existence and nature [philosophy of God].

The word 'philosophy' literally means 'love of wisdom'; and Pope John Paul taught in *Fides et Ratio* that 'the human being is by nature a philosopher' (64): we all have the power of reason, and each of us in our own way uses this faculty to seek wisdom, and ponder the great questions of life.

God graciously comes to meet us in our search for truth by his self-revelation in Christ, accepted by us in *faith*. And the systematic application of human reason to the truths we know by this supernatural divine revelation – transmitted in Scripture and Apostolic Tradition, and interpreted in the Spirit-guided teaching of the Church – is what we term *theology*. So a related definition of theology is 'faith seeking understanding'.

Catholic thinkers can inquire, as philosophers, into what human beings *simply* using natural human reason can know about God even before faith; or as theologians, they can bring into the equation things we learn by supernatural faith in God's revelation. Both are necessary pursuits (so priests in their training study both philosophy and theology).

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The First Vatican Council (1870) crystallised the Church's long reflection on the relationship between faith and reason in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* – rejecting the opposite heresies of *rationalism* (that values reason to the point of denigrating faith) and *fideism* (that values faith to the point of denigrating reason).

Rationalist attitudes are often found among non-believers. Thus a rationalist might say we shouldn't accept anything on faith, but only what we can prove for ourselves by our own reason. More subtle forms of rationalism can appear among Catholics themselves. For example, if we pick and choose which Church teachings we will believe, depending on which ones are acceptable to our own thinking, we set up our own reason as our supreme standard of truth, rather than God's Revelation.

Or if a Catholic, correctly recognising that faith can be *supported* by rational evidence such as proofs of God's existence or miraculous signs, then mistakenly goes on to *reduce* faith to this logical process – that is also a form of rationalism. Properly understood, by faith we freely step *beyond* the reasons that might have *led us* towards faith, and base ourselves instead on absolute and certain personal trust in God, the Supreme Truth, speaking to humanity.

A 'great theologian' who 'knows all the reasons' still needs this simple faith to be saved, and a simple peasant knowing virtually none of 'the reasons' can still certainly have saving faith – and perhaps a greater faith than the theologian. That doesn't mean the theologian is wrong to study the reasons; and the less-educated peasant who rightly understands faith will greatly respect theology. It just means that faith is something different from study or intelligence.

At the other extreme, false attitudes of fideism can also be found among Catholic believers, maybe unaware of Church teaching on these matters. So if we say that reason is not trustworthy (even when used correctly, carefully employing sound logic); that reason cannot prove God's existence; that we should never use rational evidence (e.g. from miracles) to support Christian faith, but should always insist on faith alone without rational considerations; that it is not good to get involved in intellectual reflection on what God has revealed – we are not being more 'pious' by saying these things: we are going against Church teaching. An anti-intellectual disdain for reason limits the sphere of Christ's redemption. Jesus came to redeem to whole of human nature, and that includes the human intellect.

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Catholic teaching thus maintains a careful balance:

- Reason is important and essential, but it isn't everything.
  - Faith and reason are *distinct* from each other, but are in *harmony*, both being gifts of God for knowing truth.
  - Reason belongs to human *nature*, given to each one of us by God in our creation; faith belongs to the higher order of the *supernatural*, being possible only by God's grace.
  - Faith goes *beyond* reason, and teaches mysteries that reason could never discover or prove, such as the Trinity.
  - But, faith never *contradicts* reason. Logic is always valid.
  - Reason *supports* faith and points towards it, as well as helping us understand the teachings of faith more deeply.
  - But *reason can't replace faith* – the personal relationship of belief in God's word which is necessary for salvation.
  - *Neither can faith replace reason* (as if it could turn a logical fallacy into a valid argument). Each has its own role.
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St Paul was dismissive of the philosophy of his day: ‘Where are the philosophers now? Where are the scribes? Where are any of our thinkers today? Do you see now how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom?’ (*1 Corinthians* 1:20) And so the Church likewise continues to insist: human reason and philosophy cannot bring salvation. We are saved only through Christ, and him crucified. St Paul goes on to say that he came not with any show of oratory or philosophy, but simply to tell what God had guaranteed, so that faith ‘should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God’. (*1 Corinthians* 2:1-5)

Thus our faith doesn’t essentially rest on rational arguments. In the words of the First Vatican Council, we believe, ‘not because the intrinsic truth of the revealed things has been perceived by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.’ (*Dei Filius* 3 (DS 3008)) By faith, we submit our created reason to Uncreated Truth – God himself.

So, where does philosophy fit in? Reason is God’s gift to us for the discovery of truth, and it naturally searches for truth and meaning. Reason and philosophy should indeed lead us from created things to the knowledge of the God who made them: following St Paul (*Romans* 1:19-20; cf. *Wisdom* 13:1-9), the Church infallibly teaches that natural human reason has the power to know with certainty the one true God, Creator and Lord. (Vatican I, *Dei Filius* 2 (DS 3026))

But because of original sin, our natural power to know truth, while not destroyed, was obscured and weakened. Reason still always gives truth if properly followed, but because human nature is wounded, we much more easily fail to follow the actual laws of logic and instead jump to false conclusions. Reason can sometimes even seem to people to be pointing away from God. St Paul tells us how, to Greek philosophical ways of thinking, a crucified God made no sense. Human wisdom was powerless for salvation; it even seemed in opposition to Christ. Like all things human, it needed to be set free.

So faith gradually heals reason, purifying us from the errors of incorrect reasoning, and enlightening matters that had been made difficult or obscure by sin (for example concerning God, or concerning right and wrong).

Over history, Christian thinkers, guided by the Holy Spirit, have gathered the ‘seeds of the Word’ God has scattered in the different human cultures. Gradually sifting and developing the teachings of the ancient philosophers, they brought them into submission to Christ – for example, showing in depth how reason proves the existence of God the one and infinite First Cause, or the spirituality and immortality of the human soul. Philosophy as it grew in the Church is not what it was when St Paul wrote.

Significantly, Pope John Paul published *Fides et Ratio* on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1998, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross. Christ crucified has triumphed – not by destroying philosophy, but by saving it. Human wisdom died with Christ on the Cross, but it has also risen with him. From being the opponent of the Cross, reason has been recaptured for Christ, made the servant of faith and integrated with faith’s teachings, and so redeemed.

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**St John Paul II, 'Fides et Ratio': the human search for wisdom fulfilled in Christ**

'In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply... A cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?*

'These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart...

'The Church is no stranger to this journey of discovery, nor could she ever be. From the moment when, through the Paschal Mystery, she received the gift of the ultimate truth about human life, the Church has made her pilgrim way along the paths of the world to proclaim that Jesus Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life".' (1-2)

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'In the far reaches of the human heart there is a seed of desire and nostalgia for God... In different ways and at different times, men and women have shown that they can articulate this intimate desire of theirs. Through literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture and every other work of their creative intelligence they have declared the urgency of their quest. In a special way philosophy has made this search its own...' (24)

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'[The Church] sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life...an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it.' (5)

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'In preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded... My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place...it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought...What has been said here of India is no less true for the heritage of the great cultures of China, Japan and the other countries of Asia, as also for the riches of the traditional cultures of Africa...' (72)

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'In engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history.' (72)

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'Deprived of what Revelation offers, reason has taken side-tracks which expose it to the danger of losing sight of its final goal. Deprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition. It is an illusion to think that faith, tied to weak reasoning, might be more penetrating; on the contrary, faith then runs the grave risk of withering into myth or superstition.' (48)

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'There are signs of a resurgence of *fideism*, which fails to recognise the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God.' (55)

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*'There are many paths which lead to truth, but since Christian truth has a salvific value, any one of these paths may be taken, as long as it leads to the final goal, that is to the Revelation of Jesus Christ.'*

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