

07-1 Faith, reason, and the educated Christian

Premise by Pierluigi Luisetti



1. This essay by **Humberto Rasi** (Photo) "*Faith, reason, and the educated Christian*", was published in the Adventist journal, DIALOGUE, vol. 15, number three, Year 2003, English edition.

It must be said and remembered that Dr. Rasi in 1989 was the founder of this prestigious four-monthly publication. Addressed to thousands Adventist university students in public colleges and universities, his hope was to encourage them to better know, live, and share their faith while studying in an environment that at times is hostile to biblical beliefs, values, and lifestyle. The same university magazine made its appearance in parallel in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese. Having not been interrupted over the years, it still exists today. Only from 2014 onwards has also been added the regular Italian edition translated from English.



2. Starting from the first release of 1989, all the quadrimestrial volumes available in the respective language, can be downloaded from the web for free in PDF format without the need to register. A very useful search engine is also available on the site. To open the related page go to the following link:

<https://dialogue.adventist.org/archive>

3. It should be noted that in this compilation I have deliberately renounced the numerous references and abundant notes contained in the appendix of the essay. The references to bibliographic sources in the academic or university field is generally a requirement that is imposed. However, from my point of view I want to propose it more as a stimulating reflection to be understood by all cultural levels.

End of premise

Faith, reason and the educated Christian

Essay of **Dr. Humberto M. Rasi**, Department of Education, General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (1990-2002).

**To love God with all your mind and heart
is a call to integrate faith and reason in
one's devotion to God and pursuit of life,
without giving up the priority of God.**

"Lord, help me never to use my reason against the Truth."

A Jewish Prayer.

What's the proper relationship between faith and reason in the life of a believer? Through the centuries, the topic has been of intense interest and concern to thoughtful Christians. Believers involved in advanced studies, research, or professions that challenge the basis of one's faith continually face the dilemma of how to integrate faith and reason in their daily life. This tension is heightened by the fact that many of our contemporaries assume that intelligent people are not religious or, if they are, prefer that they keep such beliefs private. How has the issue been faced by Christian intellectuals in the past?

This article will provide a brief historical survey of the options, review key biblical passages on the subject, and propose ways by which thoughtful Christians can satisfy their passion to both believe and cultivate a reasoned faith.

Premises and definitions

According to the Scriptures, God created Adam and Eve at the beginning of human history and endowed them with rationality, with "power to think and to do". Exercising those abilities, our first parents disobeyed God and, as a result, lost their perfect status and home. Although we have inherited the weaknesses of their fallen condition, God has preserved our capacity to think for ourselves, exercise trust, and make choices. In fact, one of the goals of Adventist education is "to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought". Before proceeding, clarity requires that we define a few terms:

- **Faith**, from a Christian perspective, is an act of the will that chooses to place its trust in God in response to His self-disclosure and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our conscience. Religious faith is stronger than belief; it includes the willingness to live and even die for one's convictions.
- **Reason** is the exercise of the mental capacity for rational thought, understanding, discernment, and acceptance of a concept or idea. Reason looks for clarity, consistency, coherence, and proper evidence.
- **Belief** is the mental act of accepting as true, factual, or real a statement or a person. Of course, it is also possible to hold a belief in something that is not true.
- **Will** is the ability and power to elect a particular belief or course of action in preference to others. • **Choice** is the free exercise of such ability.

Reason and faith are asymmetrically related. It is possible to believe that God exists (reason) without believing in God or trusting in Him (faith). But it is impossible to believe and trust in God (faith) without believing that He exists (reason).

I personally accept the primacy of faith in the Christian intellectual life, as expressed in two classical formulations: *Fides quaerens intellectum* (Faith seeking understanding) and *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order that I may understand). Reason is important to faith, but it cannot replace faith. To a Christian, acquiring knowledge per se is not the ultimate object of life. Life's highest goal is to know God

and to establish a personal, loving relationship with Him. Such trust and friendship lead to obedience to God and to loving service to fellow human beings.

Relationship between faith and reason

How have believers related to issues of faith and reason in the past? How should we? During the Christian era, individuals have assumed various approaches that can be outlined as follows:

1. Fideism Faith ignores or minimizes the role of reason in arriving at ultimate truth. According to this position, faith in God is the ultimate criterion of truth and all that a Christian needs for certitude and salvation. Fideists affirm that God reveals Himself to human consciousness through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and personal experience, which are sufficient to know all important truths. A popular contemporary saying summarizes this stance: "God says it. I believe it. That settles it". Radical, non-rational fideism was first articulated by **Tertullian** (160-230), an early Christian apologist known for his critical attitude toward the surrounding culture. It was the argumentative Tertullian who remarked, *Credo quia absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd). In the succeeding centuries other Christian authors have extolled the supreme value of blind faith in direct opposition to human reason. Carried to an extreme, fideism rejects rational thought, opposes advanced education and scientific research, and may lead to a private, mystical religion.

Critics of fideism, especially of its more radical expression, observe that faith in God and in Jesus Christ presupposes that there is a God who has revealed Himself to humanity in Christ. And that unless those presuppositions can be shown to be reasonable, or at least not contrary to reason, it is not more appropriate to believe them than to believe an absurdity. Furthermore, Christians who receive the Bible as a trustworthy revelation of God must, of necessity, exercise their rational powers to comprehend and accept the propositions and exhortations contained in the Scriptures. If the Bible is truly a propositional expression of God's will as well as the basis of faith and practice for the Christian, human reason cannot be disregarded.

2. Rationalism Human reason challenges, and eventually undermines religious faith. Rationalists maintain that human reason constitutes the primary source of knowledge and truth, and therefore provides the basis for belief. Modern rationalism rejects religious authority and spiritual revelation as sources of reliable information. Beginning with the humanistic revival of the European Renaissance (14th-16th centuries), which extolled human creativity and potential, rationalism flourished during the Enlightenment (18th century), with its systematic critique of accepted doctrines and institutions. It eventually evolved into modern skepticism which questions, doubts, or disagrees with generally accepted conclusions and beliefs, and into atheism, which denies the existence of God. Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud are representatives of this position.

In its opposition to faith, rationalism argues that religions tend to support traditional and sometimes irrational beliefs and to frustrate the self-realization of human

beings, both individually and collectively. Rationalists also argue that the reality of evil in the world is incompatible with the existence of a powerful, loving, and wise God as traditionally conceived by Christians.

3. Dualism Faith and reason operate in separate spheres, neither confirming nor contradicting each other. Many contemporary scientists, some of them Christian, maintain that science deals with objective "facts", while religion addresses moral issues from a personal, subjective perspective. Therefore, the spheres of activity of reason and faith, of knowledge and values, are unrelated to each other. Bible-believing Christians are not willing to accept this position. They argue, for example, that Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Gospels is not only the center of their faith as God incarnate, but also a real Person who lived on this Earth at a particular time and place in human history. They contend that the events narrated and the characters presented in the Scriptures were also real and part of the historical continuum, as evidenced by a growing volume of documentary and archaeological evidences.

Any attempt to separate the spheres of reason and faith relegates the Christian religion to the realm of personal feelings, individual subjectivity, and ultimately to the level of fanciful and irrelevant myth. Both Christians and non-Christians hold to varying and frequently contradictory beliefs. If these cannot be distinguished as to their truthfulness or falsehood by the use of reasonable evidence and argument, then no belief whether religious or philosophical, can claim reliability and allegiance.

4. Synergy Faith and reason can collaborate and strengthen each other in the human quest for and commitment to truth. Proponents of this position maintain that Christianity constitutes an integrated and internally consistent system of belief and practice that deserves both faith commitment and rational assent. The realms of faith and reason overlap. Truths based on faith alone are those revealed by God but not discoverable by reason (for example, the Trinity, salvation by God's grace through faith). Truths to which we may arrive through both faith and reason are revealed by God but also discoverable and understandable by human reason (for example, the existence of God, the objective moral law). Truths ascertained by reason and not by faith are those not directly revealed by God but discovered by human reason (for example, physical laws, mathematical formulas).



Clive S. Lewis (1898-1963), the renowned Christian apologist, argued that in order to be truly moral, human beings must believe that basic moral principles are not dependent on human conventions. These concepts possess a transcendent reality that makes them knowable by all humans. Lewis further maintained that the existence of such principles presupposes the existence of a Being entitled to promulgate them and likely to do so.

If the real world can be comprehended by human reason on the basis of investigation and experience, it is then an intelligible world.

The amenability of this world to scientific inquiry both at the cellular and galactic levels allows human beings to discover the laws that provide evidence for intelligent design of the most intricate kind. This extremely elaborate design of all facets of the universe, which makes possible intelligent life on this planet, speaks of a Designer. Therefore, religious experience and moral conscience can be seen as signs of the existence of the same Being that scientific research envisions as the intelligent Designer of the cosmos and the Sustainer of life.

Reason can help us move from understanding to acceptance and, ideally, to belief. Faith, however, is a choice of the will that goes beyond reason. Careful thinking, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, may remove obstacles on the way to faith. Once faith is already present, reason may strengthen religious commitment.

Faith and reason in biblical perspective

The Hebrew worldview, as reflected in the Old Testament, conceived of human life as an integrated unit that included belief and behavior, trust and thought. During most of their existence, the people of Israel accepted as a matter of fact the reality of God, whose revelations were documented in their Scriptures and whose supernatural interventions were evident in their history. For them, the enemy of belief in the true God was not unbelief but the worship of pagan deities, mere products of misguided human imagination. Their goal was not theoretical knowledge but wisdom, the gift of right thinking that leads to right choosing and right living. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding"* (Proverbs 9:10).

The New Testament reflects the transition toward a different cultural context, in which Hebrew monotheism had already become fragmented into various Jewish sects, and had also been influenced by Greco-Roman polytheism, emperor worship, and agnosticism. As the early Christian Church interacted with this religio-philosophical environment, it began to articulate the distinction and the relationship between faith and reason, granting to faith the position of privilege in the life of the believer. Bible teaching with respect to faith and reason, particularly in the New Testament, may be summarized in the following propositions:

1. The Holy Spirit both awakens faith and illumines reason. If it were not for the persistent influence of the Holy Spirit on human consciousness, no one would ever become a Christian. In our natural condition we do not seek God (Romans 3:10,11), acknowledge our desperate need of His grace (John 16:7-11), or understand spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14). Only through the agency of the Holy Spirit we are drawn to accept, believe, and trust in God (John 16:14). Once this miraculous transformation has occurred (Romans 12:1,2), the Holy Spirit teaches us (John 14:26), guides us *"into all truth"* (John 16:3), and allows us to discern truth from error (1 John 4:1-3).

2. Faith must be exercised and developed all through life. Each human being has been given a *"measure of faith"* (Romans 12:3) — that is, the basic capacity to trust in God — and each Christian is encouraged to grow *"more and more"* in faith (2

Thessalonians 1:3). In fact, *"without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6). Hence the plea of an anguished father to Jesus: *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24) and the insistent request of the disciples: *"Increase our faith!"* (Luke 17:5).

3. God values and appeals to human reason. Although God's thoughts are infinitely higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8,9), He has chosen to communicate intelligibly with humankind, revealing Himself through the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:20,21), through Jesus Christ who called Himself *"the truth"* (John 14:6), and through nature (Psalm 19:1). God wants to *"reason together"* with us (Isaiah 1:18). Jesus frequently engaged His listeners in dialogue and reflection, asking for a reasoned response (see, for example, His conversation with Nicodemus, John 3; and the Samaritan woman, John 4). At the request of the Ethiopian official, Philip explained a Messianic prophecy found in Scripture so that he might understand and believe (Acts 8:30-35). The believers in Berea were praised because they *"examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"* (Acts 17:11). The ultimate goal of life is to know God and to accept Christ as Saviour; such personal knowledge leads to eternal life (John 17:3).

4. God provides sufficient evidence to believe and trust in Him. The unbiased observer can perceive in the natural universe a display of God's creative and sustaining power (Isaiah 40:26). His *"invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen"* and understood by *"the things he has made"* (NRSV). Those who, in spite of the evidence, deny His existence and creative power *"are without excuse"* (Romans 1:20). However, when Thomas expressed doubts about the reality of Christ's resurrection, Christ provided the physical evidence and challenged him to *"Stop doubting and believe"* (John 20:27-29). When we are confronted with questions regarding the origin of the universe, our point of departure should be faith based on God's revelation: *"By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible"* (Hebrews 11:3).

5. God offers clear guidance for life, but accepts the choices we make. In the Garden of Eden, God gave to Adam and Eve the power of choice — to obey or disobey Him — and warned them of the terribly sad consequences of choosing the latter (Genesis 2:16,17). Speaking through Moses, God reiterated the options: *"I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live"* (Deuteronomy 30:15,19). His appeals to human conscience are exquisitely courteous: *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me"* (Revelation 3:20). Above all, God seeks from His creatures love, obedience, and worship that are freely chosen and reasoned (John 4:23,24; 14:15; Romans 12:1 [*logikén* = reasonable and spiritual]).

6. Faith and reason work together in the believer's life and witness. Paul stated that the acceptance of Christ as Saviour depended on a rational understanding of the gospel: *"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard"*

through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Christians are expected to be *"always...prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have"* (1 Peter 3:15 [*answer* = *apologian* in Greek, defense, justification; *reason* = *lógon* in Greek, a word, an explanation]). Peter also encourages Christians to *"make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge"* (2 Peter 1:5,6).

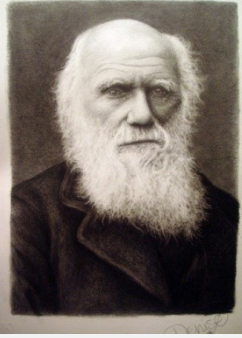
Dealing with questions and doubts

Let us now look at the practical implications of what we have examined. How should Bible-believing Christians deal with the tension that inevitably arises between their faith and their reason when they face conflicting issues in their study, research, or life experience? The following suggestions can help:

1. Remember that truth is inseparable from God. God created us as rational, inquisitive creatures. He is honored when we exercise our mental abilities to explore, discover, learn, and invent as we interact with the world that He created and sustains. Whenever we use our rationality and creativity in an attitude of humility and gratitude, we are loving God with our mind. Believers should not be afraid of study, research, and discoveries. If there are discrepancies between "God's truth" and "human truth," it is because we misunderstand one or the other or both. Since in Christ *"are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Colossians 2:3), all truth is God's truth.

2. Accept that the Bible does not tell us everything there is to know. God's knowledge is infinitely broader and deeper than ours. For that reason, He had to condescend to our level in order to establish communication with us, within our ability to comprehend. As Jesus told the disciples: *"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear"* (John 16:12). In addition, our human fallenness impairs and limits our understanding. *"Now we see but a poor reflection...; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known"* (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Bible can be approached as a book of history or literature or laws or biography. But its main purpose is to help us know God and to teach us how to become friends with Him and live godly lives in preparation for eternity. In the New Earth we will have the time and the opportunity to explore and learn from the vast complexity of the cosmos and its inhabitants.

3. Distinguish between God's Word and human interpretations. Human traditions and preconceived ideas frequently make us read things into the Bible that are not there. A sobering example is the case of **Copernicus** (1473-1543), who, on the basis of his study and observations, proposed that the planets, including the Earth, revolved around the Sun. Since most astronomers still accepted Ptolemy's geocentric theory, many religious leaders of that time considered Copernicus' ideas heretical. They believed that because of the importance of human beings and the centrality of this Earth in God's plans, the Sun and planets must revolve around the Earth. When Galileo and Kepler provided evidence in favor of Copernicus's views, the discovery did not destroy God or Christianity.



Three centuries later, **Charles Darwin** (1809-1882) argued against many theologians of his time, who believed in the absolute fixity of the species, which is not required by the Bible narrative. Not many years ago, some Christians stated that God would not allow humans to travel in space or land on the Moon. Again, those statements were proven wrong, showing they were based on personal interpretations and extrapolations.

4. Realize that the scientific enterprise is an ongoing exploration of one segment of reality. Experimental science deals only with phenomena that can be observed, measured, manipulated, repeated, and falsified. Contrary to the impression that one gains from many science textbooks and the popular media, modern experimental science frequently leads to adjustments. True, many of the basic laws are universally accepted. But as scientists continue their research, they take for granted that theories and explanations that were accepted for years may be replaced by other theories and interpretations that seem more accurate and reliable. As a matter of method, scientists work in their disciplines within a naturalistic framework, which excludes the supernatural. Many of them are agnostics or atheists; however, their beliefs are not based on scientific evidence but on personal choice. Scientists who are open to the possibility that God exists, find in the natural world abundant evidence that there is an Intelligent Designer who planned and sustains the universe and life.

5. Create a mental file for unresolved issues. Some questions will inevitably arise in our studies, in our life's experience, and even in the Bible for which we don't have satisfactory answers. In some cases, we find an explanation later. In other cases, questions remain unresolved. A classic example is the tension between our belief in an all-powerful, loving God and the suffering of the innocent. Although there are abundant evidences of God's power and care, we cannot fully understand why human tragedies and natural disasters occur in a universe in which He is sovereign. As other believers before us, we try to make sense of this and other deep mysteries. The best we can do with these issues is to suspend judgment, keep studying them prayerfully, and seek the counsel of mature believers. Some day we will gain a new insight into the mystery or God will make these contradictions clear to us. Faith in God and recognition of our own mental limitations demand that we learn to live with some uncertainties and mysteries.

Conclusion

As a way of illustrating the main thrust of this essay, we can depict our mind as a Court of law that operates every day of our lives, its integrity and freedom protected by God Himself. At Court our individual will sits as the judge, while reason and faith are the lawyers that bring evidence to consider and witnesses to present their views. The evidence and the testimony they provide comes from a wide variety of sources, which include: the influence of people we love and respect, the feeling of loving and being loved, our social interaction and dialogue with others, observations of the natural world, spiritual experiences in prayer and service, readings and research,

joys and sorrows of life, individual and collective worship, response to beauty in the arts, effect of our habits and lifestyle, and the search for inner consistency and authenticity. Our will sifts daily through this multiplicity of emotional, spiritual, rational, and aesthetic perceptions and data, comparing them with the code — our worldview.

At times, the arguments advanced will be accepted and will strengthen our faith convictions. At other times, the evidence presented will trigger an adjustment in our worldview and a modification of our beliefs. These changes, in turn, will have an impact on our conduct. Other times, the will prefers not to decide. Sitting courteously in the background, the Holy Spirit is ready to speak a word of caution, correction, or affirmation. Other voices, perhaps of uninvited observers, are also heard in the courtroom, raising objections, presenting contrary evidence, and insinuating doubts. The Court of our will continues to deliberate until the last day of our conscious life. As thoughtful Christians, we are called to love God with both our mind and our will, integrating in our life the demands of faith and intellect.

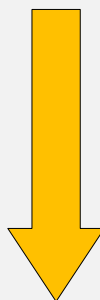
For the educated believer, there is “no incompatibility between vital faith and deep, disciplined, wide-ranging learning, between piety and hard thinking, between the life of faith and the life of the mind”.

In order to nurture these three facets of our God-given abilities — faith, intellect, and will — we must deepen daily our friendship with God and our commitment to truth. He trusts that, in the face of the evidence available to us, we will be intelligent decision-makers.

THE END

New International Version are generally the Bible references (NIV).

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