

## ON WINGS OF FAITH AND REASON – SECOND EDITION

Several years ago a curriculum committee at Harvard University proposed that all enrolling students be required to take a course in the general category of “Faith and Reason.” The proponents’ rationale: any resolution of the religious conflicts that increasingly shape our world will have to come from people who understand the global influence of religious doctrine and practice, who grasp why so many believers will fight and die for their beliefs, and who appreciate the ways in which reason is used to defend, defuse, or deny religious belief. Leading the opposition to this proposal was evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, who argued that religion has no place in a Harvard education. He said putting faith and reason in the same sentence creates the wrong impression that they are “equally valid paths to truth.” He likened it to offering a course in astrology and astronomy. “It may be true that astrology deserves study as a significant historical and sociological phenomenon. But it would be a terrible mistake to juxtapose it with astronomy, if only for the false appearance of symmetry.” Pinker garnered enough support to kill the proposal.

For me faith and reason are not alternative paths to truth. I will argue that in isolation, each can be a path to self-delusion. The journey of discovery is guided by reason and propelled by faith. You can no more ignore one of them than you can maneuver a sailboat with only the rudder or only the sail. In many ways they *are* symmetrical, each one sustaining yet restraining the other. I think Harvard missed an important opportunity. Their refusal reflects a crisis of faith – not in God but in humanity. The academic elites at Harvard either lacked confidence that they could deliver a rigorous study of faith and reason, or they didn’t trust the students to critically assimilate it. Lisa Miller of Newsweek described their strategy as self-defeating. She wrote, “A university education is our greatest weapon in the battle against our natural stupidity.”

The first mistake in the Harvard saga was equating faith to belief in God. I regard faith as a sacred trust in the infinite, the unknowable, or the ultimate reality. It arouses our highest thoughts and draws meaning from our deepest struggles. Trusting in God is one manifestation. But we find equally valid expressions of faith in Buddhism and humanism, which have no deity. Those who describe themselves as “people of faith” wrongly imply that the rest of us are sleep-walking through life without hope or purpose.

The conventional notion of faith lacks imagination. If I told you, “I believe in world peace,” you would understand this to be an idealization, not an assertion of historical reality. I’m afraid history offers little evidence to support my belief. But I’m not claiming that world peace actually happened or that it necessarily will happen – only that I believe it to be *possible* and worthy of my commitment. I believe in the *ideal*, the vision of peace, just as William James believed in the ideal of God. He said, “The gods we stand by are the gods whose demands on us reinforce our demands on ourselves and on one another.” The only real evidence we have of a lasting world peace is the fact that we can *imagine* it. This faith is not based on evidence; it *is* the evidence, as we read in the book of Hebrews.

As a young man my first real act of faith was to leave the confining religion of my childhood – like the hatchling who pecks away at its shell, not knowing what awaits it on the outside. It can only trust that breathing, seeing, and one day taking flight, are worth any risk. Sure, I had a rational basis for rejecting Mormonism, but it was inseparable from this vision. Every reasoned argument exposes an underlying faith, and every faith seeks support from reason. When they work in opposition they force our opinions to dangerous extremes (as in religious or secular fundamentalism). When they align themselves too closely they compromise our judgment (as in the Biblical defense of slavery). But when they maintain that delicate balance they become, in the words of Pope John Paul II, “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”

In the gospel of Mark, a man says to Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” How can we make sense of this paradox? The first reference to belief implies desire (an outgrowth of faith) and the second reference implies doubt (an outgrowth of reason). This man, like most of us, was torn between doubt and desire.

In many ways Unitarian Universalism has been an uneasy marriage between faith and reason. Commitment to reason has set UU faith apart for centuries, although that commitment may have softened in recent decades. Rev. Sarah Oelberg said that openness to continually reinventing itself has made UU susceptible to fads while weakening the central tradition that has brought us this far. If the new emphasis on spirituality has displaced rather than complemented rationalism, her antidote is a return to the quest for shared truth (as opposed to individual truth).

Still, the tempering of extreme rationalism was crucial to UU survival. A century ago the father of religious humanism, John Dietrich, reinvigorated the Unitarian movement with a new vision of human dignity, compassion, responsibility and creativity. Since that time UU has offered an answer to the excesses of both faith and reason. Of course, to some it has combined the worst of both worlds. Atheist Sam Harris chides Unitarian reason for making a worn-out Christian theology more palatable, and blames Universalist tolerance for giving cover to fundamentalism. He maintains the “theology of wrath has far more intellectual merit.” In Harris’ black and white world, the real enemy is gray.

I would argue that respecting the ideas of others is not only part of the UU heritage; it is essential to sound reasoning. I worked with a team of Japanese scientists who were relentlessly rational, yet always modest and respectful. If we did not agree on something, they never argued their position. Instead, they asked me to help them understand my position, with the frequent rejoinder, “Please explain.” They persisted until either they saw the light or (more often) I came face-to-face with my own error. In science or religion, the aim of true respect is clarity, not charity.

Respecting all faiths does not concede to them equal merit. One important measure of a productive faith is how well it accommodates reason. This question is spread throughout the history of western civilization. Before the Enlightenment, reason was understood to be the sole prerogative of God or his representatives. Any who challenged this assumption risked censure or even death. Attitudes toward disease illustrate the prevailing mentality of that era. Reason was employed like a dull knife, inflicting damage without cutting to the truth. Abuse and torture of the mentally ill were justified by the need to rid the patient of evil spirits. Across Europe and colonial America suspected witches were hunted down and executed under Biblical pretext. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century vaccination drew protest because it sought to overturn a divine judgment. Even today, while few people believe in supernatural causes of disease, many still believe in supernatural cures – certainly more optimistic, but no more rational.

Under the guise of reason, religious dogma has repeatedly resisted the advances of science. Calvin criticized the heliocentric theory of Copernicus, saying, “Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, not the earth.” Today the chapels and classrooms of America have become battlegrounds for the war on evolution. Threatened by man’s shrinking stature in the universe, narrow theologies have grown hostile toward science and revealed themselves as little more than “organized ignorance,” to borrow a term from Bertrand Russell.

The Enlightenment ended a millennium of ecclesiastical rule and loosened the grip of superstition on the western world. Rene Descartes, eminent mathematician and philosopher made two profound contributions to human thought. First, inquiry begins with doubt. Remember that critical thinking was foreign to western culture at that time. In fact, centuries earlier, Saint Augustine had declared that only the will to believe can produce knowledge, so for him inquiry began with desire. Here we see the same tug-of-war between doubt and desire that appears in the gospel of Mark. The second Cartesian principle is that reality begins with individual consciousness. “I think, therefore I am.” So Descartes dealt a double blow to church authority: it is right to question (a Unitarian principle), and that right resides in every person (a Universalist principle). His ideas marked the joint emergence of reason and religious tolerance: if my consciousness entitles me to doubt and to discover, then so does yours.

The Enlightenment ushered in a new rationalism that transformed nearly every sphere of human endeavor. While these triumphs permeated the popular consciousness, most Christian institutions were slow to adapt. Early on, Martin Luther appealed to “clear reason” in his condemnation of the Catholic Church. But once invested in his own theology and at odds with science, he referred to reason as a “harlot...the enemy of faith.”

Not all faiths rejected the rationalism of the Enlightenment. 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker asked why religious truths should rest on the authority of their revealer, when scientific truths stand on their own merit. Quaker feminist Lucretia Mott proclaimed, "Truth for authority, not authority for truth." William Ellery Channing recognized the dangers of reason, but saw an even greater danger in "that church which proscribes reason and demands...implicit faith."

Another Unitarian, Albert Schweitzer culminated a life-long search with these words, "The ethical acceptance of life... has a foundation in thought." Schweitzer demonstrated a universal urge to justify our core values. Even devout believers want to make some cosmic sense of the events and purpose in their life. Thomas Aquinas founded scholasticism, a formal perspective based on rigid logic, to make sense of Catholic theology. The highest forms of faith reflect some grounding in reason.

So why has reason failed to unify religious belief, when it has led to such remarkable scientific advancements? To answer this, we must consider contrasting modes of reasoning. Theologians like Aquinas and Calvin favor deductive reason, going from the general to the particular. They accept an unqualified premise, such as the infallibility of scripture. Then they draw conclusions consistent with this premise. Inductive reason, first championed by Francis Bacon, goes from the particular to the general. When evidence shows a consistent pattern, the conclusion or principle follows with some degree of probability. Deductive reason is used to defend truth; it secures, without expanding the knowledge base by emphasizing the validity of an argument (internal consistency). Inductive reason is used to discover truth; it expands, without securing the knowledge base by concerning itself with the truth of an argument (external consistency).

The scientific method relies on inductive reason; its claims tend to be tentative, piecemeal, open to refinement and therefore convergent. Certainly we see disagreement at the margins of scientific understanding, but the debate is constrained by reason. This eventually leads to consensus, and the frontier of knowledge advances. Scientific beliefs do not pretend to encompass the whole truth. Conversely, religious claims tend to be deductive, absolute and therefore divergent. Their pattern of mutual exclusivity suggests that they are mistaken or overstated. Susan Jacoby noted, "The presence of many religions, unchecked by the inquisitor's rack and pyre, tends to impeach their claim to absolute truth and spiritual authority."

Reason can be blind to its own errors. The intelligent design argument appeals to reason in citing natural order as evidence of God. On the other hand testimony of miracles points to the *suspension* of natural order as evidence of God. Which is it? The acceptance of both arguments by faithful Christians proves only their predisposition to believe (desire overpowering doubt).

Religious believers are not alone in the misapplication of reason. We all do it. A survey by Cal Tech showed New York cab drivers tend to set a daily income target and quit when they reach it. This means they work less time on busy days and longer on slow days – just the reverse of the rational strategy. Why is this? Economists have found that people generally value loss avoidance more than a gain of equal magnitude. I wouldn't gamble a large sum of money even with favorable odds. Most of us exhibit this conservative bias, which Dewey said causes humans to "attach themselves readily to the current view of the world and consecrate it." This might explain why people cling to inherited belief systems.

Reason is thus clouded by imperfection and subjectivity. Neuroscientists depict a human brain far less mechanistic than the one envisioned by the Enlightenment. Reason is entangled with language, culture, and evolution. As an organic and highly social process, it requires that we interact with other minds. Reverend Dale Arnink said, "One cannot think for one's self if one has always had to think by one's self."

Interaction and feedback can compensate for imperfect reasoning. The cab driver survey showed that irrational work strategies grew less pronounced with years of experience. Practiced freely, reason tends to be self-correcting. The early missile launchers used complex equations to calculate a precise trajectory. Even so, they usually missed. Today's guided missiles periodically adjust their trajectory based on feedback, and usually hit their target. I would suggest that a free market of ordinary ideas will converge on truth faster than uncontested genius. Human understanding of classical physics stagnated for nineteen centuries until Galileo opened the floodgates by daring to question the genius of Aristotle.

Whether or not they admit it, modern scientists do show faith – a confidence that the principles in nature are consistent and accessible to human inquiry. Not only does this faith motivate science, but it is rewarded by discovery – Einstein's "cosmic religious feeling." This feeling harbors no expectation of divine benevolence. It is enough that the universe speaks from "benign indifference," as Camus called it, in language that humans can begin to understand.

By trusting and submitting to the infinite unknown, faith becomes an act of humility and keeps reason from swelling into an object of worship. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century reason became an instrument of control and domination, contributing to materialism, genocide and the specter of nuclear war. Its power and precision left its disciples more secure and less aware, just as religious fervor had done in earlier times.

Emerson said we have a choice between truth and repose (comfort), but we can never have both. Those who express utter certainty usually compromise truth to avoid what Emerson called "the inconvenience of suspense and imperfect opinion." William James said he wasn't fond of doubt and disorder, but that he feared losing the truth by pretending to "possess it already wholly."

For the luxury of certainty, the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis may have traded away the opportunity to learn from his detractors. His book, "Mere Christianity," defends the Christian faith while revealing a scarcity of earnest dialog with his opponents. He said he'd never heard a non-Christian admit to "the utmost evil" of pride. Aside from the irony of being proud that only Christians confess to pride, his pretense that they are unique in this regard reveals the vacuum in which he operated. I have heard confessions of pride from non-Christians, and will readily confess to it myself. But Lewis may have been so invested in Christian piety that he cut off any meaningful discourse with outsiders.

Richard Dawkins, at the opposite pole from C.S. Lewis but equally sure of himself, equates religious faith to delusion. Like Lewis and Harris, he starts with a well-crafted, rational argument, but then overshoots by attacking the character and inflating the threat of his opponents. His books have bludgeoned believers, but how many minds has he changed? I can't help contrasting Dawkins with Robert Ingersoll, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century "Great Agnostic," whose cordial and thoughtful way of engaging believers invited their consideration of ideas they might otherwise have shunned. Reason makes a better probe than weapon.

Born-again Christian Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, serves as a contemporary role model. Impelled by faith more than reason, he once referred to agnosticism as a "cop out" (similar to Mark Taylor, who called it "a cheap way of ducking the question"). But when challenged by an agnostic writer who expressed dissatisfaction with the current answers to life's "ultimate mysteries," Collins reconsidered. "I went through a phase when I was a casual agnostic, and I am perhaps too quick to assume that others have no more depth than I did." Submitting one's faith to reason can be humbling and enlightening at the same time.

Sam Harris' book, "The End of Faith," makes a compelling case against fundamentalism. But it portrays a machine-like thought process whereby "Either we have valid reasons for what we believe or we do not." His message to believers and agnostics: I do and you do not. Does this sound familiar? Channing once characterized the religious extremist as an "idolater of his own distinguishing opinions, shutting his eyes on the virtues and his ears on the arguments of his opponents, arrogating all excellence ... and all saving power to his own creed."

Harris ridicules faith as a license "to keep believing when reasons fail." But isn't his writing, like any act of persuasion, an exercise in faith? What evidence does he have that he, or an *army* of atheists, could persuade Christians to surrender a mythology that has survived the darkest and the brightest centuries of human searching? His vision of a faith-free world relies as much on faith as the vision of those he condemns.

At their best faith and reason are complementary, whereby neither one contradicts nor conspires with the other. Acting in tension rather than in unison, they elevate human discourse, each one curbing the excesses of the other. The search for truth and meaning demands both. An eagle, no matter how strong or elegant, cannot soar on one wing.