

What Has Athens To Do With Jerusalem?

A Stroll Through My Own Puzzlements

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Faith and Reason, Reason and Faith. This is a huge and vital question, and so I'm delighted that we've chosen this for our topic this semester.

What's true? What's the right thing to do? Those are important questions - in fact none more important. Let's imagine two starting places for answering them, one a place of pure faith and one a place of pure reason. Let's start by acknowledging the claims of both. And let's start by acknowledging that millions of people find each the only reasonable standpoint.

Some people look at what science and engineering have accomplished for us over the past several hundred years, bringing comfort and prosperity for hundreds of millions by sticking to empirical facts: what we can take in through our five senses. Reason is a human faculty that helps us organize those empirical facts. And that's all there is, they believe. To think there's more is primitive and ignorant - a return to magic and imaginary things. The realm of reason is all there is. Something like that is the case for reason, and reason alone.

And some people think reason is what has gotten us into so much trouble: so much sinfulness and pride and wrecked lives. They don't deny there is such a thing as reason, they simply believe we have to seek guidance from God on every important matter on which God has given us direction, or else we will be turning our backs on God's will. That was Adam's first sin, and in following reason against God's will we commit that first sin over and over again. How do we know God's will? By reading the Bible, the clear record of what God asks of us. Something like that is the case for faith, and faith alone.

Millions of people adhere to each of these. Is there a place in the middle? I hope so. I've been stuck in the middle for all of my adult life, looking for a place where faith and reason connect. Not just a little of one and a little of the other, but rather a place where they connect, where they reinforce.

To say more I'm going to proceed a little autobiographically, telling a little bit my own personal story, a little of Earlham's journey with this. So let me tell you some stories.

The first one is about my Dad, Frank C. Bennett, Jr. He was certainly a man of reason (he was a chemist) and he was also a man of faith. He'd been born a Baptist, of the Northern variety, and had gone off to Bates College, a good Baptist college, where he met my Mom -- at their first dance, the second day they were on campus together.

After college they married and lived in Rochester New York, where my Dad had a job working for Eastman Kodak. We went to a Presbyterian Church because they liked the location and the congregation. My Dad muttered to himself most Sunday afternoons about what George Ulp, our Minister, had said that morning. And mostly it had to do with what Presbyterians, starting with its founder, John Calvin, call predestination.

Here's the basic deal on the doctrine of predestination. If there is a God (and there is, faith tells us), then God is all powerful and all knowing. God knows everything that is, was and ever will be. That means God knows what I'm going to do - every single thing I'll ever do. That means God knows whether I'll sin or not. God already knows whether I'll go to heaven -- whether I am one of the 'elect.' This is reason, working within faith, isn't it? My dad thought thinking about all this was important, because he was a man of faith and a man of reason. But he muttered because this didn't make any sense. If God knows everything I'm going to do, then I don't have any free will. I shouldn't bother trying. The game is rigged. That didn't make any sense. But it didn't make any sense either to suppose that God didn't already know everything that anyone was going to do. How could God be God if He couldn't. Either way, reason, working on faith, led us into a trap. He couldn't find a way out, and neither could I. And I dare say no one really has.

And with this paradox, and my Dad muttering, began my reflections and confusions about Faith and Reason, Reason and Faith, which have not left me alone for a single day since I was very young.

Here's another example, a bit different, and this one began to grab hold of me in college. If the teachings of Jesus, as reported to us in the four Gospels, are clear about anything, they tell us never to wage war. There are no exceptions

In Matthew 5, for example, Jesus says "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' [He's quoting here from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy] But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...."

And then a little later "You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [He's referring again, apparently, to Leviticus and Exodus, though neither actually urges us to hate our enemies] But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven."

I could go on, and you know I could. There is not a single passage in the New Testament (except, perhaps, in that trippy book of Revelations, and who knows what that's about) that gives any justification for taking up arms against another. So faith is clear on that. And early Christians were all pretty clear on that.

But to a lot of people, pacifism just doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense in reason. So they begin using reason to justify going to war. They say something like this. If you're not prepared to defend yourself, other people, bad people, will take advantage of you. So you have to prepare for war, even you only want to defend yourself. And sadly that day often comes and you do have to defend yourself. This is the voice of reason. Most people who call themselves Christians do think it is OK to wage war despite the utter, bracing clarity of the New Testament teaching. Over centuries, they have devised something called "Just War Theory" to justify when war is morally acceptable. Just War Theory is smart stuff, complex and carefully argued. But this is reason leading you to a different place than faith.

The title I've given my message today, "What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem," is from a 2nd century church leader named Tertullian. He was well educated in Greek and Latin classics, but he was upset at the use of reason to undermine clear Christian teachings. So he meant that question rhetorically. Imagine him saying, "What the (heck) does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" And in some of the New Testament Bible passages I asked David to read you can hear the same attitude: "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"

I may be sounding like I'm making the case for faith against reason. But I don't mean to. For one thing, the capacity for reason is the most extraordinary gift of God to humankind. I believe God expects us to use fully and well all the gifts we have been given. That comes from my faith. Does not Jesus remind us that we are made in God's image - and doesn't that suggest reason connects us to God? So I've been thinking most of my adult life. So here I am struggling to find a place for faith and a place for reason, and not having them at odds.

Jump forward a bit in time - to twelve years ago when I arrived at Earlham. There in my new office was - and is - this huge desk that first belonged to Joseph Moore. He's the person who began the Joseph Moore Museum, and he was one of my predecessors as President. Moore graduated from Earlham, he was a devout Quaker, even a recorded minister, and he taught Biology here for a few years. Then he went to Harvard in 1859 to earn a Master's degree in Biology. And so he happened to read Darwin's *The Origin of Species* the very year it was published.

From his first reading Joseph Moore knew that what Darwin said was true. He also knew that the Bible was true, including the Genesis account of Creation. And he knew he couldn't reconcile those two truths. He came back to

Earlham to teach, he became President, and then he returned to teaching. He spent all this time after 1859 trying to figure out how to reconcile Darwin and the Bible, Reason and Faith. He never succeeded, but he told people "All Truth is God's Truth," and he refused to use his understanding of faith to dismiss reason, or his understanding of reason to dismiss faith. He thought, and he believed, that there was more to know - and in that more that might or might not be given to him, would be the reconciliation, the harmonizing, of faith and reason.

I'm with Joseph Moore, so I love having his desk in my office. I think there is always more to faith than I understand. And I believe there is always more to reason than I understand - probably more to both than any human beings ever will figure out. For me that's not a basis for dismissing either faith or reason, but rather a case for humility and a case for constant searching. There must be more, there surely is more that we may know, some of it by Faith and some of it by Reason, and all of it God's truth.

Jump forward a bit in time, to 1889. (Joseph Moore is still on the Faculty. He would be alive until 1905.) If you were a student in 1889, and no doubt for many years before that and for a few years after, you would have taken a course in your senior year called "Christian Evidences." The President of the College, Joseph J. Mills, taught that course. In addition to being President he was also Professor of Mental and Moral Science. As a textbook, they used a book a book by Milton Valentine called *Natural Theology or Rational Theism*. Valentine had been President of another college. Here is the opening paragraph.

I. DEFINITION AND GENERAL VIEW OF THE SUBJECT.

1. NATURAL THEOLOGY treats of the *existence* and *character* of God, as these may be known from reason and nature. It investigates the evidences of His being, and seeks to determine His attributes and relation to the world. The conclusions reached through this investigation, and established as valid on just principles of evidence, form what may be accepted as Rational Theism, or the doctrine of God as ascertainable apart from supernatural revelation.

That is, Valentine is trying to work out how reason teaches us the same things as faith. He is trying to connect the two - to build a bridge between them.

I don't own a copy of Valentine's *Natural Theology*, but I do own copies of several other books that were standard textbooks in college courses on "Evidences of Christianity." I'm fascinated by them. Such courses and such textbooks were staples of a late 19th century education in the liberal arts and sciences. All these courses tried to reconcile faith and reason. Here's one first published in 1846, written by Mark Hopkins, President of Williams College. My copy is the 23d edition, from 1893. And here's another one, by Stephen G. Bulfinch, from 1866.

So more than a century ago, many people wrote these books called *Evidences of Christianity*, and everybody who went to college took the course. There was a good deal more optimism and confidence than there is today that we could connect, or that we could bridge, reason and faith. I think you'd have to be pretty brave (even reckless) to write such a book or teach such a course today.

So what's happened since Joseph Moore went to Harvard and read *The Origin of Species* in 1859 that makes such courses and such textbooks seem impossible to write? That is not a question for a Sunday afternoon in College Meeting but rather for a whole four years in college and then some years in graduate school and then, perhaps, a lifetime beyond. More as a tease than anything else let me simply say that the beginning of understanding why no one writes books like this any more has to do with a change in how we understand reason and a change in how we understand faith.

On the one hand, we now think of reason (for all its practical triumphs) in a narrower, more modest way. Hardly anyone any more believes that reason can tell us what we ought to do in order to live the moral life. Reason, we believe, can help us delve into the patterns and causal sequences of the material world. And reason can tell us how to be effective (or efficient) so long as we already know what we want to do, (as long as we know what goals or purposes we want to pursue), but reason cannot tell us what those goals or purposes should be. To find our goals we either need to turn to faith, or we need to decide that there is little more to life than pleasing ourselves or making ourselves happy - whatever that means. The Greek philosophers thought reason could tell us what we ought to do. And Kant thought so, too, though he was a little more cautious. Now very few philosophers think so.

There have been important changes in faith, too. It no longer seems so easy to know what God asks us to do simply by reading the Bible. For one thing, reading doesn't seem so simple. Even if you've only be at Earlham a few weeks you're likely to have learned that what you take from a book has a lot to do with who you are and what you bring to the reading, not just with what's already in the book 'as written.' Reading, we now realize, is an activity that involves a lot of use of reason: it involves criticism and interpretation, and there is no getting away from that.

Another change is that we grow more and more aware that other peoples around the world have their faiths, and they are different from ours. These people (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists) believe God told them something different. As we give greater respect to others on this planet, we find it harder to say why (or even whether) ours is the true faith.

These changes in reason and in faith have so changed the terrain that hardly anyone knows how to connect them one to another.

I've been picking my way through some puzzlements of faith and reason. Sadly I could offer dozens more. Happily I won't. Sometimes reason, working on faith, leads us into paradox – as with predestination. Sometimes reason and faith lead us down what seem like disparate paths – as with creation and evolution. Sometimes reason seems to lead us away from the clear leadings of faith – as with so-called 'Just War.' And yet I do not believe we can choose one, between faith and reason, and reject the other.

So now what are we to do? I told you I was mostly going to share my puzzlements with you. I do want to point your attention to two things from the Bible that Earlham's founders thought were important. They're the other two things I asked David to read. Psalm 46 was read on the very first day that Earlham opened, in 1847. And it says "Be still and know that I am God." Sometimes silence before God, waiting on God, is what is wanted. Human reasoning can crowd out or drown out opportunities to hear from God.

On the other hand, our founders chose words from the beginning of the Gospel of John for our motto. And that book begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That's deep, and Quakers have been puzzling over those words and finding guidance in them for centuries. To me they give confidence that there is meaning in this life, and wholeness, that come from God. That meaning and that wholeness work on a transcendent plane, beyond the ordinary reach of human reason, but sometimes partially accessible to human reason.

Finally I want to make two observations urgings.

The first is to bring humility to this question. Reason is an important human faculty for understanding the world. But when we know something through reason, do we know God's understanding of that? I do not think so. When we are puzzled and cannot find an answer in reason, should we think there is no answer, no solution? I hardly think so. On the one hand, there may well be an answer in God's understanding, but God's understanding may be beyond us.

And the second is to bring optimism to this question. I like the spirit of Rufus Jones's urging us to believe that we are on a journey with God, that there is always more before us, that God and human beings belong together (I would add, in reason and in faith), and that we should "sail the uncharted seas with God."

Readings for the Message

Psalm 46: 8-11

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord,
what desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
10 "Be still, and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!"
11 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

John 1:1-5

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 4 What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

1 Corinthians 1:20-21

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

from Rufus Jones, "Rethinking Quaker Principles," 1941

Is our Quakerism to be an open or a closed type of religion? Open religion means a type that is uncongealed, fresh, free, formative and in vital contact with the creative stream of divine life. Open religion has faith in the spiritual capacity of the soul and confidence that God and man are akin and essentially belong together. Open religion, therefore, is expectant, forward looking. It prizes the past, but believing profoundly that God is a living God, it sees more yet of love and truth and goodness before us. Its ultimate assurances are not in books or creeds or formulations or arguments, but in the soul's experience of the reality and Christlikeness of God. It dares to leave religion free to grow with the growing world and growing mind, and to sail the uncharted seas with God. The Society of Friends in its early formative period