



“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth...”

(Pope St. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 1)

With this image of the two wings, Pope St. John Paul II summarizes two thousand years of Christian reflection on the relationship between faith and reason. The image is surprising. For according to the predominant mentality of our times, one must choose between *either* being a person of faith or being a person of reason. One cannot be both. That there is a dichotomy between the two is almost a given within the contemporary academy and within our society at large, even among many Christians.

However, the good news that we will illustrate in and with this series of essays on evolution and the Christian faith is that the one and the same God who created us with reason also gifted us with faith. No one has to choose between the two. Everyone can have both. Faith and reason are meant to work together.

Why is the view that one must choose between either living the life of a faithful and devout believer or leading the life of an intelligent and enlightened adult so widespread today? The answer is complex, but I will give five reasons here.

The first reason is that at face value, faith and reason can appear to be opposed to each other. Thus, human beings had to actually learn how these two ways of contemplating truth could work together. The integration between the two does not happen by nature but by nurture. For this reason, it took the Catholic Church well over a thousand years from her founding by the Lord Jesus to learn and then to show the Christian people and the world how faith and reason can come together harmoniously.

A second reason why faith and reason are widely perceived to be in conflict today is sin.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines sin as follows: “Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for

God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law” (CCC, no. 1849).

Because of sin, human beings are prone to all forms of disintegration. Sin tears apart things that otherwise would go together peacefully in our lives. Take faith and reason. Although God meant both these ways of contemplating truth

Faith and Reason: The Two Wings of the Human Spirit

Rev. James Brent, O.P.

to work together, there are many sinful tendencies that make the work of integrating faith and reason difficult.

The tendency to reject God’s truth when it is difficult to live or to understand; the tendency to take the world into our hands and to dominate it for our own plans and purposes; the tendency to refuse to depend upon God from our hearts for a truth which is genuinely beyond our powers of direct verification; and the tendency to despair over the difficulties of working through all the many perplexities about God and the world. And then there is the tendency to despair over knowing truth itself. In a fallen and a sinful world, these are only some of the tendencies that tempt us to give up on the arduous task of reconciling faith and reason.

A third reason is historical. The sixteenth century was a time that placed an unusual number of perplexing social and intellectual challenges

before the Church. The invention of the printing press, the Protestant reformation, the discovery of “the new world,” the rise of modern science, the growing awareness of the great diversity of world religions, and the development of new philosophies. These are only some of the historical developments that tested and continue to test the synthesis of faith and reason accomplished by the Fathers and the Scholastics by the end of the thirteenth century.

A fourth reason is found in our contemporary culture. Our contemporary culture has an extremely impoverished understanding of what faith is and of what reason is.

On the one hand, faith is equated with religion. It is commonly thought to be nothing but feelings about certain matters. It is a set of feelings about life, meaning, values, and God. On the other hand, faith is sometimes understood to be a set of private convictions about these matters, but not convictions based on *evidence*. Rather, to many contemporary minds, faith has little or nothing to do with *truth*. A person’s faith cannot be said to be true or false. At most, a faith conviction is true *for this individual*, *i.e.* it is his belief. But the belief itself cannot be simply *true*.

Reason, in contrast, is equated with science. It is understood to be thinking based on experiment, critical analysis, and evidence. The results of science, it is widely thought, are verified facts and publicly accessible truths. In fact, to many contemporary minds, only the results of science are *bona fide* verified facts or publicly accessible truths. For contemporary people who think that faith is merely a matter of feelings that have nothing to do with truth, it seems *obvious* that faith and reason either have nothing to do with each other or have to be in conflict.

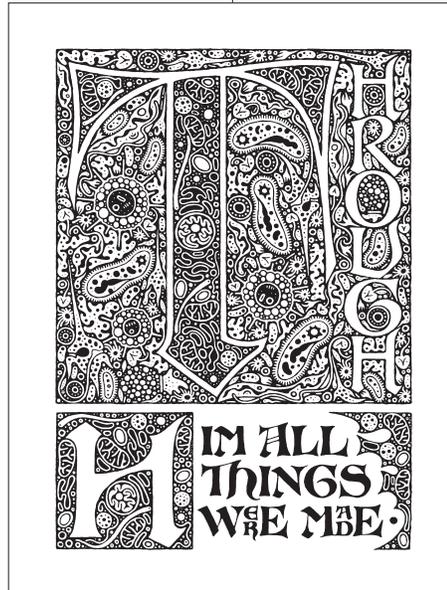
The final reason involves certain movements in contemporary society. In a society where faith and reason are not integrated and where it seems that one must choose between the two, many people do choose one or the other with

a conscious exclusion or rejection of the others. Some people choose to fly by reason alone, and reject faith altogether. This choice is often called *rationalism* or *scientism*. Its motto could be, “Forget faith. Reason alone is the guide to life.”

Other people choose to fly by faith alone, and reject reason in some serious way. They may sincerely and deeply believe the Bible or some other religious text, but as is often the case, they refuse to ask hard questions about the meaning and interpretation of this sacred text. Thus, they often refuse to accept well-established results of modern science because they think that these scientific claims would undermine their faith. This alternative is often

called *religious fundamentalism*. Its motto could be, “Don’t think. Just believe.”

In sum, it takes time, teaching, and effort to learn how to integrate faith and reason. Our sins and our weaknesses make it difficult to learn to fly with both wings of the human spirit. The history of the last several centuries has moved our civilization away from an intellectual synthesis that shows us how this can be done. Finally, our contemporary culture does not teach people how to fly with both wings, and it is populated by vocal minorities who confuse people about even the possibility of synthesizing faith and reason. Is it any surprise that for nearly all people today it *seems* that faith and reason are opposed to one another? **T&E**



FIND THIS (AND MORE) ON THE WEB:

<http://www.thomisticevolution.org/disputed-questions/faith-and-reason-the-two-wings-of-the-human-spirit/>