

AQUINAS LECTURE 2010 – FAITH, REASON AND THE CHALLENGE OF ATHEISM

Professor Neil Ormerod, Professor of Theology, Australian Catholic University

Let me begin with a couple of anecdotes concerning public perceptions of the relationship between faith and reason.

Some years ago I published a small piece in the ABC online journal, *Unleashed*. It was on the papal encyclical *Spe Salvi*, commenting on how Benedict XVI's letter had been largely ignored by the secular media, unlike his first encyclical *Deus caritas est* which was widely reported and well received.¹ All in all I thought it an uncontroversial piece, not likely to attract much attention. Within days it had generated 133 responses, almost all attacking religion, the pope and the presumption that the ABC should publish such a religious piece. Typically of the comments are the following:

Religion has done itself and the human race a disservice, it has failed miserably, hindered progress and it is too late to make up for it now and nothing can stop the inexorable march of progress and learning and science or the death of these religions.

And:

Religious people are hypocrites because they accept the findings of science and the benefits it brings but refute science where their personal pet theory is concerned.

And my favourite, on my suggestion that Benedict is very well educated:

Well, actually not at all. He is the last stupidest man alive. Is the pope smarter than a fifth grader? A fifth grader knows that this planet is billions of years old. [The] Pope knows that God almighty created earth and heaven in six days and had a well deserved day off on seventh. A fifth grader knows that mankind evolved through billions of years of evolution. [The] Pope knows that an angry God kicked us out from heaven some 5000 years ago.

There was a similar reaction when Prof Gary Bouma, emeritus professor at Monash University, suggested that universities should include more courses in religious studies and theology in their curricula. This rather mild suggestion was met with howls of protest. One letter to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* asked whether engineers would be saying

¹ Neil Ormerod, "The case of the vanishing encyclical", *Unleashed*, 14 December, 2007. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/stories/s2118934.htm>.

prayers to ensure their bridges didn't fall down. I responded with a letter published the next day pointing out that some of the most prestigious universities in the world, Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and others, all taught theology, and no one questioned the standing of their engineers and scientists.

Behind these comments there is much ignorance, prejudice and plain hostility, some of it undoubtedly traceable to, or at least legitimated by, the publishing success of Richard Dawkins, particularly his book *The God Delusion*.² How often I have witnessed fertile young minds devouring this book on trains and buses as if it were holy writ. I do not think Dawkins has created this animosity all on his own, but I do think he has tapped into something deeply disturbing in the present cultural climate. Of all the prejudices that live a subterranean existence in our culture, the one which many feel more than comfortable to bring into public view is the prejudice against religion. For some people, to bring religion into the light of day is an offense against public reason, for religion of its nature is inherently irrational.

Where did it all go wrong?

Of course this is a far way away from a Catholic conception of the relationship between faith and reason. The Catholic tradition is rich with this interplay of faith and reason, best illustrated in the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose memory is honoured by this lecture series. The First Vatican Council confidently asserted, "Not only can faith and reason never be at odds with one another but they mutually support each other", while Pope John Paul II wrote an entire encyclical on the topic of faith and reason, *Fides et ratio*; there he spoke of faith and reason as the "two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." He goes on to argue that in fact, "faith liberates reason in so far as it allows reason to attain correctly what it seeks to know and to place it within the ultimate order of things, in which everything acquires true meaning" (*Fides et ratio*, n.20). Indeed faith and reason are mutually purifying, reason freeing faith from superstition, and faith opening reason to the fullness of truth.

Despite these confident assertions of the mutual compatibility of faith and reason found in the Catholic tradition, it is clear that this message is not being heard, not only in the larger

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2006).

culture, but even among Catholics themselves. Catholic too can feel uneasy under the weight of criticism directed towards religious belief, a criticism often grounded in the assertion of the irrationality of all religion. Charles Taylor in his magisterial *A Secular Age* has captured the spirit of the age when he speaks of it as “one in which [religious belief] is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace”³, certainly not intellectually so. Something has gone wrong, or at least something has shifted, over the centuries and it is not clear how a genuine confidence in the compatibility and mutuality of faith and reason can be restored.

Fundamentalist Christians

Of course it is easy to point to examples of the breakdown of the relationship between faith and reason on the Christian side of the ledger, in the relatively recent phenomenon of Christian fundamentalism and its spin-offs in creationism and so-called “creation science.” Flying in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence, they require a literal reading of the text of Genesis and the subsequent development of pseudo-scientific theories to account for the gross discrepancies between their reading of Genesis and the scientifically established facts. This is painful to behold and makes an easy target for those who seek to promote the view that religion is inherently irrational. Indeed there seems to be a macabre dance of mutual recrimination between fundamentalists and the Dawkins of the world. Of course there are some genuine concerns behind the fundamentalist stance, but the ways in which these concerns manifest themselves has helped reinforce the notion that faith and reason are incompatible, and indeed hostile enemies.

Faith vs. reason at the Reformation and Enlightenment

A less superficial example arises from tensions which arose at the time of the Reformation in the west. The reformers develop three great antimonies: grace versus works, scripture versus tradition, and faith versus reason. The third of these had its origins in the intellectually decadent nominalism of the late medieval age which undermined confidence in reason to know realities. On this antimony of faith and reason Luther proclaimed:

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

There is on earth among all dangers no more dangerous thing than a richly endowed and adroit reason, especially if she enters into spiritual matters which concern the soul and God ... Reason must be ... blinded, and destroyed. Faith must trample underfoot all reason, sense, and understanding, and whatever it sees it must put out of sight ...

Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason.⁴

In seeking to argue for the mutual compatibility of faith and reason in our contemporary setting, this proclamation is something of an “own goal”. Indeed, whatever it may have meant for Luther in its original context, it is now ammunition for atheists seeking to attack the reasonableness of religious belief. A Google search of this quote will reveal its repeated appearance on multiple atheist websites – indeed it is possible to buy a tee-shirt with this quote emblazoned upon it, from an atheist website! The world of Luther was still struggling to understand the impact of the Guttenberg press; little could he guess that something he wrote then might come back to haunt us centuries later on in the cyber corridors of the internet.

This division between faith and reason was to be given philosophical legitimation in the work of the Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant. Rather than begin philosophy with a study of being, or metaphysics, he undertook a Copernican revolution in philosophy to begin with the problem of knowledge, or epistemology. While seeking to legitimate the discoveries of the empirical sciences, of Newton and others, he also declared the impossibility of metaphysics, arguing that knowledge of the “thing-in-itself” is beyond the range of human knowing. In particular he asserted three realities beyond the grasp of human reason: knowledge of the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and the existence of human freedom. While he maintained that these three truths were necessary postulates for morality, they could not be known through the use of pure reason itself.

Of course there is a significant difference between the concerns of Luther and Kant. Luther was seeking to protect faith from the encroachments of reason. Reason was suspect due to the vitiating impact of original sin; it was simply not to be trusted in matters of faith. Kant on the other hand was seeking to establish the autonomy and self-sufficiency of reason. Reason stood opposed to the incursions of historical revelation, whose very contingency ruled it out

⁴ This quote is frequently cited on various web sites as coming from Luther, but I have not yet found the original source. See for example <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/14223.htm>, accessed 4 August 2006. It is quoted by Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 75

as a source reason could encompass. Kant wanted to contain religion within the self-imposed limits of “reason alone.” Though their motivations were quite different the end product was the same. The cultural divide between faith and reason has grown into a chasm, in the end to the detriment of both faith and reason.

Indeed I think it one of the ironies of the present situation is that the more successful reason is, particularly in its manifestation in modern science and technology, the more we seek to limit its applicability to those areas of success alone. And so while Kant was captured by the success of the science of his day – and it was a remarkable achievement – he felt it necessary to eliminate the possibility of metaphysics. Similarly the scientist Richard Dawkins wants to limit all truth and every exercise of reason to what can be established through an empirical scientific method. However, with a bit more, dare I say, metaphysical imagination one could point to the success of the sciences as indicative of the profound intelligibility of the cosmos, and then go on to ask whether that intelligibility has an intelligent ground. But this is to get ahead of ourselves.

Catholics and faith-reason

The teachings of Vatican I on the question of faith and reason, already mentioned, are framed by the context of Luther and Kant. On the one hand there were the Catholic traditionalists who, like Luther, sought to draw a line between faith and reason; on the other hand were the rationalists who, like Kant, thought that all religious truth should be accessible by reason alone. In response the Council taught the inner unity of faith and reason, both of which have their source in the one God: “it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason.” Against the rationalists it maintained that there are some truths revealed by God that remain inaccessible to reason: “there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, are incapable of being known.” Perhaps primary among these are the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Against the traditionalists it affirmed the power of reason to know certain things without the need for revelation, things such as the moral law, though because of the impact of sin, the fact that revelation contains moral teaching is so as to assist our weakened reason to arrive at

moral truth. But perhaps of greater interest in our current context of a militant atheism, the Council taught:

The same Holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

This teaching was then reinforced by the following condemnation:

If anyone says that the one, true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason: let him be anathema.

Few Catholics are perhaps aware of this teaching and might even be somewhat shocked by what is being asserted; some might be more shocked to know that the same teaching is repeated verbatim in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, of the Second Vatican Council.⁵

Of course the key word in the teaching of the Councils is the word, “natural” (though I would note as an aside that the word “natural” is missing in the English translation of *Dei Verbum*, but present in the other translations). During the debate at Vatican I the word “natural” was inserted to distinguish what was being stated from any claim that could be made about “fallen reason.” Vatican I makes no claim about the status of fallen reason’s ability to know God’s existence.⁶ The point of difference between the two positions, Catholic and Reformed, might then revolve around differing accounts of the role of grace and its healing effects, both on the will and the intellect. And so Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan paradoxically concludes an essay on the possibility of natural knowledge of God with the following: “I do not think that in this life people arrive at natural knowledge of God without God’s grace, but what I do not doubt is that the knowledge they so attain is natural.”⁷

Nonetheless I must confess that in recent years I have been increasingly puzzled and a bit occupied with this particular teaching of Vatican I. About six years ago while teaching seminarians in Sydney I asked whether they thought it was possible to prove the existence of

⁵ See *Dei Verbum*, n.6.

⁶ For an account of the debate at the Council and the meaning of its teaching see Fergus Kerr, “Knowing God by Reason Alone: What Vatican I Never Said,” *New Blackfriars* (2010), 215-28.

⁷ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Natural Knowledge of God,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William Ryan and Bernard Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 133.

God. Most said no, even the more conservative ones. They were somewhat surprised when I quoted both Vatican I and Vatican II on the topic. When I presented a paper at our Catholic theological association meeting some time later on the topic, it drew a number of strong reactions;⁸ and when I presented another paper on the topic in a more ecumenical theological setting, the reactions were even stronger. Overall we have become shy of the teaching of these two Councils and perhaps even a bit embarrassed by it. For some it evokes old style neo-scholastic Catholic apologetics which we would all rather forget. For many it is just so different from the dominant cultural ethos as to be almost unthinkable. It is a basic cultural assumption that God's existence is unprovable, largely, I believe, a result of our Kantian legacy.

And of course it is just an assumption, and such cultural assumptions are not "God given." At times they can and should be probed, questions and challenged. Indeed the work of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* is precisely about mapping the shift from a culture in which the reasonableness of God's existence was taken for granted, to our present age where it "is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."⁹ As a philosopher he remains sceptical about attempts to prove the existence of God, noting that "the inference to the transcendence is at the extreme and most fragile end of a chain of inferences; it is the most epistemically questionable."¹⁰ Nonetheless his own efforts are directed toward establishing that the dominant cultural ethos which denies the possibility of natural knowledge of God's existence is as much a "leap of faith" as the alternative.¹¹

Place of natural theology

And so my interest in natural theology is not so much about the mechanics of trying to prove God's existence, but about the underlying cultural assumptions which make natural theology seem possible, plausible, implausible, or impossible, and hence about the cultural and social role of natural theology. In particular what do those assumptions say about our understanding of reason, and its relationship to faith? In that sense I'm asking people to think of natural

⁸ That paper was later published: Neil Ormerod, "In Defence of Natural Theology: Bringing God into the Public Realm," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007), 227-41.

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 558.

¹¹ For an analysis of Taylor's position on the possibility of natural theology, and a comparison with the position of Bernard Lonergan see Neil Ormerod, "Charles Taylor and Bernard Lonergan on Natural Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009), 419-33.

theology as “contextual theology”, that is, theology written in response to a particular place and time, a particular cultural and social setting. Part of the problem in the way theologians have often thought about natural theology is that we have not considered this larger context; in fact natural theology has been thought to appeal to some disembodied form of pure reason which any reasonable person could assent to. But this is not how reason works. Reason itself is socially and culturally embedded, always operating out of assumed background knowledge and beliefs, cultural assumptions about what is reasonable, and who is a reliable authority. As Alasdair MacIntyre has shown, such a recognition does not necessarily entail a cognitional relativism, but it must make us more tentative about our claims to what has been proved or disproved by reason.¹²

If for example we consider the most famous of all attempts at a natural theology, the five ways of Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, we need to explore the particularities of his context. Why had God’s existence become an issue? What were the shifts in the intellectual culture of his day that necessitated this part of his larger project? Elsewhere I have argued that there was in fact a major cultural shift occurring at the time, one which placed a greater emphasis on discursive reason, and less on a participatory sense of being.¹³ Within that earlier world of a participatory sense of being, God’s existence was “obvious”, an unquestioned cultural given. But if one’s criterion of reality is not a sense of participation but the conclusion of a reasoned argument, then certainty about God’s existence becomes less secure. Aquinas’ five ways, in a way, “plugs the gap” that has arisen through this cultural shift. It affirms both the reality of God and confidence in reason’s ability to know of God’s existence. However, in doing so it also places human reason within a larger context of divine reason, indeed as a created participation in divine reason. Human reason is thus not the sole measure for what is real, but is itself to be measured against divine reason. This is not the autonomous reason promoted by Kant and the Enlightenment.

Of course our context is not that of Aquinas, and so we cannot expect natural theology to play the same role. We have experienced the Enlightenment and the scientific and technological revolutions. We have witnessed the rise of atheism as a “respectable” intellectual stance; and more recently we can also detect a growing suspicion about reason within post-modernism,

¹² In particular see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

¹³ Ormerod, "In Defence of Natural Theology."

whereby claims to reason are viewed as an exercise in the “will to power.” One thing we can say about modern atheists is that they are not post-modern relativists. They are concerned with truth and uphold the idea that truth attained has existential consequences. And so for them, the truth or falsity of God’s existence actually matters and has consequences for our behaviour. It is not enough to leave the question open for debate, or as something that might be true for you, but not true for me. For them, reason is still a reliable means to attain the truth, and God’s existence has to be established at the bar of reason or otherwise rejected. Aquinas might well sympathise!

However, unlike Aquinas, for atheism, reason has largely been circumscribed by the dictates of scientific, empirical reasoning. While for Aquinas, discursive reasoning needed to be both affirmed, yet placed into relationship with the larger order of divine reason, now discursive reasoning is firmly in place, but its range is limited to the empirical, physical order. And far from being subsumed within the order of divine reason, human reason is viewed as itself the measure of all things. So in our age a different approach is needed, because our context is different and our background assumptions are different. Before a new contextual natural theology could emerge this issue of the nature of reason and its scope need to be addressed, in a way which opens reason up to a different view of both itself and reality.

Reason, reality and metaphysics

Let me illustrate this opening up of reason with two stories, one ancient, the other more recent, which illuminate the issues at hand.

The first is an account recorded in Book 7 of Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he describes what has been called his “intellectual conversion.”¹⁴ Augustine’s religious conversion is being hindered by his inability to break free from a corporeal understanding of reality. And so when he thought of angels and other spiritual beings, “my imagination gave form to them also, and arranged them in their due places as though they had been corporeal.”¹⁵ As he puts the matter, “Whatever was not stretched out in space, or diffused or compacted or inflated or possessed of some such qualities, or at least capable of possessing them, I judged to be

¹⁴ For the most recent analysis of Augustine’s intellectual conversion see Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, 1st ed, Vintage Spiritual Classics (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), Book 7, 163.

nothing at all.” God was in fact conceived as “a vast reality spread throughout space in every direction.”¹⁶ Yet immediately after this admission, Augustine presents an account of an incident where one of his friends, Nebridius, gave a knock-down argument refuting the Manichean position, an argument which points out the rational incoherency of the Manichean account of the conflict between good and evil.

This juxtaposition can hardly be accidental. Augustine is outlining for his readers two distinct criteria for what is real. The first criteria is in terms of what Lonergan calls the “already-out-there-now real”, a reality thought of in terms of the criteria of space and time.¹⁷ Whatever is then not contained in space and time is judged “to be nothing at all.” The second criteria relate what is real to what is the conclusion of a reasoned argument. The reality of the Manichean position is eliminated by its rational incoherence. Without this coherence the realities they posit are revealed to be mere phantoms of the mind. Intellectual conversion begins with the realisation that these two criteria give different answers to the question, “What is real?” To embrace intellectual conversion is to begin to adopt the second criteria as the exclusive one for determining what is real. Most of Book 7 of the *Confessions* is Augustine’s working out of this shift, culminating in his spiritual ascent to “That which is”, or God. This intellectual conversion also provides him with a “solution” to the problem of evil, viewing evil as “non-being” or what is “unreasonable”. It was the beginnings of a metaphysical form of reasoning which provided a basis for all his future theologising.

Augustine’s struggle remains pertinent to our present context. The restriction of reason to the empirical confuses or conflates two distinct criteria for what is real. On the one hand reality is defined as what is empirically “already-out-there-now” to be seen, touched, heard, and so on. On the other hand we employ a form of reason, scientific method to establish what is true and hence real. Augustine’s personal conversion event remains a challenge to such confusion, and is as unsettling today as it was to him in his own time. In fact if you are not unsettled by it, you haven’t got it!

The second illustration is of more recent currency. On the 1st January, 2003, physicist and self-proclaimed “natural philosopher” Paul Davies published an opinion piece entitled “Now

¹⁶ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 159.

¹⁷ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Crowe Frederick E. and Robert M. Doran, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 276-77.

is the reason for our discontent”, in Sydney’s leading daily newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*.¹⁸ While many of the critics of religion point to the success of science in explaining the world as making belief in God irrelevant, Davies moved in the opposite direction. In this piece he raised the question of the unreasonable success of science in explaining the world – a point also made by Albert Einstein when he noted that “the most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.”¹⁹ Indeed the very success of modern science in all its forms points to the intelligibility of the universe, that the universe is deeply constituted by intelligibility. Davies goes on:

Science is founded on the notion of the rationality and logicity of nature. The universe is ordered in a meaningful way, and scientists seek reasons for why things are the way they are. If the universe as a whole is pointless, then it exists reasonlessly. In other words, it is ultimately arbitrary and absurd. We are then invited to contemplate a state of affairs in which all scientific chains of reasoning are grounded in absurdity. The order of the world would have no foundation and its breathtaking rationality would have to spring, miraculously, from absurdity.²⁰

Of course Davies is not suggesting that the universe is absurd. He is suggesting that if the universe has no source in intelligence (God), then the success of science is incomprehensible. Davies is implying that this incomprehensibility is somehow offensive to reason itself. Reason itself demands an explanation.

Whether he knows it or not, Davies is shifting the ground here from “physics” to “metaphysics” or perhaps from “science” to “meta-science.” He is asking a meta-scientific question, a question about the possibility of science itself. This question is not open to scientific investigation because one cannot use scientific method to validate scientific method, which would be circular. It requires a different, but still valid form of reasoning, something those caught up in the success of scientific method find hard to fathom. Davies is actually transposing a very classical argument into modern scientific idiom. His argument is structurally the same as the argument from contingency given by Thomas Aquinas. The intelligibility of the universe is a contingent fact, a happens-to-happen which requires further explanation. It cannot be explained by reference to another contingent fact, since this would

¹⁸ The text can be found at <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/12/31/1041196640478.html>.

¹⁹ Quoted in John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2009), 59.

²⁰ Paul Davies, "Now Is the Reason for Our Discontent," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 2003. Davies basically repeats his argument in P. C. W. Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why Is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 17-18.

simply raise the same question again (an infinite regress). Something more than another contingency is required to provide a reason why science succeeds. And this “more”, “all people call God.”

Conclusion

Let me conclude. I am not so naive as to suggest that the challenge posed by modern atheism could be met with a densely argued half page of metaphysics which would blow the atheists out of the water, tempting thought that might be. I am however suggesting that the teaching of Vatican I (and Vatican II) directly and correctly challenges deeply held cultural assumptions which demand to be examined. In this sense we have conceded too much ground to atheists who have often won the argument before it even begins. Here our Catholic faith is asking us to open up our conception of reason to embrace the whole of what is real, including the reality of God’s existence. Many of our current conceptions of reason are myopic, and in need of some “corrective laser surgery.” To do this we need to regain a metaphysical imagination to lift us beyond the constraints of the empirical to grasp the full range of what is and what can be known. Faith and reason can then together be the “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”

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