Reason and Faith: A Conflict through the History of Philosophy

Razón y fe: un conflicto a través de la historia de la filosofía

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Abstract: The relationship between faith and reason has been a subject of profound philosophical inquiry throughout history. Philosophers from different periods and traditions have grappled with the tension between religious belief and rational inquiry, shaping our understanding of the complex relationship between faith and reason. In ancient times, thinkers explored the nature of knowledge and the role of reason in uncovering truth. While reason played a central role, faith in divine beings also had significance. During the medieval period, theologians sought to reconcile faith and reason, considering them as complementary faculties for attaining truth. Throughout history, the exploration of the relationship between faith and reason has shaped philosophical discourse and provided insights into knowledge, belief, and the human condition. The ongoing dialogue continues to stimulate intellectual inquiry and offers different perspectives on the nature of truth and the meaning of existence.

Keywords: Philosophy of religion, faith, reason.

Sumario: La relación entre fe y razón ha sido objeto de profundas investigaciones filosóficas a lo largo de la historia. Filósofos de diferentes épocas y tradiciones han lidiado con la tensión entre la creencia religiosa y la investigación racional, dando forma a nuestra comprensión de la compleja relación entre fe y razón. En la Antigüedad, los pensadores exploraron la naturaleza del conocimiento y el papel de la razón para descubrir la verdad. Aunque la razón desempeñaba un papel central, la fe en los seres divinos también tenía su importancia. Durante el periodo medieval, los teólogos trataron de conciliar la fe y la razón, considerándolas facultades complementarias para alcanzar la verdad. A lo largo de la historia, la exploración de la relación entre fe y razón ha dado forma al discurso filosófico y ha aportado ideas sobre el conocimiento, las creencias y la condición humana. El diálogo en curso sigue estimulando la indagación intelectual y ofrece distintas perspectivas sobre la naturaleza de la verdad y el sentido de la existencia.

Palabras clave: Filosofía de la religión, fe, razón.
What a chimera then is a man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of all truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and trash of the universe.

Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées* 434

The question which introduces this paper clearly aims at the set of problems connected with the theory of knowledge as applied to religious knowledge. It also has a side linked to the metaphysical problems involved in some efforts to construct a consistent explanation of certain concepts employed by diverse religions. We should bear in mind that the real purpose behind this question is the attempt to find a rational justification and even an explanation of religion, although for some philosophers this attempt was only made to try to justify the grounds or basis of their own disbelief.

If we examine thoroughly the kind of knowledge involved in what we called “religious knowledge” and the kind of evidence that we ask to maintain it, certain problems arise which indicate that religious knowledge is of a radically different nature from that which we find in other fields of human life, especially in the different areas of scientific investigation.

Scientific knowledge and religious knowledge have very different standards for evaluating their fundamental truths, and this is how it should be, since they depart from very different positions. To some extent the merits of various reported items of religious information can only be discussed and examined in terms of certain beliefs, faith, or religious experience, concepts that are far away from the daily goals of scientific research.¹

The key point of this discussion has been already set by the title of this paper that we can now reformulate: can the existence of God be established by means of rational or natural evidence? Perhaps the existence of God in itself, since it deals with a very different type of knowledge which is not scientific, may indicate that one must seek another type of evidence entirely, and abandon the quest by means of reason. Our intention here is to walk the path of the history of philosophy and to analyze the main attempts to answer this problem.

which is not other than the difficult and always complex and at times contentious relationship between faith and reason\(^2\).

Before entering this study, it may be interesting to recall that depending on the answer we can give to this question about the way we can have rational access to God we will achieve very different conclusions.

If there are no valid proofs for the existence of God, then we can see that there would be three different conclusions. The first one would be simply the outright denial that there is any Divine Being. This would be the atheistical conclusion. The second one would be that of the agnostic, who contends that there is not sufficient rational evidence to establish either the existence or the non-existence of God, he literally declares that he does not know (which is the meaning of “agnostic”). And besides these irreligious or non-religious conclusions, there is also a religious conclusion, the third one, that has recognized the inadequacy of the proofs for the existence of God. This is the fideism, which states that religious knowledge is not based, and it should not be, upon rational or natural information but solely on faith. The general contention of fideism has usually been that religious knowledge is beyond the limits of man’s rational understanding and faculties. Fideism represents a combination of skepticism about the possibility of human knowledge, at least in the field of religious knowledge, and an appeal to knowledge through faith, unsupported by rational evidence. The risk of this issue is, as the passage from Pascal at the beginning of this paper stresses, to discover our complete uncertainty and our complete inability to understand anything\(^3\).

We can clearly see that at the core of this discussion lies the fundamental problem of faith and reason. Religion in general sets out a problem to philosophy: the relationship between faith and reason, or, in other words, between revelation and natural knowledge. And these issues are important not only for the individual believer and his private religious life, but they cast some questions which affect the entire society, with matters related to the relationship between revelation and science, education, Church, politics, religion, etc.

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We are going to try to establish the sort of relationship that can exist between faith and reason; between revelation and natural knowledge, between the supernatural and nature, between religion and theology on the one hand and philosophy and rational thinking on the other hand.

Facing this question about the connection between faith and reason there are, fundamentally, five different solutions and these solutions are, at the same time, different attitudes of man toward the question. These solutions have their historical background and they are: 1) To eliminate reason. 2) To eliminate faith. 3) To separate radically faith from reason, as two dominions, two realms absolutely heterogeneous and without any possibility of communication. 4) To consider faith as a supposition of reason. 5) To distinguish, harmonize and reconcile them.

From our point of view, to analyze these different proposals will shed some light on the problem and will allow us to have a better understanding of the question about how we try to gain knowledge about God.

1) The first thing that a Christian could do in order to face the problem about faith and reason would be to reject reason, to declare it totally inadequate to grasp the contents of faith. This one, faith, represents the anti-reason, although for a very different cause than the second thesis. Human reason cannot penetrate the sense of Revelation. At the bottom of reason lies something almost devilish that makes human beings feel filled up with pride and arrogance, conceit, just the opposite of the humility with which human beings must surrender to faith. If reason opposes to Revelation, that means that reason is weak.

We have some historical figures who show this tendency, like Tertullian (ca. 160-200 a.D.) who was a violent enemy of philosophers, about whom he considered “heretic’s patriarch”. There is nothing in common between Athens and Jerusalem, the Academy has nothing to do with the Church, nor the heretics with Christians. “Cedat curiositas

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5 Tertullian, De praescriptione haereticorum 7, in Ueberweg, Geschichte der Philosophie, 50.
with this motto the Christian should have enough, he does not need anything outside faith. The anti-philosophy of Tertullian is expressed in the famous formula credo quia absurdum, “I believe because it is absurd”, expression that does not appear in his writings, but expresses his point of view perfectly. Tertullian wrote:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Crucifixus est dei filius; non pudet, quia pudendum est.} \\
\text{Et mortuus est dei filius; credibile prorsus est, quia ineptum est.} \\
\text{Et sepultus resurrexit; certum est, quia impossible}. 
\end{align*}
\]

The translation is: “The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed — because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible — because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain — because it is impossible”.

In these few lines we can see the real complexity of this position. By denying reason a different set of problems arise, like how to deal with these apparent contradictions. Despite what has been seen, it is necessary to take into account the controversial context of Tertullian’s statements, statements that contemporary criticism considers highly rhetorical. In fact, Tertullian extensively and intensively employed reason in his numerous apologetic treatises, as seen, for instance, in Apologeticum 17,1-3, where his intention becomes clearer. Perhaps he should not be completely considered antirationalist. His words express the superiority of Christianity, even in confrontation with the best philosophy of his time, but not an antirationalist stance. Part of current criticism considers the idea that Tertullian proposed a faith opposed to reason as a modern creation of the Enlightenment, a kind of caricature.

In any case, we should not think that this position was exclusive to the earlier times of Christianity, rather it is a constant that appears over and over again, in different ways, throughout the history of philosophy. For example, Luther (1483-1546), who coined the expression “prostitute reason”; or Kierkegaard (1813-1846) who wrote “absurdity is the object of faith, and the sole thing in which we can have faith”, referring in this explicit way to Tertullian. And last

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6 *“Let curiosity leave its place to faith*, TERTULLIAN, De praescriptione haereticorum, 14.5.
7 TERTULLIAN, De carne Christi, 5, in Uberwieg, Geschichte der Philosophie, 51.
but not least, Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), overall in his book *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* where this author shows similar positions to those of Luther and Kierkegaard.

2) If mystery and irrationality were emphasized in the first thesis, these elements disappear totally in the second possibility which reverses the first one by eliminating faith from the equation and leaving the reason alone in the dichotomy between faith and reason. The main point of this second position is that if Revelation goes against reason then it cannot be true. This statement meant, specifically, to reject Christianity or, at least, to not accept from it but that which can be demonstrated rationally or interpreted as a symbol of rational truths.

Some philosophers held that revelation offers in an allegoric way or in a figurative sense truths that only in this way are accessible to the common people, but the philosopher knows it rationally. Part of this group of thinkers was, for example, Philo the Jew also known as Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 b.C. – ca. 50 a.D.) in the Jewish theology and Origen (185–254 a.D.) in the Christian theology. In the XI century, Berengar of Tours (999–1088 a.D.) denied the transformation of the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ, alleging that it was impossible such a substantial change without changing at the same time the constituents of these elements; in other words, Berengar of Tours denied the transubstantiation leaning on philosophical reasons. Even if this thesis has a lot of ancient predecessors it will be characteristic of the modern times. The movement of the deists, J. Tolland, M. Tindal and Voltaire, among others, at the end of the XVII century and during the whole XVIII century, will hold the possibility of a natural religion, that is to say, a kind of religion founded only and solely in reason.

Curiously enough, we could include Hegel in this section as far as to the German philosopher religion is no more than a stage or phase in the development of the absolute spirit, phase that is exceeded by philosophy itself in the conceptual or rational momentum of the spirit.¹⁰

3) The third possibility entails separating completely reason and faith and considering them like two spheres without communication among them and totally heterogeneous. This is such to the extent that

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something can be true in religious affairs and false for philosophy and vice versa. So it would be possible to be Christian as a believer and not being it as a philosopher. This is the famous doctrine of the double truth, very widespread during the Middle Ages, from the XIII century in advance. It was the averroism the doctrine which brought it on. Averroes was the Muslim philosopher from Cordoba, in Spain, who created this doctrine, inspired by the influence of the Aristotelian philosophy.

This kind of stance was very appropriate in the spiritual situation of the period, unsteady between two different authorities, the Greek thought on one hand, and the Christian tradition on the other. The influence of Averroes was very deep during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that is why this third position or doctrine of the double truth had its importance.

4) The fourth possibility appears in one of the more interesting and fascinating characters of the Church, Augustine of Hippo. For Saint Augustine, or Augustine of Hippo, faith is the presuppose of reason, the solid ground upon which we can achieve some comprehension of the ultimate truths. But this comprehension is restricted by the inevitability of the human limits. Faith would be the sole base which reason could lean on. Credo ut intelligam, “I believe in order to understand”, says the famous formula of Saint Augustine.

At the end of XI century, Anselm of Canterbury (1035-1109), who exposed the so called ontological argument, tells us that he writes “from the point of view of someone who makes an effort to uplift his mind to the contemplation of God and who tries to understand what he believes”. This is the expression of the fides quaerens intellectum, faith looking for understanding.

I long to understand in some degree your truth [oh God], which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe — that unless I believed, I should not understand.

11 The famous ontological argument of Saint Anselm is simply a complex evolution of a very similar argument given by Aristotle. To some extent, perhaps we should say that the ontological argument war Aristotle’s more than Anselm’s.
12 Saint ANSELM, Proslogion, La Plata – Buenos Aires, Yerba Buena, 1945, 11.
13 Saint ANSELM, Proslogion, 17.
We doubt that there can be a better example of this fourth position than this passage from Anselm of Canterbury.

5) But it is time to deal with the fifth and last position, which is, probably, the most developed and the one which tries to answer the question about the relationship between faith and reason in a more complete way. It is also, from a religious point of view, the answer which does justice to both faculties, reason and faith. And this position is none other than Thomas Aquinas’ position.

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), also called “doctor angelicus”, is a curious case as a thinker. And this is so because although it would not be fair to say that there is some lack of originality on him, he is not the bold philosopher who makes revolutionary discoveries. He was more a theologian than a philosopher. He writes with perfect clarity and precision, the structure of his writings is, in this sense, exemplary. Thomas Aquinas usually starts by setting out the problem that worries him, emphasizes the difficulties, presents objectively the diverging opinions and finally formulates his own theory conveniently demonstrated. He is a master of order.

His solution to the problem of the relations between faith and reason represents a model of balance and equilibrium and it is, even nowadays, the dominant attitude in the Christian philosophy and, in general, in every philosophy which tries to deal with religious worries. The way in which Thomas Aquinas faces this problem makes this issue, probably, the most important of all his thought, just because “the true philosophical value of the [Aquinas’] system lies in it and this makes of him a crucial momentum in the history of human thought”.

This proposal of Saint Thomas Aquinas is no more than harmony between reason and faith. “The whole secret of Aquinas lies in this immense effort of intellectual honesty to rebuild the philosophy upon such a base that its agreement with theology appear as the necessary consequence of the demands of reason itself rather than the accidental result of a simple wish of conciliation”.

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17 Gilson, Le thomisme, 39.
Aquinas’ approach was historically determined by the introduction in his period of the doctrine of the double truth.\textsuperscript{18} Even though Thomas Aquinas acknowledges that faith and rational knowledge are different, he does not admit that they are opposite, but perfectly harmonious. His position is that it is impossible that reason and revelation contradict each other because both of them come from God, who is the truth itself. Philosophy and theology have the same goal: God. Philosophy will consider it as the first cause of every being and will study it under the natural light of our reason; theology will see on it the goal toward the salvation of men, and it will be known throughout the supernatural light of revelation. In other words, philosophy will deal with natural truths, theology with supernatural.

The proof that Aquinas had found to demonstrate that these two realms are harmoniously related was the philosophy of Aristotle, a pagan philosopher to whom Aquinas refers always as “the philosopher” par excellence. Aristotle’s philosophy reached truths that coincided with those truths of faith, like, for example, the existence of God. This would be a sign of the indisputable power of reason without the support of faith\textsuperscript{19}. Faith and reason, then, are not two fields without communication or opposites, again against the thesis that averroism supported. Aristotle’s physic and metaphysics provide the rational principles which help to build a coherent explanation of reality and, at the same time, open to faith.

Those truths that are taught by faith and that can be also reached through the sole reason, Aquinas named them \textit{praemabula fidei}, threshold of faith, like “God does exist”, or “God is one”, etc.\textsuperscript{20} And if God revealed these truths to us, instead of letting them to be discovered by reason alone, that is, perhaps, because they are necessary to our salvation and by means of intellectual knowledge they could hardly be attained. If it is true that everybody can know this kind of truths, in fact, just a very few know them rationally and for the rest they are \textit{prima credibilia}, the first things believable.

It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human

\textsuperscript{18} See section 3 of this paper.
\textsuperscript{19} This thesis goes against the Augustinian thesis. See section 4 of this paper.
\textsuperscript{20} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa theologicae}, 1 q.2 a.2 ad 1.
reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: “The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee” (Is. 66:4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man’s whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation\textsuperscript{21}.

But reason cannot at all reach God absolutely. Some truths exceed the power of reason and, however, they are necessary for salvation and can only be known through revelation; these are the mysteries or supernatural truths called \textit{articuli fidei}, articles of faith.

There is no doubt that rational knowledge is clearer than faith and for that reason, to some extent, it is better to prefer it. But even though reason is superior because of its mode of knowledge, faith is superior in its aim: the infiniteness of God exceeds anything that reason can reach, since the finite cannot compress the infinite. It does not mean that these mysteries are anti-rational, but super-rational, they go beyond reason, they are not opposite to reason, but they are superior and outstrip it. Therefore philosophy —reason— should not deny revelation, on the contrary, it can carry out its own function by showing that the super-rational is not anti-rational.

The alleged contradictions between faith and reason are only apparent: as well as for the eye the Earth looks bigger than the Sun, but not for the astronomer, in an analogous way in the infinite wisdom the incompatibilities between reason and faith disappear: “Things known by faith through divine revelation cannot be conflicting with natural knowledge”\textsuperscript{22}.

\textsuperscript{21} THOMAS AQUINAS, \textit{Summa theologiae}, 1 q. 1 a. 1 ans.
\textsuperscript{22} THOMAS AQUINAS, \textit{De trinitate}, q. 2 a. 3.
However, if in spite of everything a real conflict takes place between natural knowledge and the supernatural one, it can only mean one thing: reason is victim of a mistake, it has been used in an erroneous way and it must be corrected. The truth is only one and a contradiction would mean a contradiction in God himself. In such situation, reason should subordinate to faith, philosophy and science to theology. “Since the Grace does not eliminate the nature, but perfects it, it is necessary that natural reason obeys faith”\(^\text{23}\).

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Philosophy becomes, following this famous scholastic formula, servant of faith. Consequently, as well as reason helps faith, faith should help reason, taking care that reason does not fall in mistakes and pointing at the goal where it should address.

The gifts of grace are added to those of nature in such a way that they do not destroy the latter, but rather perfect them; wherefore also the light of faith, which is gratuitously infused into our minds, does not destroy the natural light of cognition, which is in us by nature. For although the natural light of the human mind is insufficient to reveal those truths revealed by faith, yet it is impossible that those things which God has manifested to us by faith should be contrary to those which are evident to us by natural knowledge. In this case one would necessarily be false: and since both kinds of truth are from God, God would be the author of error, a thing which is impossible. Rather, since in imperfect things there is found some imitation of the perfect, though the image is deficient, in those things known by natural reason there are certain similitudes of the truths revealed by faith\(^\text{24}\).

This passage sets up a general principle for the relation between reason and faith and can be considered the conclusion of this fifth thesis.

We have tried to show different ways of facing the problem of the knowledge of God across the history of thought. Of course, the answer to the question that presides at the beginning of this paper is a difficult task, since often is a question that deals with

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\(^{23}\) \textsc{Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae,} 1 q. 1 a. 8 \textit{uititur tamen}. In other words, this is the old medieval formula of “\textit{philosophia ancilla theologiae}”.

\(^{24}\) \textsc{Thomas Aquinas, In Boethium de Trinitate,} q. 2 a. 2 c.
the inner feelings and thoughts of people, but we have tried to set out different approach just in order to clarify that the several answers to the question are multiple and in this multiplicity lies the complexity of the problem. May these pages serve of some utility just to know that perhaps there are not always reasons in the knowledge of God.