

Name of Book: Faith and Reason (Fides et Ratio)

Author: Pope John Paul II

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Central Theme

Although the encyclical is titled *Faith and Reason*, its central theme is truth, ultimate truth. In it Christian faith is proposed as an option for truth. The background of the encyclical is the contemporary philosophical currents of our time like skepticism and relativism which deny the possibility of certitude and holds to the non-existence of ultimate truth. In response, the encyclical asserts:

Although time changes and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole... These are among the indications that, beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity (#4).

This body of knowledge is found in the Christian faith wherein the ultimate truth is the truth of revelation "...the word of God which she has received in faith" #7. It is important to bear the horizon of ultimate truth being explored in the encyclical in mind, for it sets the strength of the encyclical as well as its limitations so that we do not expect from the encyclical what it does not set out to explore.

The encyclical sets about its task by setting out the nature of its truth, its relation with reason as a foundation, as well as its reliance on reason, the role of the Magisterium as guarantor of ultimate truth, some competing conceptions of our time, relation of philosophy and theology and the present tasks of theology today.

Ultimate truth

Following Vatican I document *Dei Filius*, the encyclical distinguished **the truth of revelation** and **the truth of philosophical wisdom** as two orders of truth neither identical nor mutually exclusive. The truth of philosophical wisdom and the sciences function within the order of natural reason; while the truth of faith enlightened and guided by the Spirit, recognizes the ultimate truth, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ also considered "absolute truth" (#15). Faith here "is said first to be an obedient response to God" (#13). "By faith, men and women give their assent to this divine testimony. This means that they acknowledge fully and integrally the truth of what is revealed because it is God himself who is the guarantor" (13). Knowledge proper to faith looks beyond signs to grasp the deeper mystery which they bear. It does not destroy mystery; it only reveals it the more showing how necessary it is for people's lives. It is a gift of revelation and disposes reason to greater depths and impels it to extend its range to mystery. The truth of faith has great influence on the truth of philosophical wisdom. The encyclical states:

“Revelation therefore introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort; indeed it impels reason continually to extend the range of its knowledge until it senses that it has done all in its power, leaving no stone unturned” (#14).

Knowledge of Reason and knowledge of faith

The relationship between reason and faith is treated in two ways: emphasis is placed on their complementarity and on the responsibility of each for the other.

Using the Wisdom books the encyclical argues that knowledge of reason and knowledge of faith are complementary (#28). “Reason observes and analyses reality with faith not being left out... Faith intervenes solely to bring the human being to understand that in these events it is the God of Israel who acts” (16).

“Reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way. In faith and reason God and human beings are in a unique relationship. So to be unique to itself, reason must realize that human knowledge is a journey which allows no rest; it must be aware of its inability to know everything by itself; and it must be founded on the fear of God (#18).

As if confronting the enemy of human reason in our time, the encyclical remarks that human reason is not limited to the merely sensory or perceptible reality, but has the capacity of self-transcendence aided by faith:

Not only is it not restricted to sensory knowledge, from the moment that it can reflect critically upon the data of the senses, but, by discoursing on the data provided by the senses, reason can reach the cause which lies at the origin of all perceptible reality (#22).

So there are different modes of truth:

- *truths of immediate experience* – of everyday life and scientific reason
- *philosophical truth* – attained by means of the speculative powers of the human intellect.
- *Religious truth* – grounded in philosophy and found in answers which different religious traditions offer to the ultimate questions
- *Countless truths* not acquired by way of personal verification but based on trust.

Bifurcation of Faith and Reason

While the relationship between faith and reason continued well into the medieval period, what the encyclical called “exaggerated rationalism” bifurcated the relationship resulting in atheism “which regards faith as alienating and damaging to the development of full rationality” (#46). Specific mention was made to some philosophical currents that bifurcated the relationship.

- *Positivism* – positivistic mentality abandoned the Christian vision of the world rejecting every appeal to a metaphysical or moral vision
- *Nihilism* – reduced life to sensations until everything was considered ephemeral. The encyclical was specific: “Nihilism is at the root of the widespread mentality which claims that a definitive commitment should no longer be made, because everything is fleeting and provisional” (#46).
- *Change in the role of philosophy* from universal wisdom and learning to a merely marginal role as one of the many fields of human knowing (#47).
- *Other forms of rationality* concerned not with a contemplation of truth and search for the ultimate goal and meaning of life; but as instrumental reason directed towards the promotion of utilitarian ends, towards enjoyment or power” (#47).

The bifurcation has been consequentially negative for faith and reason. Reason lost sight of its ultimate goal while faith became distorted giving way to superstition and I dare say fundamentalism. The encyclical states this clearer:

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. By the same token, reason which is unrelated to an adult faith is not prompted to turn its gaze to the newness and radicality of being (#48).

The role of the Magisterium

This is in line with the encyclical’s notion of faith as “universal proposition”. The Magisterium condemns Fideism and radical traditionalism on the one hand and rationalism and ontologism on the other (#52). Guiding the deposit of faith, – truth as revealed.

Situation Today

- Deep-seated distrust of reason leading to the position of “the end of metaphysics” #55 (e.g. Habermas’ linguistic of the sacred).
- In theology a certain rationalism is gaining ground especially when opinions thought to be philosophically well founded are taking as normative for metaphysical research #55.
- Signs of a resurgence of fideism which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God.
- The reading and exegesis of sacred scripture as made the sole criterion of truth. Thus identification of the word of God with sacred scripture alone, thus eliminating the doctrine of the Church #55.
- Disdain for speculative theology.

The encyclical once more x-rays the situation in the world today concerning truth, wisdom, philosophy, knowledge:

In brief, there are signs of a widespread distrust of universal and absolute statements especially among those who think that truth is born of consensus and not of a consonance between intellect and objective reality (#56).

The Interaction between Philosophy and Theology

His conclusion is very clear. It should be circular starting with the word of God as guide reason seeks to understand ultimate truth itself and applies in practical life the word of God so understood.

In the light of these considerations, the relationship between theology and philosophy is best construed as a circle. Theologian's source and starting point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word increases with each passing generation (#73)

Proposals

1 Philosophy to recover its basic nature as search for ultimate meaning in life and to direct scientific research in that light. That is, to become once more 'sapientia' wisdom.

2 Philosophy should verify the human capacity to know, to come to a knowledge which can reach objective truth.

3 The need for a philosophy of genuinely metaphysical range, capable, that is, of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth #83.

We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone; even if experience does reveal the human being's interiority and spirituality, speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it arises. Therefore a philosophy which shuns metaphysics would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation (#83).

Final proposal is affirmative of human being's capacity for philosophical and theological enquiry: "I wish to reaffirm strongly the conviction that the human being can come to a unified and organic vision of knowledge." (#85) Of course rootedness in Christian tradition is a requirement for such organic vision of knowledge:

Precisely by being rooted in the tradition will we be able today to develop for the future an original, new and constructive mode of thinking" (# 85)

If the continuity of Christian tradition is abandoned certain consequences will follow as are the case now:

- eclecticism – the use of philosophies without regard to their historical context and their unity within the whole philosophical system (#86)
- historicism – the view that the appropriateness of the truth of philosophy is determined on the basis of a historical period or epoch. "Therefore historicism denies the enduring validity of truth. (#87)
- scientism – which is a revival of positivism is the philosophical notion which refuses to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the

positive sciences; and it relegates religions, metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic knowledge to the realm of mere fantasy. It “dismisses values as mere products of the emotions and rejects the notion of being in order to clear the way for pure and simple facticity” (# 88).

- Pragmatism – an attitude of mind which in making its choices, precludes theoretical considerations or judgments based on ethical principles.
- Nihilism – the end product of all these errors is nihilistic interpretation “which is at once the denial of all foundations and the negation of all objective truth” (#90).

The Task of Theology

The chief purpose of theology is to provide an understanding of Revelation and the content of faith. The very heart of theological enquiry will thus be the contemplation of the mystery of the Triune God” (# 93). In this theology has to solve the problem of the relation of meaning and truth and the enduring validity of the conceptual language used in conciliar documents.

Another task of theology is the understanding of revealed truth, or the articulation of the *intellectus fidei* (# 97). To do this theology must turn to the philosophy of being “set within the Christian metaphysical tradition.

Appraisal

The encyclical clearly situates the relationship between faith and reason. The philosophical currents that bifurcate faith and reason especially relativism of our time is *ad rem* to the present day reality not only theologically but also epistemologically as well as morally. This is because relativism’s individualistic morality accounts for each man for himself and God for us all morality that denies the transcendental principles of being: truth, goodness, oneness, and beauty.

Difficulties

The major difficulty of the encyclical is the non-differentiation between faith and belief. One gets the impression that faith is belief in revealed doctrines. Thus faith as a personal relationship is put in jeopardy. Is faith the same thing as belief? Does one move by belief in the revealed truths to an act of faith and unto personal relationship with God?

Another unclarified position of the encyclical is the role of the Magisterium as the guardian of the deposit of faith. That office will surely be problematic to Protestants, who would view it as human authority taking the place of God, or in Paul Tillich’s words the Church taking the place of the ultimate concern. Although, the encyclical is very clear on the office of the Magisterium as the authoritative interpretation of the deposit of faith.

The encyclical raises once more the deeper question of revelation, preservation of revelation, etc.

Conclusion

In unmistakable terms, if read unbiasedly the encyclical obviously clarifies faith and reason in our time. It is comprehensive and provocative.