

When Understanding Seeks Faith: Does Religion Offer Resources for the Renewal of Contemporary Rationality?

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I

CAN FAITH be reasonable? Can reason be faith-full? The question of faith and reason and how they are related is a question that is fundamental to Christianity throughout its history. It emerges within each epoch in new forms and shapes. One could write an entire history of Christianity merely along these lines.

A prominent debate in our own times illustrates this well: the debate between evolutionary theory on the one hand,¹ and the various theories of intelligent design² or “creationism” on the other. Secular reason in the form of modern science seems at odds with Christian faith with regard to the origin of the world, especially within the realm of biology, but also within anthropology, that is, in the understanding of our very selves, our bodies, brains, and behaviors. It remains to be seen whether both sides are mortal enemies or whether bridges can be built. Where the fight is fiercest, we can hear the age-old themes of the irreconcilability of faith and reason re-emerge: there is the secularist rejection of faith by reason as “superstition,” as well as the fundamentalist rejection of reason by faith as “work of the devil.” Most Christians, though, might have settled for the

¹ Prominently and polemically represented by the “new atheism” of Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), and Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Press, 2006).

² For intelligent design, cf. especially Michael J. Behe, *The Edge of Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

idea of “double truth”: one thing as true within science, the contrary as true within faith. This kind of schizophrenia or compartmentalization is itself irrational, a form of thoughtlessness. It is only plausible until we reflect on the relationship between these two allegedly separate realms of truth and acknowledge that we cannot rationally understand how they can coexist.

How, then, *do* we understand their relationship? In the reflections that follow, I would like to suggest a brief answer to this problem, for I believe that understanding the relationship between faith and reason can also provide us with a deeper understanding of reason itself and how it is intrinsically open to faith.

Generally speaking, the debate between evolutionary theory and intelligent design is framed by the question of whether there are features within the world of biology that cannot be the work of chance, but must be the outcome of an intelligent source that has intentionally designed them. There seem to be cases in which a process of random mutation and survival of the fittest could not possibly account for the arrangement of features in certain organisms. But evolutionary theory appeals to a course of development that is completed only over a long period of time (millions of years), a time in which any necessary mutations could plausibly occur. In addition, proponents of a pure evolution theory rightly object that intelligent design can never be proven, for tomorrow science may discover unexpected mechanisms responsible for these features.³ Framed in this way, the debate can indeed lead nowhere, since it would depend on empirical research that is potentially never ending.

This picture changes if we widen its frame to include the hidden presupposition on both sides of the issue: evolution theory as well as intelligent design theory focus almost exclusively on the laws of biology, yet biological laws presuppose those of *physics*. The laws of physics, like those of gravity, of the acceleration of objects in a free fall, or even of the merely statistical probabilities in quantum mechanics, are universal laws that are applicable everywhere in the universe at all times; they can be formulated with mathematical certainty and allow for the prediction of certain events. When evolutionary biology speaks about random mutations, characterizing biological features as the outcome of mere chance, they do not intend to question the laws of physics in the name of chance

³ We might say with Cardinal Avery Dulles (“God and Evolution,” *First Things*, October 2007: 19–24): “As a matter of policy, it is imprudent to build one’s case for faith on what science has not yet explained, because tomorrow it may be able to explain what it cannot explain today. History teaches us that the ‘God of the gaps’ often proves to be an illusion.”

as well. Even the purportedly random mutations in the genome are the result of physical causalities. To question the laws of physics would be considered unscientific and irrational by virtually anyone. They are the most advanced expression of secular rationality we have; our modern technology is based on them.

But where do these laws come from? Laws, including physical laws, are forms of order and regularity. They render reality intelligible and rationally comprehensible rather than irrational and chaotic. While theories of intelligent design claim to see the hand of God in certain biological features, these theories commonly miss the fact that the much more unquestioned feature of *physical* regularity needs an explanation as well. This explanation cannot also be the outcome of randomness or chance. Regularity must be presupposed by chance; chance as such is possible only on the background of a regularity which it interrupts, otherwise the very term “chance” would be meaningless.⁴ We are left, then, with a pressing question: Who told nature to behave this way? Why does nature “obey” the laws of physics? Is not *this* the primary feature that cries out for an intelligent designer? Order itself cannot be the outcome of chance, for chance requires order, and order requires a cause, while chance and chaos do not, since they are just the absence of order.⁵

We all know this instinctively. Let us consider a simple example:

Imagine you are hiking somewhere in the mountains. At some point, you see to the right of the trail two bottles of beer, three cigarette butts, and an old suitcase. Your first reaction would likely be: “How disgusting! Who would litter this beautiful mountainside!” But you continue on your hike. A mile later, you come across a similar scene: two bottles of beer, three cigarette butts, and an old suitcase. At this point, you might say: “What a coincidence that the same kinds of things should appear again in the same configuration! What are the chances of that?” Another mile later, you look to the right, and—lo and behold!—once again there are two bottles of beer, three cigarette butts, and an old suitcase. By now you are likely to think, “This cannot be an accident! Someone must be doing this *intentionally!*”

So you progress from disgust to a sense of wonderment over mere chance to an assumption of intentional arrangement. And this assumption

⁴ Chance is the privation of regularity. Exceptions *as such* prove the rule. Furthermore, chance is not a positive reality in its own right, hence it does not cause anything. Chance can be a “cause” only in the sense that other causalities intersect “by chance” (which is itself a metaphorical expression). But for there to be chance, there must already be intelligible structures of causality having a certain regularity, which make possible the intersection of causes occurring “by chance.”

⁵ Nothing can come from nothing; but nothing (absence) *can* come from nothing.

of intentional arrangement will increase with every time you come across the scenario. Why? Because there is increasing regularity, and we instinctively know that regularity requires a cause. We do not, for instance, look for a cause for the way trees are arranged along the trail on the mountainside, precisely because they are standing there irregularly; it would not occur to us to ask for a cause in such a case, since irregularity and chaos do not require a cause; they indicate, rather, the absence of a cause. But if there were trees standing in a perfect row, we would naturally assume that someone arranged them.

If we take this to the level of a regularity that applies to the whole of reality, the entire cosmos, then the cause of this regularity cannot again be *in* the cosmos. It cannot be just one cause among others, since such a cause orders all inner-worldly causes among one another. Only an ultimate cause could account for the regularity among causes, and that is what we call God.⁶

If this is so, then it is precisely the science that, since the time of Galileo, seemed to undermine faith with its mathematical laws of nature, which implies a God who orders the universe. Without God, science would lose its subject matter: an intelligible structure of the universe that can be investigated through observation and experiment. Without God there would be nothing to know, no laws to discover, no cosmos, only chaos. The early physicists understood this. Newton, Leibniz, Kepler, and almost every other physicist of note in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed in intelligent design in this sense. Even many modern-day physicists, unlike many biologists, still marvel at the order of the universe, even though they might not ask further questions about the ultimate origin of this order. Without intelligent design, therefore, there is no intelligibility to reality. It is something that can merely be assumed, but without any reasonable foundation.

Another assumption surrounding modern science is that the simplest and most economical explanation of nature is the best. When Galileo

⁶ This argument does not reproduce “Paley’s watch.” It does not argue from purposivity but from regularity, albeit any kind of regularity may ultimately imply purposivity, as Thomas Aquinas holds in his *Fifth Way*. In this strong sense, even efficient causality would not be intelligible without final causality. Similarly, E. Stein and E. Husserl find mechanical causality intelligible only as an abstraction from motivation, from which it would remain derivative (for example, R. Bernet/I. Kern/E. Marbach, *Edmund Husserl* [Hamburg: Meiner, 1996], 153). Hobbes, Spinoza, and others had proposed inertia as a non-teleological principle, but also as a form of self-preservation (which is a teleological principle). See Hobbes, *De Corpore*, VIII, 19 and *Leviathan*, II.

proposed his new system, for instance, it promised to explain the movements of the heavens by laws that were simpler than those of the old Ptolemaic system used during the middle ages. The old explanation seemed outdated, because it was uneconomic. But why should economy be an argument for or against a scientific theory? The old Aristotelian system accounted for the movements of the heavens just as much as the new one did. It made reasonably accurate predictions. Why would we assume that the simpler explanation is the truer or better one? This is merely an assumption, as Immanuel Kant acknowledged.⁷ But this assumption is rooted in the idea of an *intelligent design* in the universe. We instinctively believe that there is not only someone who designed the universe, but also one who is supremely knowing and wise, arranging things in the best possible and most efficient manner. As we have said, philosophers and scientists in the seventeenth century still actively held this belief and explained Newton's laws of mechanics accordingly.⁸ It is only on the basis of such a belief that the assumption that the simpler explanation is the better, that is, truer, explanation can be justified.⁹

In fact, the very idea that the universe is governed by a universal set of physical laws *in its entirety* is also an assumption. Newton did not intend

⁷ Cf. Kant on the regulative use of the ideas of pure reason (*Vernunft*) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, B670/A642–B696/A668. For “Ockham’s razor” cf. B680/A652; teleological principles and the systematic unity of the whole of reality are also discussed in B704/A676–B732/A704. Similarly, R. Swinburne has pointed out that this is a metaphysical presupposition of science; cf. R. Swinburne, *Simplicity as Evidence of Truth* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997).

⁸ For example, N. Malebranche, *Recherches de la Vérité, Eclaircissement sur chap. IV de la 2e partie de la Méthode*. Cf. also L. Scheffczyk, *Schöpfung und Vorsehung* (= Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte III, 2a) (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 190.

⁹ This argument does not apply to those scientists who actually *deny* that there is any order in the universe. Nietzsche had done so, indicating (as Rorty would later do) that the belief in the intelligibility of the universe presupposes the existence of God (which was indeed the way Descartes had argued for the intelligibility of the universe, as we will see), rather than the other way around, thus making the same point in reverse. If there is no intelligible structure to reality, however, then scientists would not explore and *discover* an order to the universe, only *impose* one on it; in such a case, the use of simpler hypotheses could be justified only for *pragmatic* reasons (that is, they are easier to manipulate). My argument here is not with this position. It should be noted, however, that this pragmatist approach cannot explain the success of some hypotheses and the failure of others. In fact, *all* hypotheses are errors, some being useful and others not—why is this the case? An unorganized reality would have no structure that could agree or disagree with a scientist’s construction. Purely pragmatic premises could support no intelligible notion of truth as agreement of theory and reality. After all, the very notion of a mind-independent reality, a “thing in itself” (even if unknowable) or a “true

his laws to explain only what might occur in London, or in Europe, or even on the earth as a whole, but the movement of all the stars (including those stars that cannot even be seen), that is, to account for movement universally. But how could one ever prove a theory's universal applicability? We might say, of course, that we now know that everything began with the big bang. Since everything comes from one source, everything must behave uniformly. But how can we be sure of that? If the big bang is true, it is something we know of only because we have already presupposed that everything behaves uniformly and in the same way, in obedience to the same set of physical laws (for instance, that there is a constant rate of expansion of the universe away from a central point in an intelligible pattern), so that we are able to extrapolate back to this big bang. This is the *only* possible access we have to such an event.

But more fundamentally, any claim that reality is governed by universal laws of motion must remain simply a claim. No laboratory experiment can prove it; no empirical observation of reality can provide evidence for it. *As a matter of principle*, experiment and observation only provide *samples* of reality, never reality as a whole. A leap from examples to universal laws remains to be made. It is a leap of *faith*.

It is evident, then, that secular reason and science depend on a faith of some sort. This faith need not be of a revealed sort, nor a faith in God's self-communication through Jesus of Nazareth, nor a faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible. But there must be some kind of faith in the source of the universe as intelligent, almighty, and eternally reliable. Richard Dawkins and the new atheists will cringe at this. But there can be no escape from the conclusion.

Even if scientific inquiry entails a kind of faith, it is a faith reason can discover on its own; no special revelation is required, for it is implicated in reason's own procedures. This discovery, in fact, is tantamount to a liberation of reason from the limits imposed by modern secularist ideology. Modern distortions of reason have their root particularly in the eighteenth-

world," presupposes or anticipates a view from nowhere, that is, God's view. The purely logical consequence of this view is solipsism. It is no coincidence that Hume not only denies strict laws of nature, but claims that "we really never advance a step beyond ourselves." *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: 1987), bk. I, part II, sect. VI. Conversely, Descartes must prove the existence of God in order to show that there is something more than the *cogito*; the very thought of ourselves as finite is only intelligible against the horizon of the infinite (that is, solipsism cannot even be thought without God). These arguments have been developed especially by R. Spaemann; cf., for example, R. Spaemann, "Gottesbeweise nach Nietzsche," in *Das unsterbliche Gerücht* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2007), 37–53.

century Enlightenment, which denied that the world beyond the senses was open to rational investigation. Though it was possible to formulate laws for observable nature, no meaningful inquiry could be made into their origin or the reason for their applicability to the material world. This use of reason was driven in many ways by polemics against the Church or revealed religion of any kind. Belief in revealed religion was often caricatured as fanaticism or superstition (not unlike today); political consequences during this time (that is, during the French Revolution) therefore included not only the king and aristocracy being sent to the block, but clergy and religious as well.¹⁰

What becomes evident politically is the oppressive aspect of this severely limited Enlightenment reasoning, that is, its one-sidedness. Other cultural expressions of the time (for example, the rebellion of the darkness within the human subconscious) witness to this: Francisco Goya's drawings of the *Dream of Reason Which Gives Birth to Monsters* or his drawings from the terrors of the war in Spain, or Sarastro's relationship with the "Queen of the Night" in Mozart's *Magic Flute*.¹¹ In excluding its other half, Enlightenment reason itself becomes irrational. Adorno and Horkheimer see this as the very logic of totalitarianism, which they have called the "Dialectic of the Enlightenment": Enlightenment reason, in its attempt to subject nature to human control and thereby liberate the human person, becomes a merely *instrumental* reason. Such reason is driven by the very powers of nature it attempted to subject, namely fear, power, and the anxiety over prospects for survival. Progress thus becomes destructive and oppressive of its very subject.¹²

The one-sidedness of enlightenment reason is revealed not only in the political exclusion of certain segments of the population, or of contributions of certain "non-rational" parts of the human psyche in human life, but above all in the exclusion of *faith* from the realm of reason—as if it were an enemy rather than an ally.

As a further consequence, faith is consistently seen as irrational. In this light, conversion seems arbitrary. As Alasdair MacIntyre tells it, St. Edith Stein hoped that her philosopher colleagues would understand that her

¹⁰ The development of this form of thought has been described in Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Robert Spaemann once suggested that the best resolution to the *Magic Flute* would be for Sarastro to marry the Queen of the Night. Cf. R. Spaemann, "Ende der Modernität?" in *Philosophische Essays* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), 259–60.

¹² M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

conversion to Catholicism was not a move toward the irrational.¹³ Embracing God's revelation in Jesus Christ is certainly an act of faith. The content of faith cannot be deduced from reason, that is, demonstrated like $2 + 2 = 4$, but involves the decision or free assent of a believer. It also involves a freely given grace, which reason cannot presume to receive, and a revelation which God freely chooses to give, for on its own reason could never have predicted that God would take up our human nature in the Incarnation.¹⁴ God's free decision to do so could not have been deduced or predicted by reason. These three decisions, God's decision to reveal himself and save us, his decision to give us the grace to believe in this revelation, and our decision to assent to this grace of faith, are beyond human rationality's ability to foresee.

But this does not make conversion irrational. Such a position would necessarily imply that any manifestation of free will would be essentially irrational and unreasonable. Stein was able to point out that faith, although it cannot be deduced from reason, is *not outside* the boundaries of reason, nor contrary to it. Faith itself can and should be a philosophical topic. Reason in fact would be unreasonable if it should exclude anything from possible consideration. "If faith makes accessible truth unattainable by any other means, philosophy . . . cannot forego them without renouncing its universal claim to truth."¹⁵ As rational, philosophy is universal and all-encompassing. It is the form of thought that explores the ultimate and universal intelligibility of all reality. But faith, too, is an exploration of reality's intelligibility, for faith likewise proposes an explanation of the ultimate ground of all reality, for example, when it speaks of the creation of the cosmos. It gives an account of the intelligibility of the world, even of rationality itself! Without replacing reason's principles, it suggests to reason something about its own origins. How could philosophy remain true to itself while ignoring what faith has to say? And how could reason exclude faith if it is part of the reality it proposes to explain?

Edith Stein has made the astute observation that Enlightenment reason commits itself to a paradox if, with Kant, it seeks to determine its

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue: 1913–1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 179–81.

¹⁴ Whether the Incarnation would have happened even without Adam's sin depends on God's will, and therefore can be known only by revelation: "Ea enim quae ex sola Dei voluntate proveniunt, supra omne debitum creaturae, nobis innotescere non possunt nisi quatenus in sacra Scriptura traduntur, per quam divina voluntas innotescit." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 1, a. 3.

¹⁵ MacIntyre, *Edith Stein*, 180 (MacIntyre quoting Stein).

own limitations *a priori*. In order to know a limit, we must already be on both sides of a boundary; that is, we must have already exceeded it. Reason transgresses its own limits in the very act of determining them. Though this had already been argued by Hegel, Stein's counterargument is not a Hegelian absolutizing of reason, but the suggestion that reason needs an Other with which it can dialogue. This is faith. Only in the light of faith can reason know its limits, since it is, at the same time, being elevated to further horizons.¹⁶

Our considerations of intelligent design have shown how reason becomes narrow, superficial, and ultimately unreasonable if it is isolated from questions of faith. Nothing in evolutionary theory as such need exclude the idea of an intelligent ordering of the world; in fact, this theory must presuppose such an order, at least on the physical level. Biological thinking, then, is intrinsically susceptible to a religious interpretation insofar as it is concerned with articulating an order within reality, an order that does not rule out chance occurrence on the biological level. Scientific reason is by its own nature geared towards these questions. Reason itself demands liberation from the self-imposed shackles of the Enlightenment. The struggle, therefore, is not between faith and reason, but between two understandings of reason: one that is open to faith, and another which has narrowed itself so as to become hostile to faith. Such narrowness ultimately makes reason irrational, since it lacks any understanding of its own nature.

II

Obviously, a rationalistic opposition to faith will not only have problems with Christianity, but with any kind of faith. It excludes the possibility of any rational discussion about God, should he exist at all. Nations and secular institutions based on this exclusion will naturally have difficulty finding a place for the faiths and religions espoused by members of their own populations. God and religion would necessarily be relegated to a purely private sphere or the sacristy. If reason does not apply to matters of religion, then religion must be merely a matter of sentiment or a matter of the heart. And it had better stay there, and not venture to shape speech or action. Reason, after all, is the sphere of universality, of public discourse, and something common to all human beings, while feelings are private and particular, like personal taste. And, as we know, it is useless to argue about taste—whether spinach tastes good or not, for example. So likewise religion has to be kept out of the realm of public reasoning. Were

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

faith to really answer to such a description, it would either evaporate into nothing, or it would indeed be a blind, emotionally-driven fanaticism. This, the Enlightenment's understanding of faith, produces a split between the modern secular state and religion, giving rise to an antagonism marked by persecution and terrorism. The culmination of such thinking is the violent, anti-clerical acts of the French Revolution, or the modern secularist tendency to eliminate all trace of religion from the public sphere. It will in turn push religions out of the sphere of public reasoning that would allow them to develop an appropriate reasonable self-understanding, thus provoking non-rational reactions of violence.

Since more substantial commitments fall outside of its field of vision, the only common denominator for this narrow kind of reason is modern technology. As Carl Schmitt put it at the beginning of the 1920s, Lenin and the capitalist actually have a common goal: the electrification of the planet.¹⁷ They can both agree on technology. What was true then is true now: Al Qaeda and the C.I.A. can both agree on the importance of computer technology. It is the lowest common denominator, the means to mutually assured destruction.¹⁸

But just as purely secularist reason is not neutral, but itself a position among others (that is, a particular form of one-sided reason or ideology), so too the expulsion of religion from the public sphere is not a neutral position. Allowing no hint of God in the public sphere is tantamount to declaring God dead. An atheist faith is proclaimed through silence and absence. If, on the other hand, God exists, it would be shown by the lives of believing peoples. Atheism is not a neutral position, nor is religious fanaticism the only alternative; rather, a public square is needed in which religious discourse and symbolism are permitted, so that belief might be tested and purified by reason and dialogue.¹⁹ As it is, however, the modern secular West has no way of speaking with the great religious

¹⁷ Without endorsing C. Schmitt's later political aberrations, one can appreciate this insight in his earlier work, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (1925) (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 22.

¹⁸ I am using the "C.I.A." as a *chiffre* for the military power of the secular West. It is meant to highlight a constellation of issues, not to morally evaluate what otherwise might be a legitimate set of concerns and strategies.

¹⁹ Here Habermas's demand that religion should translate its beliefs into the public realm of reason is legitimate, closely paralleling the emphasis that J. Ratzinger has placed on the inherent rationality of Christianity. Cf. J. Ratzinger and J. Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). The limit to this translation would be the "life-worldly" roots of faith (Habermas) and the contingent premises of faith-statements which, although not *contra rationem*, remain *supra rationem*.

traditions or of facilitating their conversations among each other. But if there is no rational way of communicating about what most deeply moves us, then relationships among different communities of belief will increasingly move from questions of truth to questions of power, to mere rhetoric and, ultimately, violence.²⁰ Only a form of reason that has not degenerated into mere technological thinking can help to prevent this.

III

This, however, is not just a challenge to the secularist West, but also to the world's great religions, Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike. If religions refuse to engage the state and each other in rational dialogue, then they are as responsible for the developing disaster as purely secularist distortions of reason.

Whether Muslims are ready to participate in thoughtful dialogue, however, is a controversial question. Pope Benedict XVI was attacked for referring to the dialogue between the Emperor Emmanuel and a Muslim from the fourteenth century, and for quoting a French Islamologist who presented Islam as a belief in a God who is beyond rationality and even free from obligations to his own promises.²¹ That the Holy Father had also pointed to similar developments within Christianity (not just in modern day fundamentalism, but much earlier, within the Catholic Christianity of the late medieval period) had been lost on most of his listeners. These developments actually *preceded* the emergence of modern secularist thought: before reason excluded faith from itself in the period of the Enlightenment, faith had excluded reason from itself in late medieval Nominalism.

Fourteenth-century thinkers like Duns Scotus or William of Ockham limited reason's access to God, deriving human knowledge of God increasingly from revealed matters of faith alone. Though there is still a rational knowledge of God for Scotus, it is severely limited: by reason alone we cannot know God's omnipresence, justice, omnipotence, or providence.²² Ockham denied that reason could really manifest God in any genuine sense. As a Nominalist, he denied the existence of universal structures that make reality intelligible and indicate an intelligent designer; there are no ideas in God to correspond to what he has created. There is no teleological principle in the structure of the cosmos to reveal God as its ultimate goal;²³ not even the principle of causality can give the world any

²⁰ Nietzsche said it first and perhaps most clearly; modern versions, such as Rorty's, are less forceful and do not acknowledge the inherent potential for violence.

²¹ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address.

²² Cf., for example, Scotus, *De primo principio* 4, 86.

²³ Ockham, *Quodlibet* IV, 1 and 2.

predictability or general order.²⁴ God only creates individual things, and his omnipotence and choice are only limited by the principle of non-contradiction—which, in Ockham's analyses, is not much of a limitation at all. Everything is viewed by Ockham through the lens of God's omnipotence; and curiously, even this omnipotence can be known only by faith, not by unaided reason.²⁵ Thus human reason cannot reach God, but can only know what is found empirically before it. By its factual existence, we know that the world was made by God in this particular and contingent way, but this alone tells us nothing about God himself. Our only access to God is through faith, not reason, since reason is limited to factual observance of particular individuals as God has made them. In this respect the Enlightenment's position (in the form that Kant gave it, for instance) existed long before the Enlightenment. The position of the late medieval Nominalists, however, was not motivated by a secularist rejection of faith, but by a pious theological consideration: God is completely free and omnipotent, able to create and change the order of all that exists as he wishes.

This includes not only the laws of nature, but also the laws of morality. For Scotus, for instance, everything other than God is good only because God has willed it so, and not vice versa.²⁶ In his *potentia absoluta* God could have made the second tablet of the Decalogue entirely different, although he could not change the first tablet that commands us to love him.²⁷ For Ockham, however, God could even have written a moral law into our hearts that commands us to hate him—and could still do so today.²⁸ He is not bound by his own commandments, promises, or covenants. This position indeed resembles that kind of Islamic theology that has been quoted by Pope Benedict XVI in his Regensburg address.

Thus, whatever we encounter in observable reality—or even in our hearts—could have been otherwise. It therefore can reveal nothing to us

²⁴ Ockham, II *Quaestiones in librum secundum sententiarum*, qq. 4 and 5. The articles of faith will appear false especially to people of wisdom: “[A]rticuli fidei nec sunt principia demonstrationis nec conclusiones, nec sunt probabiles, quia omnibus uel pluribus uel maxime sapientibus apparent falsi. Et hoc accipiendo sapientes pro sapientibus mundi et praecise innitentibus rationi naturali, quia illo modo accipitur ‘sapiens’ in descriptione probabilis.” *Summa Logicae*, 3–1.01 *De divisionibus et definitionibus syllogismorum*. For Ockham, even the unicity of God, his infinity, eternity, his power to create *creatio ex nihilo*, and his knowledge of things other than himself are mere matters of faith, not knowledge and reason.

²⁵ Ockham, II *Quaestiones in librum secundum sententiarum*, d. 1, q. 4 and *Quodlibet*. I, 1; VI, 6.

²⁶ Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, d. 19, q. un. n. 7.

²⁷ Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 44, n. 6 and *Reportatio* IV, d. 46, q. 4.

²⁸ Ockham, IV *Quaestiones in librum secundum sententiarum*, d. 1, qq. 10–11 and 16.

about God himself, except that he has decided that things should be thus and so. It shows us God's decision, but not God himself. God becomes a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God who disappears behind purely arbitrary decisions.²⁹ God begins to resemble an absolutist ruler or tyrant who does not appear in public, whose unpredictable or arbitrary whims paralyze his subjects with fear and trembling.³⁰

This kind of thinking is still active in the seventeenth-century philosophy of René Descartes and, with him, all of early modern science and secular humanism.³¹ For Descartes, mathematical models of nature correspond to God's arbitrary choice of this particular order for nature and for reason itself. God could have wired our minds and ordered nature in a completely different way.³² He could have made it possible for us to think $2 + 2 = 5$ clearly and distinctly, that is, in such a way that it would be true.³³ For Descartes, as for Ockham, nature and reason cannot tell us

²⁹ While early Christianity had understood itself as *vera philosophia*, displaying an optimistic understanding of the use of reason, it has now arrived at the very opposite end of the spectrum; both sides, however, can claim roots in the very essence of Christianity.

³⁰ Not untypically these kinds of theologies tend to unite with authoritarian forms of government.

³¹ Cf. A. Ramelow, "Truth Makers: On Robert Miner's Genealogy of the Genealogists," *Nova et Vetera* 5:3 (2007): 647–706, esp. 658–62 and 682–89. If the Protestant Reformation is skeptical about the use of philosophy and human reason, then this may stem from the same late medieval roots. While these roots are controverted (cf., for example, Thomas M. Osborne, "Faith, Philosophy, and the Nominalist Background to Luther's Defense of the Real Presence," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 [2002]: 63–82), it might be possible to show that modern day fundamentalism's creationism and the science that it is rejecting share the same Nominalist roots.

³² Generally speaking, God's will is immutable (this might not be the case for Ockham), God choosing once and for all from eternity. He is, however, completely indifferent regarding what he chooses. (Cf. C. Cuning, "Descartes on the Immutability of the Divine Will," *Religious Studies* 39:1 [2003]: 79–92). "And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it." Descartes, letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1904), 4:118–19; *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, ed. R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 235.

³³ "You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause." Descartes, letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, *Oeuvres* 1:152, *Philosophical Writings*, 25. "You ask what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are

much about God. At the most, we know only the infinite perfection of a God who is not a deceiver (*genius malignus*). This knowledge, of course, depends on our having “clear and distinct ideas,” while the truth of these ideas is derived from God’s decisions. This is sufficient for Descartes’s purposes, however, for in his philosophy God’s only role is to bridge the gap between subject and object: he guarantees that we are wired with the same mathematical ideas as those which truly apply to actual objects in nature.³⁴ But neither kind of “wiring” tells us anything more about God than that he chose this particular “program.” Our reasoning is shut off from God, who is then given no further thought.

In other words, a God who is an arbitrary tyrant eliminates himself from the picture. Nevertheless, as soon as this kind of reasoning grasps its full implications and its own operative motives, it will become aware that at the root of its thought is this deep seated belief: God is an arbitrary tyrant, not a trustworthy father. This way of thinking, in the words of Descartes (although he himself does not want this to be his last word on God), holds God to be something like a *genius malignus*, an evil spirit, and that this is the truth about reality at large. We are, therefore, and will always be like slaves who do not know what their master is doing, rather than children in communion with their loving father. This distorted image is the deepest root of an underlying despair in our age.³⁵ It moti-

equal—just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things.” Ibid. “God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore . . . he could have done the opposite.” Descartes, letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, *Oeuvres* 4:118, *Philosophical Writings*, 235. “I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3.” Descartes, letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648, *Oeuvres* 5:224, *Philosophical Writings*, 358–59. Cf. also M. Osler, “Eternal Truths and the Laws of Nature: The Theological Foundations of Descartes’ Philosophy of Nature,” *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 46 (1985): 349–62.

³⁴ This is the function of the proof for the existence of God, which then guarantees (in a somewhat circular fashion) that our clear and distinct ideas correspond to reality. The paradigm for these ideas is the innate ideas of mathematics and geometry, which is our “hard wiring” as well as the form of modern science. Cf. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, esp. *Meditations* 3–5.

³⁵ A similar observation has been made by the psychologist Horst Eberhard Richter; the subsequent emphasis on the root of religion in a feeling of “absolute dependency” (Schleiermacher) might then appear to be an overcompensation of this outlook; cf. M. Frank, *Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen über die neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 45–72.

vates the technologies designed to control all the contingencies of life, making reliance on God unnecessary; it takes the preservation and direction of life into our own hands alone, and precisely because God seems absent. This is behind all attempts at “playing God” in the creation and preservation of human life. It underlies a life dominated by the *conatus sese preservandi*,³⁶ willing not only to shed moral scruples and sanctify any means to its desired end, but also to lose such ends themselves for the sake of the technological means. The more ultimate ends of human existence will narrow to the mere satisfaction of sensual needs, aggravated by an underlying lack of trust fostering anger and greed.³⁷ J. Pieper has hinted at this hidden connection between intemperance and despair.³⁸ Without a genuine understanding of the despair over a “hidden God” an understanding of the contemporary ethical and cultural problems will fail to rise above the level of mere moralistic complaints.

But we do not have to believe in this kind of God. Faith in this kind of God is itself a choice.³⁹ It is a belief in its own right, but not a good one. To make God into a demon is itself demonic. Christianity is, by contrast, a faith in God as Logos, Reason itself, a Reason that has assumed our own human nature in Jesus Christ. While the three monotheistic religions believe that God is supremely free in his decision making (rather than being ruled by necessity or fate), he is, for Christians, also the God who is Love. Hegel understood this better, when he argued against certain agnostic theologians of his time: he emphasized that Plato and Aristotle had already insisted that God cannot be envious, that is, that he is not a God who would begrudge us a share in his divine knowledge. How much more should this be true for the Christian God who is just

³⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics* III, 6, 7.

³⁷ In the domination of ends by means, even sensual ends are often secondary: means and products for their satisfaction are often developed before there is a need to satisfy. It is the *raison d'être* of advertisement, for instance, to produce the needs and the market for such means.

³⁸ J. Pieper, *Zucht und Maß* (Munich: Kösel, 1949), 110f. Cf. also Aquinas, *ST* II–II, q. 153, a. 4, obj. 3: “Praeterea, luxuria causatur ex desperatione, secundum illud Ephes. IV, *qui, desperantes, seipsos tradiderunt impudicitiae.*” And the response: “[D]icendum quod a delectationibus luxuriae praecipue aliqui abstinent propter spem futurae gloriae, quam desperatio subtrahit. Et ideo causat luxuriam sicut removens prohibens, non sicut per se causa . . .” (ibid., ad 3). For an account of nihilism as the fruit of this development of mistrust, see John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, §§45–47. What he says about knowledge, trust, and faith in human friendship (§§31–33) also applies to friendship with God.

³⁹ As we have seen, Ockham himself says that the omnipotence of God, to which he constantly appeals, is a matter of *sola fide*. To believe in this kind of God, therefore, is itself an arbitrary choice, not an insight of reason or a matter of wisdom.

this: self-communication.⁴⁰ Without following Hegel into the extreme conclusion of dissolving faith into reason, this observation should resonate with any faith in the self-revelation of a divine Logos.

IV

This last understanding of the relationship between faith and reason is better captured in other forms of medieval thought, which offer attractive alternatives to Ockham and Scotus. In the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the relationship between faith and reason, philosophy and theology, and reason and free will is carefully balanced. For St. Thomas, faith and reason cannot contradict each other, because both proceed from God.⁴¹ God is not only the one who reveals himself in the light and content of faith; he is also perceptible to us in the very principles of reason we find in ourselves.⁴² These principles are a communication of God's own wisdom. St. Thomas likens God to a wise teacher: if a teacher were to teach a student something contrary to or different from what he knew to be true, that is, his own knowledge, he would be a deceiver or liar. If God therefore equips human nature with principles of rationality that are not his own, he would be subject to this charge. To assume this about God is tantamount to blasphemy, St. Thomas says.⁴³

Nevertheless, it is certainly true that some things do proceed not only from God's wisdom, but also from his free will, a sovereign will that, although it is based in his wisdom, is still supremely free to choose. This choice concerns creation and revelation. That is why we cannot, by

⁴⁰ Hegel makes this point repeatedly; cf., for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, vol. 3 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), 279; he seems to have Plato's *Timaeus*, 29 through 30, in mind here.

⁴¹ For example, Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I, c. 7. Thomas's position was confirmed by the Church at the First Vatican Council: "Even if faith is superior to reason there can never be a true divergence between faith and reason, since the same God who reveals the mysteries and bestows the gift of faith has also placed in the human spirit the light of reason. This God could not deny himself, nor could the truth ever contradict the truth." Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, §4, DS 3017. Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (§§9, 53, and 43), who sees their union confirmed by biblical Wisdom literature, which draws from pagan sources (*ibid.*, §16).

⁴² "Principiorum autem naturaliter notorum cognitio nobis divinitus est indita: cum ipse Deus sit nostrae auctor naturae. Haec ergo principia etiam divina sapientia continet. Quicquid igitur principiis huiusmodi contrarium est, divinae sapientiae contrariatur. Non igitur a Deo esse potest." Aquinas, *ScG* I, c. 7.

⁴³ Cf. Aquinas, *ScG* I, c. 7: "Illud idem quod inducitur in animam discipuli a docente, doctoris scientia continet: nisi doceat ficte, quod de Deo nefas est dicere." This might amount to a strong indictment of Descartes.

reason alone, arrive at the contents of faith.⁴⁴ These contents are acts of God's love, acts which, though not irrational, are a free, unforced communication by God. Reason and faith, therefore, have two different sources: the principles of reason (logic, mathematics, and the like, originating in God's wisdom) on the one hand, and God's free choices as they are revealed to us, on the other. Some things, such as the Incarnation, we know by revelation alone, while other things we can know simply through the use of reason, like biology and mathematics. (There is, consequently, no Catholic mathematics.) And then there are those things we know from *both* sources, such as the existence of God. In those cases, faith helps the weakness of our reason to arrive more safely at conclusions that we could have reached by reason alone. But faith never replaces reason. Rather, reason is the source of understanding faith, that is, of making intelligible what otherwise might remain opaque or inapplicable in our life. Without an understanding of faith by reason, revelation would not enter our hearts; it would not really be revelation at all. We cannot simply accept the contents of faith by an act of the will, but must appropriate them by the use of our reason as well. Only then can we grasp what our will is assenting to and what the consequences of this assent will be.

A proper understanding of the correlation between faith and reason will likewise make possible a relationship between the Church built on faith and a secular state based on reason; they are not mutually exclusive or essentially antagonistic, but open to one another. Furthermore, a proper sense of the relation between faith and reason will allow conversations between religious traditions to take place. Most religions share a belief in a God who can be known by reason. Reason can discern that he must be omnipotent, free, reasonable, wise, and good. Although what

⁴⁴ "There exists a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards their source, but also as regards their object. With regard to the source, because we know one by natural reason, the other by divine faith. With regard to the object, because besides those things which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, cannot be known." *Dei Filius*, §3, DS 3008, and §4, DS 3015; cf. also *Gaudium et Spes*, §59. Aquinas gives as a further reason why this is actually helpful: "Alia etiam utilitas inde provenit, scilicet praesumptionis repressio, quae est mater erroris. Sunt enim quidam tantum de suo ingenio praesumentes ut totam rerum naturam se reputent suo intellectu posse metiri, aestimantes scilicet totum esse verum quod eis videtur et falsum quod eis non videtur. Ut ergo ab hac praesumptione humanus animus liberatus ad modestam inquisitionem veritatis perveniat, necessarium fuit homini proponi quaedam divinitus quae omnino intellectum eius excederent." *ScG I*, c. 5, n. 4. Trying to argue for revealed truths with unbelievers, however, opens us up to ridicule, since they might think that we believe because of such arguments (*ibid.* I, c. 9).

he has decided on the basis of his freedom, that is, revelation, may be something upon which we do not agree, even these decisions are not outside the reach of reason, and can enter into the conversation as well.

This is the perennial wisdom of the Catholic tradition. It should be our task to appeal to similar traditions in the Islamic world, as well as to seek to liberate the secular West from the narrowness of its self-imposed limitations on rationality. Against these limitations we have to rediscover an understanding of reason which is not arbitrarily curtailed, but reflective of its own nature and use, ultimately grounded in God himself. It is, in other words, our task to rediscover a reason which seeks faith.⁴⁵ **N·V**

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Br. Justin Gable, O.P. for his helpful editing of this essay.

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