
A REFLECTION ON SOME PHILOSOPHERS' EXPLORATION OF THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

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Abstract

The relation between faith and reason in religion is one of the cardinal thoughts that occupied the attention of the Scholastics. The belief in religious dogmas which the believer has not witnessed or may likely doubt are encouraged to be taken with faith as true for all time and place. Reason on the other hand which calls for the critical examination of the claims, be it religion or secular no doubt comes into conflict with faith or fideism. How can this dilemma be reconciled? Is it possible for us to have faith and still be rational? Several scholars are divided here. Whereas, the scholastic Tertullian, the existentialist Soren Kierkegaard and a host of others place faith over reason, this study counters the arguments of these minds by stating that reason is indispensable to faith in matters of religion. In this connection, this paper employs the ideas of John Scottus Erigena, Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Rush'd (Averroes) and Pope Francis to make the point clearer.

Keywords: Reason, Faith, Aquinas, Pope Francis.

Introduction

Philosophers, Theologians and Scholars have advanced arguments that are used to defend their views when matters such as the nature of

God and the ways of knowing the Divine arise. On the one hand are those who base their arguments on the eternity of God while those who deny that there is a God that orders the Universe occupy the other hand. Those who founded their propositions on the principle of eternity of the Divine are theists and they formulate arguments to prove the existence of God. The other class of scholars has shown the flaws in the theistic arguments and still denies any Supernatural effect on the Universe. Both orientations seem to be saying the truth simultaneously, but in reality, only one of them can be true. This is why it is called an antimony. The aim of this essay is not to examine both theistic and anti-theistic arguments but merely to show that theism can't do without Fideism in most cases. The approach is taken from this angle not because Fideism can't be explained directly but because Fideism naturally implies Theism – the belief in one God or gods or some supernatural forces.

To realize the above aim, the objectives therefore, shall be examining what theism entails so as to have clear idea of what fideism is. This also involves exposing some of the staunch defendants of the theory and the arguments that they have put forward to this end. Furthermore it shall briefly look at Tertullian's *Absurdity*; the exaltation of Fideism by the Arab philosopher and mystic Al Ghazali. Consequently since one cannot adequately capture the thoughts of Fideism without Reason, a brief explanation will be made to see how Reason can aid the knowledge of the Divine. A focus on reason is important in this essay because Soren

Kierkegaard attacked Reason as a way of Knowing. So if he (Kierkegaard) could undermine Reason and exalt the *leaps of Faith*, a brief inspection of what Reason entails is imperative for the all-round comprehension of this paper. After these, we shall then proceed to look at how Kierkegaard sees Faith before attempting a thorough critique of this work.

After a critique of Soren Kierkegaard and other scholars who take the fideistic stance that excludes reason, the third part of this study, reveals the problems with this stance and exposes the thoughts of some greater scholars whose ideas show the connection between religion and faith.

An Exposition of the Notions of Faith and Reason in Religion

Fideism is a term that is derived from faith. It is used to describe “one who thinks that religious faith is irrational or non-rational, and furthermore, that it is still somehow okay or even a good thing to have religious faith.”(Murray and Rea 2008 p.3) Fideism is closely related to Theism because, since fideism has to do with Faith, Theism involves the belief in one God or some gods. At the variants of Theism are Atheism – the total denial of the existence of a God or any Supernatural Divine, Agnosticism – the suspension of judgment about the existence of a Divine due to lack of conclusive evidence.(Stumpf79 p.104) A view held by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Thus, to be a Theist would involve having Faith in a Divine. In other words, to be theistic would involve Fideism. We

shall now consider what Fideism means.

To be a fideist involves Faith and although there are many conceptions of Faith, this paper shall look at Faith as a propositional attitude, which involves a cognitive stance towards a statement. For instance, if I say: “ASUU will go on strike this year!” People will take varying cognitive stances to the statement. Most of such is to *believe it, doubt it, fear it, or hope in it*. The stance that one uses to approach it, is determined by what one stands to gain. However, from the Religious perspective, Faith is “being sure of what is hoped for and certain of what we do not see.”(op. cit, p.94) However, there are four characterization of Faith that comes to mind.(NiV 1984)

These are:

- i. Faith is believing something in the absence of proof;
- ii. Faith is believing something in the absence of supporting evidence;
- iii. Faith is believing something in the face overwhelming counter evidence; and
- iv. Faith is believing something that we do not know to be true.

From the four characterizations made out for faith in the preceding paragraph, one discovers that it tells about the nature of faith. That is, faith has to do with insufficient or lack of Evidence and Knowledge. Faith, despite being unable to show proof or evidence, still appears to lay claims to knowledge. Can this be possible? Toeing this tradition is the ancient church father Tertullian who makes the claim “I

believe because it is absurd!”(Holmes,2017) Even the Islamic philosopher Al Ghazali also harps that “all truths about man and the universe are already contained in the Qur'an.” (Smart 1999 p.210) This means that through faith humans can know the Divine as well the phenomena. But there are several implications to this view. But before showing such implications, we shall now look at 'that which stands in direct conflict with it' – Reason.

Theologians have seen the way of reason to be the way of the Philosophers. Having observed the phenomena, the philosopher has come to the conclusion that there are so many things that cannot be accounted for based mainly on faith. It is not possible to base the knowledge of the Divine on probability as Faith wants us to do, that is, not being sure of what one believes. One of the Islamic philosophers that emphasizes the role that reason plays over faith in knowing the Divine is Ibn Rush'd (Averroes) popularly known for his *Double Truth theory*. He claims that both Faith and Reason are saying the same things about the Divine but Faith is used by lay men who need riddles, myth and legends; Reason is used by the sophisticated minds.(Marenborn1998,p.394) thus, goes on to conclude that Reason should overshadow Faith because reason possesses sophisticated thoughts. In this regard, we shall get involved with the thoughts and ideas of Soren Kierkegaard on the subject. This scholar has a soft spot for what has been termed as the 'leaps of faith'.

This paper has focused on the meaning of faith and how it can be related with reason towards the knowledge of the Divine. What we want to do at this point is to look at how the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard construes his own idea of fideism. We shall inspect the phrase - 'leaps of faith' which is being ascribed to him. What does it mean to have leaps of faith? To answer this question, *The Concept of Anxiety* comes to mind as our main point of reference.

The phrase 'leaps of faith' means “the act of believing in or accepting something intangible or unprovable or without empirical evidence.”(culled online 20th September 2021) It is an act commonly associated with religious beliefs as many religions are considered to be an essential element of piety. Speaking on the subject, H. Alastair and G. Marino, observes that: “...Kierkegaard himself never used the term as he referred to a leap as a leap to faith. A leap of faith ... involves circularity in so far as a leap is made by faith.”(Alastair (eds)1993,p.157) Here, the implication is that Kierkegaard himself never made use of the phrase but it was something merely ascribed to him. In his *Concept of Anxiety*, he shows the core of the leap to faith using the story of Adam and Eve. He argues that Adam's leap signifies a change from one quality to another; mainly the quality of possessing no sin to the quality of possessing sin. For Kierkegaard, the transition from one quality to another can only take place by a leap. Consequently, Soren Kierkegaard blurts out that:

...it is inappropriate to base belief in God on reason. Instead, he emphasizes the necessity of

irrational leaps of faith ... religious belief is a passionate and unconditional commitment to God that not only transcends reason and evidence but also stand in direct conflict with it.(Thomte (eds) 1980p.48)

What the above excerpt tells is that for Kierkegaard, the belief in God or the Divine is not rooted to the use of reason but on faith. And faith as used within the context of believing in a Divine is usually irrational or non-rational. Moreover, it is very important to comprehend that Kierkegaard feels a leap of faith is necessary in the acceptance of Christianity due to the paradoxes that can be found in the religion. If one takes only faith and relegate reason as scholars such AlGhazali and Soren Kierkegaard would subscribe, then the following flaws manifest:

Firstly, fideism has been taken very seriously by a variety of philosophers and theologians. However, a moment's reflection will see that not most of us will be comfortable with it. For instance, let's imagine a patient who visits a doctor for the treatment of cold, only to be told by the doctor that the cure would be to remove one of her kidneys. When the patient prompted why one of her kidneys has to be removed the doctor merely responds that he has faith that such an act would make him alright. A situation of this nature would require even the strongest and adapt fideism to ask for reasons. When matters of great importance are at stake such as health, survival, desires of the heart, even the best of fideist ask for hard evidence and not grounded convictions or leap of faith as Soren Kierkegaard and

Al Ghazali would have us think. Thus, it would be soothing to think that religious faith is a product of irresponsible, irrational, or non-rational belief-forming practices.

Secondly, if belief in the Divine is grounded in the leaps of faith with nothing to do with reason as Kierkegaard, AlGhazali, and Tertullian claim, then the works of St. Augustine, and some other medieval church fathers would have to be in vain as they used reason to clarify some of the doctrinal problems that started arising out of their faith. Furthermore, all the theistic arguments put forward to prove the existence of God would become entirely untenable and unnecessary. This is so because he recommends that belief in God 'is a passionate and unconditional commitment' where irrational leaps of faith have a role to play. But even grounded theologians before him had already found faith inconclusive enough to justify their religious stance.

A third problem that rears its ugly head when Kierkegaard's idea of faith looks plausible is that which has been put forward by C.S Lewis. Using Supernaturalism, a basic tenet of Christianity Lewis counters that "it is something that can be logically inferred based on teleological argument regarding the source of human reason." (opcit) What Lewis brings to our knowledge is that even some tenets in Christianity are based on the use of the human reason and not merely on faith, with Supernaturalism as one of those. This goes on to imply that fideism cannot just stand there all alone. It needs reason to make some dogmas much more rational. A further attack on using

irrational or non rational leaps faith alone as a means to arriving to the Divine is well grounded in the thoughts of St. Thomas Aquinas whose thoughts shall be considered shortly.

A Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in Religion

From the previous section, it becomes obvious that we cannot have a situation where faith alone can rule without the employment of the rational faculty of human beings. This simply points to the fact that one cannot entirely rule out the place of reason in the fideistic stance. This is why this work projects the belief that a reconciliation between reason and faith is not only possible, but important. This is why this section employs the thoughts of some notable scholars such as St Thomas Aquinas, Erigena and Pope Francis to justify our idea that faith and reason can cohabit peacefully. We commence with Thomas Aquinas.

For St. Thomas, religious knowledge is possible through two ways: Faith and Reason. Faith is what theology uses while reason is the way of philosophy.(Stumpf,p.67) Their difference is that each begins from a different starting point. For Aquinas, both of them are saying the same about God for different reasons. The one using reason interprets things in nature with it whereas the theologian rests demonstration of his conclusions upon the authority of revealed knowledge. While Soren Kierkegaard holds that reason and faith contradicts each other and stands in opposition or conflict, St. Thomas is of the view that faith and reason do not necessarily

contradict each other. Reason deals with matters not aimed at human's religious ends while faith does. He goes on to reiterate that some truths are available by reason and some by faith. Wherever reason is capable of knowing something, faith strictly speaking is not necessary. It is at this point that St. Thomas makes a dichotomy between revealed theology and natural theology. For revealed theology, there is no need for reason as faith is enough but natural theology is susceptible to the proof reason. The point to be made here is that Kierkegaard's view that reason has no role in religious belief is totally untenable. St. Thomas' view however, tolerates reason and shows the indispensable role that reason plays in the search for truth and the Divine. We assess John Scottus Eriugena on the subject.

In one of his most popular works titled *Periphyseon (Division of Nature)*, John Scottus Eriugena laid down his understanding of the relation between reason and faith. The former, in his schema he retained as reason and the latter, he coined as authority. For him there is a necessary connection between the two spheres of human thoughts.

For Eriugena, faith or as he called it authority proceeds from reason. He acknowledges the fact that there is the need to understand the fact that reason is given to us by God and hence ought to be used to the glory of God for a better understanding of faith. Let him speak for himself:

Even reason herself teaches this. For authority proceeds from reason, but true reason certainly

does not proceed from authority. For every authority which is not upheld by true reason is seen to be weak, whereas true reason is kept firm and immutable by her own powers and does not require to be confirmed by the assent of any authority. For it seems to me that true authority is nothing else but the truth that has been discovered by the power of reason and set down in writing by the Holy Fathers for the use of posterity. (Williams (trans) 1990, p.11)

It is the case that from that for John Scottus Eriugena, the role of reason is more indispensable to than faith. He argues that reason is of high regard and use even in some other occupations and therefore in such instances faith is of less value. The fact that the recreation of the structure of the universe in thought requires the use of the liberal arts and a correct employment of logic indicates that a pure intellectual intuition of the universal substance escapes human beings. We employ logic to make valid deductions about phenomena but not as simple and blind assumption on faith.

Since reason's valid deductions play a fundamental role in demonstrating the necessity of negations, and therefore in granting a correct understanding of the truth hidden under the symbols used by the Scriptures, it is clear that the Scriptures and true reason are not incompatible but rather, complementary. To this claim Eriugena also adds a metaphysical argument stating the common origin of authority and reason:

So do not let any authority frighten you away from

the things which the rational deduction from right contemplation teaches you. For true authority does not conflict with right reason, nor right reason with true authority, since there is no doubt that both flow from the same source, the Wisdom of God.(ibid, p.108).

From the above, it is very easy to conclude that on the relation between reason and faith, John Scottus Eriugena believes that one does not necessarily rule out the other. Rather, both of them are derived from the Wisdom of God and hence complementary. However, it needs to be said that during Eriugena's time the Church was not ready to employ the tools of critical reason and logic for the corroboration of their faith. Hence, the problem came to be that even John Scottus Eriugena was branded as heretical. We now turn to the Islamic philosopher, Ibn Rush'd, popularly known as Averroes.

Averroes (Ibn Rusdh'd) is one of the most popular Muslim scholars in the Medieval Era whose translation of Aristotle earned him the title of the 'Great Commentator' (op cit p. 93) In his work titled *Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence of the Philosophers)* Averroes responds to fellow Arab scholar Al-Ghazali, the mystic who had placed religious faith on such a high pedestal over reason. Averroes does the reverse on the grounds that religious faith should be subordinate to reason. It is in this connection that Groff and Leaman opines that the aforementioned work is a “point-by-point rebuttal of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, a book which has negatively turned the tide against the once-

influential Neoplatonic-Aristotelian mode of philosophy, charging figures like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina with failing to meet the rigorous methodological standards that they themselves laid down and wandering into the realm of heretical innovation and even unbelief in twenty of their thesis” (Groff, 2001 p.88). But as is the case of this essay, we shall concern ourselves mainly with the ideas he shares on the relation between faith and reason.

We understand that for Averroes, Reason and Faith are two adequate ways of coming to know about the scripture (Al Qur'an). He holds that the way of faith is the way of the laymen, the dogmatic theologians whose mind cannot handle logic and contradiction. However, reason is the tool that is being used or employed to the trust of the conclusions of the philosophers and intellectuals (ibid p.89).

Interpretation of unclear or ambiguous Qur'anic passages is unavoidable, as virtually all Muslims recognize, and when the apparent sense of scripture is at odds with the conclusions of strict, demonstrative reasoning, it must be interpreted figuratively. This is because 'Truth does not contradict truth, but rather it is consistent with it and bears witness to it.' The overzealous theologians do more damage to religion than the philosophers, because they indulge in hasty and often groundless interpretations of scriptures that violate its apparent sense as well as the dictates of reason. They also employ the same dialectical method of presentation indiscriminately to all believers, not realizing that the universal message of Islam requires

different media for different audiences with different capacities. While the demonstrative, dialectical and rhetorical methods all are capable of arriving at essentially the same truth, the first is really only appropriate for a handful of intellectuals, the second for dogmatic but reasoning theologians, and the third for the common people.(Ofuasia 1996, p.344) In short, abstruse metaphysical questions are best left in the hands of qualified experts. To broadcast the methods and conclusions of the philosophers or the theologians to simple believers (for whom the literal, apparent sense of scripture is sufficient) is to jeopardize their faith and do them harm(op cit,p.88).

It is clear from the brief attention that is being given to the ideas of Averroes here that for him, reason and faith are tools to be employed by two different kinds of people for the sole aim of understanding the truths contained in the Al Qur'an. We turn to St. Thomas Aquinas.

St. Thomas Aquinas is one of the scholastics. He is usually credited with natural theology (Stumpf 1979, p.167) He advanced the famous cosmological arguments to prove the existence of God and was very instrumental in the debate on the place of reason and faith which was giving theologians some serious concern given the growth in the use of human intellectual capacity.

For St. Thomas Aquinas, reason and faith are two ways of knowing. 'Reason' covers what we can know by experience and logic alone. From reason, one can know that there is a God and that there is only

one God; these truths about God are accessible to anyone by experience and logic alone, apart from any special revelation from God.

'Faith' covers what we can know by God's special revelation to us (which comes through the Bible and Christian tradition). By faith, we can know that God came into the world through Jesus Christ and that God is triune (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). These truths about God cannot be known by reason alone.

Faith builds on reason. Since faith and reason are both ways of arriving at truth – and since all truths are harmonious with each other – faith is consistent with reason. If we understand faith and reason correctly, there will be no conflict between what faith tells us and what reason tells us. (Peterson 2000).

It is obvious from the foregoing that for St. Thomas Aquinas, the two major ways of arriving at truths is vested in in faith and reason and sees no reason why undue emphasis should be placed on the clash between them.

Since the ideas of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis on the subject matter appear to be very similar, we shall examine their claims in tandem. The idea of Pope John-Paul II clearly and also echoes the need to harmonise the connection between faith and reason. John-Paul II is of the view that both need not be at logger head with each

other. Rather each of them can actually strengthen the claims of each other. This is also the case with Pope Francis who writes a little over a decade later on the need to make plain the point that both reason and faith are essential tools in our understanding of scriptures. For one cannot do completely without one because of the other and vice-versa.

While speaking on the connection between faith and reason, Pope John Paul II initiates that “they are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (Pope John Paul, 1998, p.1). The implication here from the idea given by Pope John Paul is that both faith and reason are tools employed towards the attainment of truth. One cannot do without the other.

For Pope Francis, the dialogue between faith and reason would be better appreciated when one understands that “each has to strengthen the other”(Pope Francis 2013, p.32) This is not only in consonance with the take of Pope John-Paul II but also the claims of other scholars both in the religious and secular arena. This view appears to be echoed by several scholars. Let us pay attention to a few of them.

On the one hand, religion cannot simply dismiss the critique of reason on the ground that faith is founded on divine revelation. (Masong 2013,p.13) According to Whitehead, “reason is the safeguard of the objectivity of religion: it secures for it the general coherence denied to hysteria”(Whitehead 1948, p.64). In

sidestepping reason, the genuine dogmas of religion degenerate into dogmatism. On the other hand, reason cannot simply dismiss faith. Reason that aims towards the truth anticipates an implicit faith, a *rationis fides*—“an antecedent coherence that is already presupposed in any process of inquiry” (Hutter, 2005, p.168) Reason, or explicit knowing, has to start somewhere, and this somewhere is what Michael Polanyi calls “tacit knowing”.(ibid) All explicit reasoning is founded on, and guided by, an implicit belief, religious or otherwise. Reason is aimless unless there is a tacit belief.

Conclusion

This paper makes a critique of Fideism most especially from the perspective of Soren Kierkegaard. We started by looking at what Fideism constitutes and also examined the views of some theologians and scholars who hold such position. To this effect, we considered the nature of faith and some of the ways the word is being used. After this, a brief investigation of what reason implies was elaborated before contemplating particularly on Kierkegaard's fideism after a critique of his idea was made using St. Thomas to counter his dichotomy of faith and reason as distinct ways of knowing the Divine.

For this paper, the idea of Fideism was espoused and the implications of undermining reason were shown. There are so many things that faith alone cannot help us know. Most times humans rely solely on the power of the reason and to say that faith is all there is when

theological matters are concerned is to miss the point. We shall therefore, conclude this essay using the words of Galileo that: “the intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven not how heaven goes.(culled online Dec.3, 2022).

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