

Fideism



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Date: 2002

DOI: 10.17421/2037-2329-2002-PP-01

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I. Fideism and Traditionalism in the Context of the 19th Century

The term "Fideism" (Fr. *fidéisme*) is mainly used to refer to a 19th century theological movement that essentially advocated a dramatic reduction of the ability of reason to know truths of a moral and religious kind, while restricting access to them to the sole faith in Revelation. Rising as a reaction to rationalism and its breaks into areas reserved to Catholic theology, fideism involved apologetics in the first place, i.e. a section of theology designed to prove the accountability and reasonableness of Christian faith. In fact, from a more general point of view, the tendency to refer to faith or to Revelation what should be the object of reason (and thus be a philosophical pursuit) is a possible attitude of any religion as such. This happens when a set of notions, revealed or anyway supernatural, is exalted to the expense of reason, separating it from what the latter could well know or understand by itself.

Within the Christian faith, the issue of fideism has several implications and articulations. It involves a number of themes such as the natural knowledge of the existence of [God](#) [2]; the acknowledgement of a natural moral law, the role to be assigned to the "preambles of faith" (Lat. *praeambula fidei*) at the outset of the act of faith; the way we speak of God, or the impossibility of doing so, ultimately the links between faith and reason, between nature and grace. It is therefore a core issue of the faith, both for its running tacitly through the whole historical debate on the relationship between philosophy and theology, and for the fact that its advocacy of the superior status of Revelation and of faith over the forces of reason alone is legitimately part and parcel of the Christian message. Divine Revelation, culminating in the incarnation of the Word of God and in the mystery of His death and resurrection, also conveys a paradox and a scandal and appears to us in a logical perspective that befuddles our reason. That would also explain why some believers have been fascinated by fideism, while others have been mistaken as fideists, or lastly why fideism itself has been misunderstood as an intrinsic element of faith. All these misunderstandings in

fact may be resolved if we simply make clear that faith, in its going beyond reason, neither contradicts it nor wishes to do without it.

Although the term probably appeared for the first time in *Réflexions sur l'évangile du salut* (1789), a work by Eugène Ménégoz, if we take the history of theology, fideism is essentially used to refer to the French thinkers of the first half of the 19th century, such as Philippe Olympe Gerbet (1798-1864), who wrote *Des doctrines philosophiques dans leurs rapports avec les fondements de la théologie* (1826), Louis Bautain (1796-1867), responsible for *La philosophie du christianisme* (1835) and Augustin Bonnetty (1798-1879), who was in charge of *Les Annales de la philosophie chrétienne* (1830-1879). Supported by the teachings of revealed doctrine and of the theological tradition, the Catholic Church isolated in this kind of philosophical reasoning a number of statements that noticeably diverged from the contents of faith. Namely Bautain's writings justified this judgment; hence local authorities first (1835-1840), and the Roman Curia itself a few years later (1844), made him subscribe to precise theological statements that corrected these mistakes. This circumstance was to be taken as an opportunity, anticipating more extensive explanations in the Constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I (1870), to clarify some guiding elements in the relationship between faith and reason. Among the formulae to be clarified was the idea that "reason can prove with certitude the existence of God and the infinity of His perfections" (DH 2751) and that "proof drawn from the miracles of Jesus Christ, sensible and striking for eyewitnesses, has in no way lost its force and splendor as regards subsequent generations" (DH 2753). In particular, it is further considered a mistake to think that reason "cannot acquire the true and full certitude of the reasons for credibility, i.e. of those reasons making divine revelation clearly credible (*évidemment croyable*), such as miracles and prophecies particularly, and above all the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (DH 2768).

In its origins and its historical backdrop fideism is also often associated with "Traditionalism," which slightly precedes it and partly echoes some of the views later adopted by fideists. As it developed in the community of believers following the French Revolution, traditionalism claimed that divine Revelation was absolutely necessary to human beings to be able to grasp not only strictly supernatural truths, but also those of a metaphysical, moral and religious order. It followed that social and political repercussions were also possible: if reason were incapable of attaining truth by itself, as a result it would not manage to develop an adequate social or governmental system (as revolutions would clearly prove). Social order would only rest on a moral order revealed to us by God Himself. Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) was the forerunner of traditionalism, Louis de Bonald (1754-1840) being the movement's father, and Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854) its main representative. Bonald was responsible for adding an emphasis on its implications for knowledge acquisition: since the act of thinking would not be possible without language and words are needed to start using words themselves, it is hence essential that someone first talked to humans to enable them in turn to express concepts and truths through words. Then God Himself is seen as that "someone", and the "original revelation" seen as the initial word that would enable us to access any kind of truth, religious, moral and social. The truth of Catholicism would simply be guaranteed by its universality and its antiquity, by its perennial presence as the "shared feeling" of humankind. The principal work of the movement was the *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (1817-1828), bringing together various thinkers, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire (1802-1861) being the best known among them, along with Combalot, de Coux, Gerbet, Guéranduer, Montalembert, and Salinis. Lamennais' own ideas, condemned by the encyclicals of Gregory XVI *Mirari vos* (1832) and *Singulari nos* (1834), would later merge with the views of "semi-traditionalism."

Augustin Bonnetty, himself a promoter of the same "moderate traditionalism," in June 1855 was to provoke a reaction from the Holy Office. Among the theses the French thinker was asked to subscribe to, two in particular concern us here. In the first it is claimed that "although faith is above reason,

nevertheless no true dissension, no disagreement can ever be found between them, since both arise from the one same immutable source of truth, the most excellent and great God, and thus bring mutual help to each other" (DH 2811). The second concerns the rational, but non-rationalist nature of theology, for fideists and traditionalists meant precisely to criticize its negative tendency towards rationalism: "The method which St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure and other scholastics after them used does not lead to rationalism, nor has it been the reason why philosophy in today's schools is falling into naturalism and pantheism. Therefore, it is not lawful to charge as a reproach against these doctors and teachers that they made use of this method." (DH 2814).

Bautain and Bonnetty did themselves accept the change of perspective required by the Church's Magisterium, but the modern debate on the nature of faith and the theological method was just starting then and it would continue to emerge as an often unresolved tension between two points of view: theology, on the one hand, would pay more attention to a metaphysical analysis with rational and objective elements, e.g. in the case of Neoscholastics; the existentialist trends of the new movements, on the other hand, would insist more on the role of subjectivity and of religious experience. The crisis due to the Modernist mistakes and the radicalisation of the opposition between Catholic theology and that of the reformers precisely on the multi-faceted aspects of the relationship between faith and reason, did not facilitate a resolution of this tension between the two tendencies. Attempts in this direction would only emerge with the more mature expressions of mid-20th century personalism, even though John Henry Newman and Maurice Blondel had already opened the way, by showing how faith is by no means rational, but believing is all the same reasonable.

II. *La philosophie du christianisme* by Louis Bautain and the "Fideistic Feeling"

As we consider the historical development of fideism the works and profile of Louis Bautain deserve more space, given his unusual intellectual career (cf. Poupard 1961, 1964 and 1982a). After moving away from religious faith in his youth and approaching the movements of French eclecticism, Bautain gradually rediscovered the nobility of Christian morals when compared with the propositions of a purely philosophical type of ethics and the pre-eminence of evangelical truths over human opinions. He would first demonstrate this belief in his work *La morale de l'Evangile comparée à la morale des philosophes* (1827) in which he claims: "I have reasoned with Aristotle; I have wanted to rekindle my intellect with Bacon; I have methodically doubted in the company of Descartes; I have permitted, with Kant, to be told what I was able and allowed to know; and the outcome of my reasoning, of my intellectual renaissance, of my doubts on method and of my criticism, was that I did not know and, probably, would not be able to know anything. [...] I then turned to Plato. I learnt to speak magnificently about the good, but I did not know how to live it out. I had many insights, I saw very little and did not enjoy anything. I was neither better, nor happier for being more learned [...]. A book saved me, but a book that was not written by human hands. There I found the deepest knowledge of human beings and of nature, the simplest and at the same time the most sublime morals. I read the gospel of Jesus Christ moved by the desire to find truth; and I experienced a warm admiration, I was penetrated by a sweet light that did not only enlighten my mind (Fr. *mon esprit*), but that brought its warmth and its life into the depths of my soul" (quoted by Poupard 1982a, p. 102).

Bautain's lectures as a philosophy professor at the Strasbourg Academy and as a priest from 1828 onwards attracted a large group of students. His philosophical as well as his religious reflections, compiled as a collection of letters exchanged with his young audience, would be published in 1835 in the volume *La philosophie du christianisme*. Bautain's main concern was to replace the illusion of a

philosophical religion, springing from the Kantian "reduction" programme and from Schleiermacher's idealism, with the truth of the Christian philosophy seen as the true "idea" ruling over nature and humans, so that it may express in terms drawn from metaphysics and [Idealism](#) [3] what God had accomplished in both. Human beings need certitude, knowing from experience that all their knowledge is changeable, debatable, uncertain. Who could ever know them better than their own Creator, Who gave them His word fixed in Scripture, transmitted by Tradition and interpreted by the Church? Demanding to solve the problem of the fate of human beings without calling on it is a feat doomed to fail. For the young Strasbourg professor, a philosophy without God is a philosophy against God. "Once the Word has become flesh –he would claim a little later in 1839– philosophy cannot but be Christian or anti-Christian. Nowadays we could not nor should not speak of Plato's, Aristotle's or a Stoic philosophy. These doctrines have a reason to exist only in their own historical times, as preparatory steps for the only philosophy, for there is but one wisdom, God's own wisdom, manifested in his Word. In our times no other philosophy is feasible but the Christian one: in it is the hope of science, civilisation and progress of human kind" (quoted by Poupard, 1982a, p. 105).

Bautain's emphasis and radicalisation of the idea, belonging to the Fathers and to Augustine in origin, that the Christian religion is the only true philosophy, raised many eyebrows. The bishop of Strasbourg, Monsignor Le Pape de Trévern, would officially ask him to subscribe, in 1835 and 1840, to some anti-fideist theses (cf. DH 2751-2756); some years later it would be the Congregation of Bishops and Religious Order, in a document dated April 26, 1844 (cf. DH 2765-2769), to ask him to accept a few theses in order to amend his errors. Following the illuminating theology courses held by G. Perrone (1794-1876) at the Roman College, and thanks to the stimulating correspondence with J.A. Möhler (1796-1838), Bautain realised more clearly that some of his thoughts betrayed a burning and rather unbalanced zeal, advocating rather too strenuously the rights of faith against the assaults of rationalism. From that time onwards, having truthfully recognised his mistake concerning the inability of reason to attain certitude in metaphysical and religious matters, he would not -more accurately- affirm anything but the "irreducible specificity" of the knowledge of faith.

The attempt made by Bautain was no doubt a daring one. Although his plan to replace the philosophical systems taught at the time with a "Christian philosophy," both in the universities and the ecclesiastical schools, simply comes under the name of "fideism", the pejorative connotation surrounding this definition -evoking an irrational kind of faith and the Church's condemnation- probably does not fully do it justice. If we consider the elucidations that he received and accepted, and what more specifically pertains to the fideists' error (see below, III), also in relation with his career and with the development of his thought as a whole, we should more exactly speak of his "fideistic feeling," rather than of his fideism (cf. Poupard, 1961, pp. 171-226). Bautain is often associated with the image of a person denying the [natural knowledge of God](#) [2] and the rational dimension of the act of faith, which led to the Church's condemnation of his ideas seen as a gateway to skepticism. This view is more or less accurate from a historical point of view, but it may be defined more precisely. An analysis of his own writings, as well as the substance of his controversy with Monsignor de Trévern call for a more careful and balanced opinion.

Bautain's "fideistic feeling" is a combination of his anti-rationalism, of some aspects of traditionalism, as well as the influence of romanticism and also of a profound mystical insight. In a letter addressed to the Master of the Strasbourg Academy following his suspension from teaching in June 1822, he wrote: "when speaking about God, it is not so much a case of demonstrating the impossibility of his non-existence, as of making one feel that he is there (Fr. *il s'agit de faire sentir qu'il est*)." The experiential dimension, and thus also the mystical one, is a central element for him. He wants knowledge to be based on real experience. It is not the experience of a [realism](#) [4] referring to a purely objective truth, but the experience of a transcendental idealism connected with a self-sufficient philosophy as a form of philosophical and

theological apologetics. In this respect, he would show an explicit admiration for Descartes and Kant. Paraphrasing Descartes' *cogito*, Bautain affirmed, rather, "I feel, therefore I exist," for feeling is deeper than thought and precedes it. He also interpreted Kant's view of confining faith within the scope of practical reason as the only way of protecting it from skepticism. Charmed by Augustine's view in *The City of God*, where knowledge, wisdom, contemplation and the possession of God are joined in a single enjoyment of love, Bautain's philosophy is in line with the "feeling" of the Romantic age. Its undeniable shortcomings and confusions do not obscure the new insights of his theology of faith. In a pre-Vatican I period, at a time when the dogmatic framework of the links between faith and reason was slowly being elaborated, his thought may have certainly lacked appropriate conceptual tools, but not passionate communicative fervour.

III. The Philosophical and Theological Roots of Fideism

So far we have been examined the main developments of French 19th century theology. However, for a deeper understanding of fideism and of its consequences for the relationship between faith and reason, we now want to present a brief account of the main conceptions of the faith it sprang from and to isolate the ones which were alien to it.

One may quite easily argue that legitimately advocating the pre-eminence of faith over reason, and considering how God's work and revelation exceeds any human expectations and desires is bound to lead to a depreciation of reason. It should be remembered, however, that reason, though wounded by sin on a moral level and limited on a cognitive level, is nevertheless necessary to faith. Reason, in fact, is "human," and faith must be a response of our humanity in its fullness, reason included, to God who reveals himself. While single claims found in [Sacred Scripture](#) [5] or made by some Christian authors, isolated from their own context, would seem to support such downgrading of reason, they should be understood in the light of Revelation as a whole, and evaluated on the background of the whole history of Christian philosophy. This is why, for instance, we cannot speak of fideism in St. Paul, when he holds wisdom as unsuitable to comprehend divine mysteries (cf. *1Cor* 1:18-25), because elsewhere he praises the ability of that same wisdom to ascend to the Creator starting from the observation of His creation (cf. *Rom* 1:20; *Acts* 14:15-17; 17:24-28). If death on a cross, along with its implications for a Christian's own life, remains a scandal from an intellectual point of view, it is equally true that the sign of love and self-giving unto death calls on humanity as a whole, which includes our reason as well, and that the latter is asked to recognize the sincerity and truth of the witness expressed in such a sign. Since many ancient Christian authors such as Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, esteemed Greek philosophy as a valuable road to faith, then those other judgements, such as Tertullian's, who apparently disregarded reason, deserve a more in-depth analysis. One of the phrases most referred to in favor of fideism, *credo quia absurdum* (that means "I believe because it is absurd to do so"), and attributed to the Latin writer, or even erroneously to Augustine, were never used, or at least with that meaning, by these two authors. In Tertullian's works you will only find the phrase *credibile est quia ineptum est* (which could be translated "It is worthy of being believed because it is foolish") which, in the context it is drawn from, was meant to indicate the superiority of Christ's resurrection, in his true flesh, over our human expectations and foresight (cf. *De carne Christi*, V: PL 2, 761).

The exaltation of grace by Augustine is to be understood in the context of his polemics against Pelagius, for he wanted to play down the claims of the latter about the saving power of human works to the exclusion of the aid of grace. Centuries later, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), in his monastic theology took great pains over reinstating the role of contemplation and prayer as ways to access the knowledge of [God](#) [6], but in doing so he did not mean to undermine the value of the intellect and of how it may be

used to grasp divine mysteries (cf. *1Cor* 1:18-25). He only intended to show the way to a more perfect knowledge, that is the one granted by love. Faith and reason, at least up to 13th century, are not seen *next* to each other, but to a certain extent *within* each other. The Augustinian recommendations to "understand to be able to know" (lat. *intellige ut credas*) and "believe to be able to fully understand" (lat. *crede ut intelligas*), are still well attested, in Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), within the Medieval notion of *fides quaerens intellectum* (that is, a faith looking for, seeking for, loving reason).

A clear separation of faith and reason will only appear as late as in William of Ockham (1280-1349), and above all in Martin Luther (1483-1546). Though in the Late Middle Ages Nicolas d'Autrecourt (1300-1350), and before him Peter Damian (1007-1072), had shown some lack of confidence in the powers of reason and philosophy, only the Reformation would produce a specific philosophical movement claiming that reason is likewise unable to prepare the way to God and that faith may be interpreted mainly as a form of trust and relief. Metaphysics would then lose its role as truthful knowledge, with faith becoming the only source of certitude and the *praeambula fidei* being removed as a preliminary to the act of faith. All revaluation of humanity, and of what belongs to nature, would be seen as a step towards [atheism](#) [7]. If Luther was the first to provide fideism with strong religious roots (though, conversely, upholding a higher view of God's transcendence), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) would deepen the philosophical roots of fideism by means of his critical philosophy. According to Kant, being excluded from "pure reason", God, the soul and morals are purely objects of "practical reason," which although is still called "reason" has in the process lost its character of a universally communicable (not a priori) knowledge. For Kant, the knowledge of [God](#) [2] is a practical postulate, something that can be "thought of", presupposed or entreated, but cannot be "known." The access to what is "transcendent" can only be gained through subjective experience and no longer through nature. Moral natural certitudes are even more shifted towards the terrain of the subject's own sensibility and feeling, as they gradually merge with his or her faith.

We now need to look more carefully at Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) whose views are more structured and demand more attention. Despite the fact that his position is sometimes identified with that of the fideists, the view of the French thinker and scientist deserves more than a hasty evaluation. Pascal perceived and professed, on the one hand, all the strength of the kind of knowledge that only faith and mystical experience could offer him, as witnessed for instance through the pages of his *Memorial*, but he was also, on the other hand, a forceful advocate of the value of reason, which he precisely appealed to in the apologetic positions expressed in his *Pensées*. There is no doubt that for him faith in [Jesus Christ](#) [8] embraced the entire sphere of true knowledge, as he consistently stated in the following passages: "Not only do we know God by Jesus Christ alone, but we know ourselves only by Jesus Christ. We know life and death only through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ, we do not know what our life is, nor our death, nor God, nor ourselves" (*Pensées*, n. 548). To which he added: "Therefore I shall not undertake here to prove by natural reasons either the existence of God, or the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul, or anything of that nature; not only because I should not feel myself sufficiently able to find in nature arguments to convince hardened atheists, but also because such knowledge without Jesus Christ is useless and barren" (*Pensées*, n. 556). Such supremacy of faith does not however exclude reason. We may say that Pascal forces his readers to walk up all the steps of reason before declaring its inadequacy, not far from the image offered three centuries later by Wittgenstein, who claimed that language is like a ladder you can climb up, but once you reach the top you must drop it in order to acquire the knowledge of the higher things language cannot express. Some other of his *Thoughts* also point in this direction, namely the following: "the last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it" (n. 267), or "reason would never submit, if it did not judge that there are some occasions on which it ought to submit" (n. 270). We may succinctly recapitulate his position by reminding ourselves of

his firm conviction to avoid "two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only" (n. 253).

The developments of modern and contemporary theology on the issue of fideism are too wide-ranging and complex to be summarized here. Readers who are interested in that, can follow the main traces through works providing an historical account (cf. Aubert, 1957; Fisichella, 1996). If we identify the essential elements of fideism in the inability of reason to attain any firm conclusions in the domain of religion and morals, and in the rejection of philosophical reasoning in the domain of theology and faith, we should conclude that these components feature, more or less markedly, in almost all the authors following the Reformation tradition, including Kierkegaard, Barth, Bultmann and Ebeling. If, on the other hand, we think of the reappraisal of the personal and experiential dimension of faith, aimed at upholding the value it has for the subject beyond any subjectivism, we should then accept that such a tradition of thought does not belong to fideism, even though some of the authors mentioned above may have been influenced by it in their theses, especially when stirred, often uncritically, by the claims made by Modernists. Newman, Blondel, Mounier, Marcel, and Guardini headed that reappraisal on the Catholic side, and so did Buber and Rosenzweig in the Jewish context, along with other Protestant theologians.

Apart from what we have already said on the developments of fideism and traditionalism in the 19th century, the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church has made several contributions to clarify the specific role of philosophy in the understanding of Revelation, and generally in theology, that is the role of reason within faith. In addition to the anti-Modernist teachings of Pius X in his decree *Lamentabili* (1907) and in his encyclical *Pascendi* (1907), Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* (1879) emphasized the harmonisation of faith and reason in the work of Thomas Aquinas, and Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) contains meaningful teachings as well. More recently, the issue has been handled again in an authoritative fashion by John Paul II, first in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (1993), as regards the natural knowledge of fundamental moral principles, and then above all in the encyclical [Fides et ratio](#) [9] (1998). This latter document vigourously underscores the primary call of philosophy to the knowledge of [truth](#) [10], and offers a wide-ranging view on the relationships between philosophy, theology and Revelation.

The incompatibility of faith with fideism and traditionalism is also mentioned in the encyclical *Fides et ratio* (cf. n. 52). The document recalls on the forms in which fideism, or its allure, are ever present in contemporary theology: "In theology too the temptations of other times have reappeared. In some contemporary theologies, for instance, a certain rationalism is gaining ground, especially when opinions thought to be philosophically well founded are taken as normative for theological research [...]. There are also signs of a resurgence of fideism, which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God. One currently widespread symptom of this fideistic tendency is a "biblicism" which tends to make the reading and exegesis of Sacred Scripture the sole criterion of truth [...]. Other modes of latent fideism appear in the scant consideration accorded to speculative theology, and in disdain for the classical philosophy from which the terms of both the understanding of faith and the actual formulation of dogma have been drawn" (n. 55). In the same encyclical, recalling the inevitable tension between the wisdom of the cross and the philosophical search for truth -and perhaps also taking up an expression dear to Cardinal Newman, who loved to present the option for the faith as a path ending in a ultimate, though "reasonable," "surrender of reason"- in one of its most beautiful pages, the Pope expresses the ultimate meaning of that tension, but also his intimate wish that these points of view could hopefully meet: "Reason cannot eliminate the mystery of love which the Cross represents, while the Cross can give to reason the ultimate answer which it seeks. It is not the wisdom of words, but the Word of Wisdom which Saint Paul offers as the criterion of both truth and salvation. The wisdom of the Cross, therefore, breaks free of all cultural limitations which seek to contain it and insists upon an openness to the universality of

the truth which it bears. What a challenge this is to our reason, and how great the gain for reason if it yields to this wisdom! Of itself, philosophy is able to recognize the human being's ceaselessly self-transcendent orientation towards the truth; and, with the assistance of faith, it is capable of accepting the "foolishness" of the Cross as the authentic critique of those who delude themselves that they possess the truth, when in fact they run it aground on the shoals of a system of their own devising. The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet" (n. 23).

IV. Faith and Reason: a Dialogue without Suspensions

In the wide spectrum of the connections between faith and science, a possible question could be: why does the [Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church](#) [11] insist so much in its determination to stress the ability of reason to access truths of a natural order? The "issue of fideism" is but one of the different aspects that, over the past two centuries, have shed light on this Church's insistence. Can science also be involved in this elucidation and if so, how? These questions necessarily lead us into the arena of dialogue between the teachings of the Church and scientific thought.

What we have just seen proves that it is no rhetorical exercise to state that the Church's Magisterium recognizes the intrinsic value of science. She trusts scientists since they do not live on doubts, but seek out certainty and Truth. This untiring and multilateral search triggers the need for mutual dialogue, since the points of view of the Church's teachings and science are different but complementary. However, this dialogue takes place not so much between science and faith, between concepts and ideas, but between people, scientists and believers, who are both keen on the truth of the human being and on the knowledge of nature. How can we ensure the ideal conditions for this dialogue? According to a current view, that is well liked by both sides and that takes up the analyses carried out by Karl Popper (1902-1994), two preliminary conditions are often claimed: that science be aware of its own limitations and mistakes, and that theology be less constrained by dogma, inasmuch as it is more conscious of the infinite gap between its own formulations and the mystery of God. Now then, these two conditions, signposting, as it were, an apparently easy path, seem to me insufficient, or even wrong. We should not forget that in order to enter a dialogue we need first of all to be ourselves. Science has to be aware of its ability to attain the truth, since its foundations are rooted in a healthy realism and not in a vague skepticism. Theology in turn should not discard its dogmatic content: its own specific trait is that it offers a supplement of meaning which is stored in the faith in Revelation. Though aware of their own limitations, science and theology cannot resign the value of their understanding of reality. The conditions for an honest dialogue lie in the respect for each other's own area of knowledge and competence.

The dialogue can only take place between a faith mindful of the true knowledge it embodies -not understood as a vague religious penchant- and a science aware of its authentic position within human thought. Faith encompasses things lying beyond reason but not contradicting it, things above reason but not necessarily irrational. To recognize that faith is not founded on a formal rational analysis nor is it the result of a syllogism, does not mean that faith is unreasonable. Enhancing emotion and playing down reason is certainly tantalizing. Reason is often seen as something cold, abstract, detached from reality, something less human than spontaneous feelings and emotions stemming from life experience. In spite of that, the *credo quia absurdum* is incorrect: a faith that does not "lean on" reason, having no preambles in it, is not human as such (cf. [Fides et ratio](#) [12], 67). A faith that is unconnected to any understanding cannot be Christian. Faith cannot contradict reason: I would not believe if I did not have sound reasons to do so –Thomas Aquinas would have said, and Augustine before him. It does not mean, however, that

what falls in the realm of feelings is necessarily passing and doubtful. Feelings both facilitate will and kindle passion, the passion we need to love truth. As a result, if we were to separate religious feeling from reason we would deprive faith of one of its paramount components. As Thomas Aquinas put it: "we only love what we know and we only know what we love" (*De Malo*, q. 6): here we have a clear example of the fruitful alliance between will and understanding.

If we are to understand and experience this fruitful alliance and interrelation, we need to be fully aware of all aspects of being. Contemporary culture, though, is like a broken mirror, whose individual fragments point to an unsettled and limited view of the human being. The humanities, on the one hand, have highlighted the problems posed by human questioning, and the store of certain knowledge available to them has thus shrunk; natural sciences and [technology](#) [13], on the other hand, are branching out into areas that are too distant from the field of human sciences to be able to make comparison or dialogue possible. A true *paideia* is only possible if human reason is re-evaluated in order to balance the role of feelings; feelings that, in turn, reason itself may produce by looking at [nature](#) [14] as something able to marvel us, and not just as an object to be analysed or, even worse, manipulated. Scientists and believers must both be trained to grasp the "lessons of wonder," as pointers to the mystery of the world and, above all, of God. In science knowledge means explanation, in faith it means love. Whoever seeks truth and love needs the love of truth and the truth of love at the same time.

V. Fideism as a Temptation for the Believing Thinker

Our analysis of the link between faith and science, also in relation to the issue of fideism, would be incomplete, however, if we did not take into account a third element, that is [culture](#) [15]. Indeed it is the culture prevailing at a given time that communicates the achievements of science, just as science tends to interpret them in the light of that culture. If culture only saw faith's implications in the private domain and in that of subjective views, without leaving any room for a link with history, with the values of philosophical research and the experiences of truth potentially shared by everyone, it would predispose the believing thinker to a fideistic attitude. I think that such a temptation is particularly acute nowadays for it shows an easy way out saving us from making costly and demanding connections. According to such an attitude, science is seen as the domain of universal knowledge, a knowledge easily communicated to the different cultures throughout the world as a result of its strict public transmission rules. Religion, on the other hand, is presented as a source of legitimate and unquestionable diversity, or even of conflict, due to the different facets that religion acquires in the multiplicity of cultures: as a result, there would be no reason to link your faith's belief to your scientific activity. In order to protect the rules guaranteeing its acceptance across diverse cultures, science should clearly keep away from the domain of spiritual values. Clinching proof in this respect is provided by the statistics on scientists' own religious inclinations. Even bearing in mind the methodological limitations of this kind of evidence, the data show a large number of scientists "believing in God", who, when asked to specify in greater detail the objective contents of their belief, in the majority of cases deny not a few of the central issues of Christian Revelation and reject the potential implications of religion, either ethical or moral, for their experiments and research (cf. Ardigo e Garelli, 1989, v. I, ch. 5).

While in her teaching the Church has always insisted upon the legitimate pluralism of cultures, she has at the same time insisted upon the uniqueness of truth. Within the links between faith and culture it has often been made clear that faith is meant to adjust through *inculturation* to every community, society and culture, but not to replace any of them by any means. It may be significant to bear in mind that, precisely among the claims Bautain was asked to subscribe to in 1844, there was one excluding the definite bond of Christianity with any political regime or form of social organisation (cf. DH 2769). Church's teachings,

thus, admit a pluralism of cultures, but no pluralism or relativism in truth. In theological terms, this state of affairs is a consequence of the *universality* claimed by the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, more specifically the claim made by the [Christian Logos](#) [16], to be the image of a Creator who is God of everything and of everyone. It is precisely this metaphysical perspective endorsed by Christian religion that guarantees that reconciliation of pluralism and truth is indeed possible. The appeals to the truth of [creation](#) [17] and to the voice of our conscience, two paths able to lead us up to God as the foundation of all truth, good and beauty, have never been put forward by Christianity as a private, special route, one reserved for those only who have the virtue of faith (a gift, as it were, reserved for a few). Rather, they are paths open to every person of goodwill and to every authentic search for truth, including not only philosophy but also science. The phrase "philosophy does not save," dear to some forms of contemporary fideism, is not entirely correct. As Vatican II repeated, the gates of salvation are open to all those who, not knowing the Gospel, seek truth with a righteous heart (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 16); Christians also know that, since salvation and truth are unified in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. *Jn* 14:6), all search for truth embodies a salvific dimension.

If faith does not affect scientific work from the point of view of its methodological [autonomy](#) [18], it does affect, on the other hand, the personal activity of believing scientists. The latter know that the world science strives to understand and to investigate is the same one created by God; they also know that human beings, as objects of scientific analysis themselves, have a transcendent dignity, as creatures made in the image of their Creator. Their religious faith, therefore, also "affects" their scientific activity, and this is because reason cannot be separated from faith. It affects their attitude towards nature, the moral virtues governing their work, the motivations sustaining their research commitment, even the optimistic approach nourishing their faith in the rationality and intelligibility of the cosmos, as they know it to have been designed by a Creator God. As a spiritual writer of our times reminds us, leaving faith outside the lab for scientists would be tantamount to breaking up their own personal life and, sooner or later, perhaps even their faith: "Have you ever stopped to think how absurd it is to leave one's Catholicism aside on entering a university, a professional association, a cultural society, or Parliament, like a man leaving his hat at the door?». And this holds true because «religion cannot be separated from life, either in theory or in daily reality" (J. Escrivá, *The Way*, n. 353 and *Furrow*, n. 308).

Read also: [Science and Theology. Dialogue between](#) [19]

[God, Natural Knowledge of](#) [20]

[Truth](#) [10]

[Unity of knowledge](#) [21]

Additional Related Documents:

John Henry Newman, [The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason](#) [22], 1839

Documents of the Catholic Church related to the subject:

[Abbreviations and complete titles of the documents](#) [23]

DH 2751-2756; DH 2765-2768; DH 2811-2814; DH 2841-2847; Vatican Council I, DH 3033; [Humani generis](#), DH 3875-3876, 3892-3894 [24]; [John Paul II, Discourse to scientists at the E. Majorana Center, Erice \(Sicily\)](#) [25], 8.5.1993; [Fides et ratio](#), 52, 55 [9], [Benedictus XVI General Audience 2012-11-21](#) [26].

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