



TRUE TRUTH and Why It Matters— “What are Three Enemies of Truth?” Part 6a

THE THIRD ENEMY OF TRUTH: OUR MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

“In a sense the marriage of faith and reason is the most important question in apologetics because it is the overall question. If faith and reason are not wedded partners, if faith and reason are divorced or incompatible, like cats and birds, then apologetics is impossible. For apologetics is the attempt to ally reason to faith, to defend faith with reason’s weapon.”ⁱ

In both religious and secular circles, faith and reason are understood in ways that contradict the Judeo/Christian Scriptures. This phenomenon in the West is partly due to Darwinian philosophic naturalism that pits science against religion, where the former gives us objective knowledge binding on all, but the latter produces personal preferences binding only on the subject.

It’s also partly due to equivocating terms (i.e., misrepresenting the meaning of a word in context). This is evident when professing believers affirm that, “to argue your religious convictions removes the need for faith”.ⁱⁱ With positions like this, it’s understandable why many nonbelievers see Christians as foolish stupid sheep believing in fairy tales.

Defining faith in such terms is not only unbiblical, but it mutes the Christian worldview from significantly informing areas of education, law, bioethics, philosophy, and political theory. The reason is because “faith” understood in the above manner, does not provide knowledge, but only offers private personal preferences or values.

Hence, to remove the misunderstanding between faith and reason, we will consider three views regarding their relationship, the definitions of faith and reason and the ways in which the two are allies, rather than enemies.

THREE VIEWS OF FAITH AND REASON: Philosophy of Religion

There are essentially three views concerning the relationship between faith and reason. Actually there are more but for our purposes we will consider; strong rationalism, fideism, and critical rationalism. Our treatment of these views will not be extensive, but brief. We will focus on the key aspect of each view attempt to determine which one is most logical and practical.

STRONG RATIONALISM (SR)

Strong Rationalism is the position that holds in order for a religious belief-system to be properly and rationally accepted, it must be possible to prove that said belief system is true.ⁱⁱⁱ Essentially, one must be able to prove the truthfulness of a religious truth claim to any reasonable person who is willing to investigate the particular claim. Moreover, one can't have any doubts about their position in order to claim to know it. This view suffers from two problems: first, reason is never neutral, and second, this view does not meet its own criterion.

FIRST PROBLEM—*Reason is not Neutral*

It assumes that the faculty of “reason” exists on a neutral playing field regardless of one’s worldview. It also assumes that if the mere facts are logically reasoned, than any reasonable person will embrace the truth claim argued. For example, take Christianity.

The strong rationalist assumes that to win an orthodox Jew over to Jesus of Nazareth all that’s required are arguments demonstrating he’s the Messiah from the Old Testament who resurrected from the dead. While this is the model the apostles demonstrate in the book of Acts, there’s much more required for an orthodox Jew to be convinced of who Christ is.

Worldviews determine what is accepted and rejected. For the orthodox Jew it’s blasphemous, to hold that Jesus was God incarnate. Moreover, the Jewish Messiah was “to be a reigning king, not a crucified criminal.”^{iv} It was not part of their theological paradigm. The Cross of Jesus Christ was and remains to be *the* stumbling block for Jews which Paul the apostle explains addresses (1 Cor.1:23).

SECOND PROBLEM—*It Doesn't Meet its Own Criterion*

The fundamental problem with strong rationalism is that it fails to meet its own criterion. After all, if it's possible for the strong rationalist's view to be mistaken, than how can he prove that his position is true with 100% certainty? The problem with not allowing *any* doubts to adhere is that one can't claim to have knowledge. This is too restrictive.

Moreover, the strong rationalist commits the "parental trick" of "Do as I say, not as I do," which doesn't work well with youth and it doesn't work well logically. This position undeservedly has *too high a view* of reason. In religious settings, these are people who can endlessly talk about theology, but living out the implications of a life consecrated to Christ is missing.

FIDEISM

Fideism is the opposite extreme of strong rationalism. It's the view that reason has nothing to do with saving faith much less the enterprise of knowledge. The Fideist denies that reason has any place in the decision making process of saving faith, for if reason does, and arguments are used to convert someone to Christ, than faith is nullified. But is this true?

WHAT DOES FIDEISM MEAN?

One definition of *Fideism* is that religious belief-systems are not subject to rational evaluation.^v "To say for instance, that we have faith that God exists and that he loves us is, to say that we accept this in a way that does not depend on any evidence or reasoning, and that we refuse to have anything to do with trying to prove or disprove God's love for us."^{vi} The account of scripture contradicts this position:

(1 Cor.15:16-22) ¹⁶For **if** the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷and **if** Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸**Then** those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹**If** we have hoped in Christ in this life only, [**then**] we are of all men most to be pitied. ²⁰But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. ²¹For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."

Note here how Paul is *reasoning* through the “if...then” clauses. In this context he’s arguing for the historicity of the resurrection and concludes that if it actually did not occur in space-time-history then we are still in our sins without hope. The point is that reason here is explaining the acts of God in history—specifically Christ’s resurrection. Like strong rationalism, fideism has a few problems: first, is thinking faith is a “blind leap” in the dark, and secondly, its claims can’t be falsified.

FIRST PROBLEM: Faith is not a “Blind Leap” in the Dark

The Fideist position assumes that *true faith* is a blind leap in the dark. The underlying supposition is that to even question the truthfulness of one’s faith is equal to being “unspiritual,” even “carnal” not pleasing to God. Biblically, without faith it is impossible to please God, but the way the Fideist uses the term *faith* is alien to Scripture.

The origin of this view is not only refuted by Paul’s arguments for the resurrection in (1 Cor.15), but also by Peter’s command for believers to be ready to give everyone who asks a reason for the hope that lies within them (1 Pet.3:15). Perhaps in other religions faith and reason have nothing to do with each other, but not with historic biblical Christianity.

SECOND PROBLEM: It’s Claims can’t be Falsified

What’s disturbing about this view is that it’s not falsifiable. It has left the philosophical playing field. It has entered the realm of *religious relativism* where truth claims are beyond falsification religious experience trumps theology and religious pluralism reigns where all religions end up teaching the same basic message.^{vii}

When there’s no recourse to falsify a religion’s truth claims, we can’t discern which one is true, or false, or better? This position works against Christianity’s exclusive truth claim of Christ as the only rescue for sinners, and it also falls into the naturalistic notion that only science gives us objective knowledge, whereas religion provides mere subjective preferences and values.

If fideism is true, then who cares which religion you choose, because for authentic faith to exist, reason can’t be used to argue for; Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, etc. The Fideist has too low a view of reason and goes to

the opposite extreme of the strong rationalist, by contending that rationality has no part in religious discourse.

Furthermore, this view exalts religious experience over rational inquiry. When that happens logic is denuded of its power to persuade and is replaced by emotion and feeling as the arbiter of truth. Strong rationalism has too high a view of reason, Fideism has too low a view of reason but *critical rationalism* as will be demonstrated avoids both of these extremes.

CRITICAL RATIONALISM

Critical Rationalism is the view that religious belief-systems can and must be rationally criticized and evaluated, although conclusive proof of such a system is impossible.^{viii} This position encourages the use of reason in considering truth claims, but cautions the reasoner to understand the limits of reason. Critical rationalism also cautions against being over confident in conclusions drawn from investigation because all truth claims have their problems.

This position has two powerful strengths, the first of which is the encouragement to use reason because it matters, and the second, is to understand that there are contenders to consider.

FIRST STRENGTH: Reason Matters

This approach rightly values the role reason plays for objectively verifying a truth claim. It encourages the questioning of a religions veracity, of the veracity of its leaders, and it requires for there to be justification of beliefs held.

We're not to be foolish nor are we ever to blindly trust someone who is in leadership claiming to speak on God's behalf. Instead, there's a standard that must be consulted, a book—the Bible. The apostle Paul praises the Berean Christians for scrutinizing his message with what God had previously said through the prophets in Acts 17:10-11:

*“¹⁰ The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ Now these were more **noble-minded** than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, **examining** the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”*

These Berean Christians are described as being *noble-minded*—which involves the disposition of being open-minded to fairly evaluate something,^{ix} (i.e., Paul’s message). They also had an *eagerness*—a deep desire, a great anticipation toward the activity of ^x *examining* the Scriptures—which means they were ready to learn the nature or truth of Paul’s message through the process of careful study, evaluation and judgement.^{xi} That is, they were ready to “sift up and down” Paul’s gospel as a judicious lawyer does for his case.^{xii} Open-minded, eager to judiciously scrutinize Paul’s message is an amazing quality that does not diminish biblical faith, but holds it up as a most valuable treasure.

SECOND STRENGTH: Reasons have Contenders.

All truth claims have problems and counter arguments to their position. It doesn’t mean we can’t hold our views passionately and argue forcefully for what we understand to be true. It’s however important to remember that in our passion and argumentation must be marked by humility. We can’t be “know-it-alls” because none of us do.

Theological views differ (E.g., the age of the earth, the return of Christ, the gifts of the Spirit, etc.). Sometimes we need to revisit doctrines we take for granted, and look at ones that are hard to understand (E.g., Trinity, Christ’s Incarnation, God’s Sovereignty, human Freedom, Justification by Faith, Sanctification, etc.).

The *critical rationalist* tends to be more humble with knowledge because they are free to follow the evidence wherever it may lead. This position has a proper view of human knowledge (It’s finite and limited) that permits a spirit of dialogue the other two positions tend to damn up.

For the *strong rationalist* any doubt forfeits one’s claim to having knowledge, for the *Fideist*, reason and knowledge have nothing to do with faith, but for the *critical rationalist* a measure of doubt does not forfeit one’s claim to knowledge but demonstrates the limits of human reason.

In the following section, we will look at defining faith and reason from a biblical understanding.

THIRD STRENGTH: It's more Holistic

Critical rationalism approaches the knowledge of God holistically where both reason and religious experience contribute to our religious knowledge, and yet both points have their limits and dangers.

What we know, we usually live. That is we live out the implications of what we believe, what we trust to be true. As Christians this view empowers us to integrate the knowledge of God so that we experience God. Our head and heart are not at odds, but are working together to help us love God and one another.

The distinctions between these three views are important to understand because believers and skeptics function in one of these areas. Identifying this landscape of thought either in us or in another can help us make corrections to our own faulty thinking, and also help us understand those we are trying to reach. It can help us also mine truth wherever the evidence may lead.

ⁱ Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, p. 29. © 1994 by Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, InterVarsity Press

ⁱⁱ Radio Talk Host Greg Koukl fielded a caller on *Stand To Reason* broadcast. This occurred sometime in the 1990's

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.45, ©1998 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

^{iv} George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p.316, © 1974 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

^v Michael Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.49.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p.49

^{vii} There's much that can be said about religious pluralism. Simply stated, it's the view that all religions are true (which when compared at their essential core is contradictory), and to hold that only one religion is true (which is not contradictory) is abhorrent to religious pluralists' [*Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*, London and New York, Series Editor: Paul K. Moser, Pg.74, © 1999 Keith E. Yandell, Routledge Series]; Moreover there's a refusal to see any religion as truer or superior to another. So there's no difference between *Yahweh*, *Allah*, *Brahman*, *Buddha*, *Jainism*, etc. [Evans, C. Stephen, "Religious Pluralism," *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, Pgs.93-94, © 2002 by C. Stephen Evans, Intervarsity Press]

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.53.

^{ix} Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Second Edition Volumes I, §27.48 Greek word: *eugenais*

^x Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Second Edition Volumes I, §25.68, (New York, United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989 United Bible Societies)

^{xi} *Ibid.*, §27.44 Greek word: *anakrino*

^{xii} Reinecker & Rogers, *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*, p.307, © 1980 by The Zondervan Corporation