

## REASON AND FAITH

**T**HOSE who oppose the acceptance of supernatural truth through the medium of Faith take up their position, theoretically at least, in the interests of Reason. Speaking largely there are three groups in the opposition. There are those who maintain that the so-called 'supernatural' is a mere myth of traditional superstition, rather less crude, no doubt, than the fetishes of uncivilised tribes, escaping the grossness of classical mythology (though lacking the artistic merit with which Greeks and Latins adorned their legends), yet nevertheless merely the more or less finished and elaborated results of a tradition 'derived from semi-barbarous Hebrew peoples.' We are told by modern Rationalists that 'we must cease talking of God in the Biblical sense and, as the foundation of the new order, must supplant theology by mental hygiene. Space is too crowded with stars and universes for heaven above and hell beneath.'

If the supernatural is in truth such a myth, then Faith is mere credulity. It is no better than a child's belief in bogies and fairies, and is far less excusable because it is exhibited by those who should have the intelligence to know better. Proud Rationalism frowns upon the puerile fantasies of Faith!

The more intelligent antagonists of Faith, however, realise that what is called 'the supernatural' cannot be thus easily and conveniently disposed of. To some extent it has to be reckoned with as an aspect of reality. They attempt, therefore, to eliminate Faith on the ground that what is called the supernatural is in fact nothing more than the higher reaches of the purely natural. This is the position adopted by some of the best known exponents of 'rational' theology, as, for

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instance, by Professor Webb, of Oxford. It is urged that with the passage of time the human mind (to some a mere phase in an evolutionary pantheism) attains gradually to a clearer and wider grasp of reality; that there is no limit in the human intelligence to the advance of scientific investigation and metaphysical speculation; that what is now outside the actual range of that intelligence will with experience and persevering investigation be brought within its comprehensive grasp.

On this hypothesis Faith, which denotes belief in something essentially outside the possible range and capacity of the unaided human mind, belief in truths known only by the authoritative word of God revealing hidden secrets of His inmost Being, Faith of this kind is unnecessary and indeed inconceivable.

This position is well calculated to soothe the intellectual pride of the intelligentsia. Superficially it is more tenable than that adopted by the first group of the opposition; actually it is even less rational, for reasons which will appear later.

The third group has for its nucleus a certain important class of thinkers in France. Their standpoint is summed up in a single word of their own coining (as far as I know untranslatable) namely 'extransecisme.' Unlike those upon whose views we have already touched, they are not concerned to deny the real objective existence of the supernatural properly so called. Claiming to be mere historians of 'psychological' (they mean mystical) experience, they find themselves impelled to conclude from collected data that Faith is utterly contrary to Reason. They defend this conclusion on the alleged evidence that the human mind which has been subjected to Faith is a very palimpsest, that the supernatural of Christian tradition has been forcibly imposed upon the totally dissimilar and even antithetic reason of man, that it is an ungainly super-

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structure ruthlessly clamped to a completely unsuitable foundation by the iron bands of theological dogma. Faith is thus, in their view, utterly unreasonable because Reason not only has nothing in common with it, but sees contradiction and even impossibility in what is proposed for acceptance by Faith.

It is possible that many may find themselves somewhat in sympathy with the above conclusion, for the supernatural is of its very essence and definition precisely that which transcends the natural powers not merely of man but even of the highest created intelligence. The position is undoubtedly more intelligent than that of the other two groups, but it is none the less untenable. The moot point in all three is fundamentally the hypothetical antithesis of Faith and Reason, and much of the opposition must fall to the ground if it can be shown that this hypothesis is unwarranted. That it is so will be abundantly clear from what follows.

For the sake of clarity let us define our terms in the sense in which they are used here.

*The Supernatural* is that Truth or mass of truths about things divine which exceeds the natural capacity of any created intelligence. Its existence is known negatively by Reason, but positively only by Divine Revelation.

*Reason* is the natural faculty proper to man whereby he can acquire and understand such truth and such reality as falls within the natural range of that faculty. It depends on the senses for the acquiring of knowledge.

*Faith* is a gratuitous and supernatural gift of God whereby a natural intelligence such as man's is made capable of accepting with absolute conviction, though without the possibility of complete understanding,

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such supernatural truths as it may become cognisant of through Divine Revelation.

It must be clearly understood therefore that the supernatural and the natural are distinguished precisely and only in so far as the former is *outside* the range of natural intelligence while the latter is *within* its range. Again supernatural truth can be acquired only by Revelation and grasped only by Faith, though Reason may subsequently use these truths as the indemonstrable principles of scientific theology. But does it follow that the acceptance of facts in themselves above the capacity of Reason is derogatory to Reason? The content of the formularies of Faith is admittedly above Reason and therefore obscure to the human mind. Does it follow that they are contrary to Reason? The wisdom of ancient Greece supplies the key to the reply. We read, in the *Metaphysics* (II, 1) of Aristotle: 'As the eyes of the night-owl to the blaze of the light of day, so is the reason in our souls to the truths which are in themselves most evident of all.' A savage becoming acquainted by hearsay with such an accepted marvel as wireless telephony, for example, might be excused but not justified for incredulity. Or would it not be crass foolishness on my part were I to reject the findings of modern bacteriology merely because that science is beyond the present range of my intelligence? In other words, a statement may be unassailably true in itself yet remain obscure to many because they are not able to grasp the full significance of the terms used. But though they do not completely understand, nevertheless it is reasonable that they should accept the truth of the statement on faith, relying on the authority of minds wiser than their own. How then can belief in the supernatural upon the authority of God be rejected as unreasonable? The truth is that Faith is not only not unreasonable but is a very perfection and completion of the faculty of

Reason. The real criticism of the Rationalist is that he is not reasonable—or at least not sufficiently reasonable.

## II

In that superb product of human thought known as *Thomism* there is a fundamental truth which goes no little way towards explaining the outstanding position of that system. It is this: '*Gratia perficit naturam*' 'Grace perfects nature.' Of the many radiations of this central principle only one is of immediate concern. That particular aspect of Grace known as Faith perfects the particular faculty of nature known as Reason. Let that stand for a moment as a mere postulate.

Human knowledge and wisdom consist in the grasping of the ultimate causes of things. Of itself and unaided, human reason can attain to, and has attained to, an extraordinary degree of knowledge respecting the First Cause of all things, God. To take an example from only one thinker among a host, there are those five monuments of human reason, the *Quinque Viae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, in which are comprised his famous metaphysical proofs of the existence of God as the Author of Nature. The whole of his treatise on the nature and perfections of God, both in the *Summa Theologica* and in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, are admittedly masterpieces of clear human thought, and therein a stupendous array of attributes, operations and perfections of God are demonstrated in the light of human reason.

Yet with all this, with all that reason has discovered or can discover concerning God, there remains always the endless distance between the Finite and the Infinite. Reason is hampered and enclosed by its own finiteness. We can think of nothing except in terms of the finite and the limited. Even in our reasoned

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knowledge of God our concepts are primarily of the finite things we know. They are qualified, it is true, by such terms as '*infinite*,' '*perfect*,' and so on. But what do these qualifications represent in our minds? They are mere negations of the necessary limitations in the only things we know. By reason we know God to be the Supreme Good. But what do we know positively of Good except the imperfect and limited good that we find in finite things? By reason we know God to be Omnipotent. But what do we know of Omnipotence except as a negation of the obvious limitations in the manifestations of power in ourselves or in nature? *By the very exclusion of all limitations from God, Reason bids us admit the existence of God in qualities and perfections the true nature of which we cannot grasp because they are beyond us. Reason itself leads us to the threshold of the Supernatural.*

Reason itself, therefore, indicates to us that there must be an inconceivable unlimited field of knowledge about God and His Essence of which it can tell us nothing positively. Further, man of his nature desires knowledge, and, as has been pointed out, we are said to know when we have discovered the ultimate causes of things. We can conclude, then, that it would be a desirable thing if reason could know not only all that is within its own natural sphere, but also those other Divine truths of the existence of which it is certain, but of the content of which it is by its very nature and limitations ignorant. In other words it would be desirable were it possible. Nay, more, if it were possible, it would be necessary to man's perfection and ultimate happiness. The real point at issue, therefore, is the *possibility* of attaining to any grasp of these truths.

It is abundantly evident that this possibility of attaining to any knowledge of the intimate nature of God, signified by the Supernatural, depends on three

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things. It depends, firstly, upon the real existence of the Supernatural, secondly upon the existence of a revelation by God Himself of at least some of the particular supernatural truths, and thirdly upon the bridging of the gulf between the supernatural and natural. As to the first it has already been shown that the fact of the existence of the Supernatural is demonstrable by reason, in the sense that it is the only possible conclusion from known premisses. As to the second there are the Bible and Christian Tradition, both of which are historic facts, claiming to set forth this Divine Revelation and supported in their claim by the authority, the sanctity and the miracles of Jesus Christ, as well as of the Saints. For the third point, the gulf is bridged by *Faith*. If, therefore, God has thus made it possible by Revelation for man to know some of the truths of the supernatural order, then *Faith*, the vehicle of these truths, is not merely not antithetic to reason, but is in truth a perfection of reason, for it opens the way of the human mind to a vast field of knowledge inconceivable and hitherto absolutely unattainable. *Faith* perfects Reason in accordance with our original postulate.

### III

The real point at issue is fundamentally the exact part played by *Faith*. It must be admitted that Reason, limited to the Finite, is separated by a measureless gulf from the Supernatural, which is in the order of the Infinite. If man is to be brought into immediate contact with the Supernatural therefore, there must be some bridge thrown out across the gulf. Let us consider what appears to be a good analogy. In the construction of a stone-built arch, the piers on either side are first built. Growing out of each of these, and yet forming an integral part of each, springs an incipient arch—the bed or seating upon which alone the

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arch proper can rest naturally and securely. Now, to apply the analogy, our thesis of a bridge between natural and supernatural will stand if there can be found such a ledge or incipient arch in each from which a bridge may spring and upon which it may rest. As for the bridge itself—it is *Faith*, supernatural in origin and not to be acquired by man except as a gratuitous gift from God. Man has no right to such a gift—unless God for His own purpose has willed to make it possible for man to attain to some positive knowledge of Himself in the supernatural, unless, as we say, He has willed to raise man to the Supernatural Order. But, granting God's will to do this, He must strengthen and elevate man's natural powers by the gift of grace, which gift brings Faith in its train. But can Faith be so given to man as not to offend against his nature? To return to our analogy, if Faith is the bridge or arch, what of the ledgings or seatings on which the arch is to rest? It is not difficult to show that they actually exist.

In all created nature there is a passive capacity rendering it entirely obedient to the Omnipotent Will of the Creator. In man there is a faculty which not only exhibits this passive capacity in common with all creation, but is peculiarly fitted to become the vehicle or medium of contact with the Supernatural, if the Creator sees fit to use it. This faculty is the human intellect, man's natural medium of knowledge, and man's primary contact with the Supernatural is a contact with Supernatural truth. It is upon this faculty that God builds upwards and outwards the bridge of faith which, once built, so forms part of the faculty in which it is rooted and out of which it springs that the two become as one thing.

On the other side the Supernatural, as presented to man, has a similar ledge for the support of Faith. The truths of Revelation necessarily remain supernatural



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in their content and outside the comprehension of the human intelligence, but they come to man with adequate evidence of their *credibility*. They shew no contradiction to the findings of reason, but, more than this, they are supported by an authority whose credentials Reason can examine and approve. Perhaps the notion of credibility demands one word of explanation. When a scientist presents me with some statement of scientific fact, the whole content of which I personally do not understand, my concern is primarily with his authority to make such a statement. If I can satisfy myself as to his authority, I accept his statement as true. In other words *I believe* his statement because, in the light of his authority, it is credible.

It is, however, of supreme importance to observe that the statement in question must not be wholly unintelligible to me. The terms in which the statement is couched must convey a definite and true, though not necessarily a completely adequate, idea to the mind. Thus I can scarcely be said to 'believe' that  $A=X+Y$ , no matter what the authority. Again, unless I am acquainted with the Latin tongue, it is useless to ask me to believe the statement: 'Mundus productus est ex nihilo per creationem.' But rendered into familiar English terms: 'The world was produced out of nothing by creation,' the statement becomes at least sufficiently intelligible to be believed, even though everyone does not perhaps completely grasp the deepest significance of the terms employed.

Similarly, though the Supernatural truth presented to man for belief is of its nature outside human comprehension, still if he is to believe it, it must be conveyed to him in terms which do hold some definite meaning for his intelligence. Thus that revealed truth which we call the Trinity is expressed in words which are familiar: 'There are Three Persons in One God.' Yet the understanding of the mystery and in-

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finite truth involved in these familiar words is essentially outside the range and capacity of any created intelligence. It remains impossible to judge of the intrinsic truth of the statement except by an examination of the credentials of Him Who makes it. But here again human reason is allowed its play, for in that examination it can of itself discover that the truths of Faith are presented upon the unanswerable authority of God Himself.

The supernatural as presented to man is thus furnished with a 'ledge,' namely, the adequate evidence of its credibility, upon which the arch of Faith may rest. Although a man cannot comprehend the truths of Faith, he can know by Reason that they are credible, *i.e.*, worthy of belief.

These two ledges, then, permit the unification of the natural and supernatural, yet neither the one nor the other loses anything of its essential characteristics and perfections.

## IV

It is already clear that Reason has its own undisputed realms of operation, and it retains undiminished its sovereignty even when Faith is conjoined with it. The great Aquinas, perhaps the greatest Theologian of all time, upheld fearlessly and completely the validity of Reason in its own sphere. 'Wisdom,' he says, 'is two-fold, created and uncreated, and both are possible to man. In both there is that certitude of knowledge which Truth connotes and it is impossible that the truth in one should clash with that in the other, for both are derived from one First Cause, God' (*De Verit*, xi, 1, ad 16m). Not only, therefore, is uncreated wisdom immutable but created wisdom, also, is essentially unchangeable because of the stability of the objects with which it is concerned. 'In things supernatural the authority of God is the sole guide to

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truth; in the natural order everything may be put to the test of reason: consonance with reason is the accepted norm of truth' (*Summa Theol.*, 1a, 2ae, 98, 1).

Yet because Reason, in itself trustworthy, is patient of error from a variety of causes, such as lack of complete information, bodily indisposition, personal animus and so on—because of this, Faith can and does illuminate and aid Reason even in its own sphere. Man's contact with the Supernatural will necessarily re-orientate his whole life and outlook, he will think more accurately, his vision will be clearer, the horizon of his reason will be widened, because he will see more and more the wider purpose of things created. I have said that St. Thomas's tractate on God is a masterpiece of clear human thought, but I protest, as St. Thomas protested, and as his life bore witness, that such a masterpiece would have been impossible had his mind not been illumined by the light of a living faith.

This is not unintelligible, for, as has been pointed out, Reason is the basis and groundwork of Faith. Faith springs out of reason as the arch out of the pier, one with it yet distinct. It is the human intelligence with all its natural powers and attainments untroubled and preserved, drawn up by God into a higher sphere where it can have *certitude* of Divine truths even while natural limitations prevent the understanding of those truths. So far from Faith being opposed to Reason, Reason is the very foundation and subject of Faith. Without Reason Faith could not be.

Our findings, then, are these. *Faith is not Reason.* They are precisely as distinct as are the Supernatural and Natural with which they are respectively concerned. Faith is not Reason but Faith is eminently reasonable.

To justify that conclusion has been the whole purpose of this essay. If it has succeeded in its purpose, then the answer to the objections and the questions ori-

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ginally proposed for examination is established. This answer is all the more important and vital because of the spread of materialism which aims at confining all human activity and purpose within the narrow bounds of the bodily, and animal element in man's nature. Materialism denies the possibility of the whole supernatural and of man's relation to it. For this reason alone, Materialism is, apart from the many other objections that can be urged against it, utterly and completely irrational.

The acceptance of the truths of Faith is in no sense a *submission* of Reason, nor is it unworthy of a being endowed with Reason. On the contrary, it is the only reasonable and perfect completion of the powers and capabilities of a rational being.

HILARY J. CARPENTER, O.P.

## *TENEBRAE FACTAE SUNT*

**H**IS friends were hiding, and the light of day  
Unfaithful too, forsook Him there and fled.  
O coward daylight! Wherefore didst thou flee,  
And then come creeping back when He was dead?

O shamefaced day! returning all too late  
Upon the footsteps of departing gloom,  
To haunt the evening hilltops half-afraid,  
And see thy Master carried to the tomb.

ELIZABETH BELLOC.