

# THE ISSUE OF GOD TODAY

by Richard Bastien

*“He who wishes to learn must believe.”* Aristotle

*“There are two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason. The supreme achievement of reason is to realize that there is a limit to reason.”*— Blaise Pascal

I would like to set out four world views which people, and especially university students, encounter today and to show how each of them has developed on the basis of a particular understanding of the role of faith and reason in the quest for truth. More specifically, I intend to show that these worldviews are mutually exclusive and that any person living in the West is bound to choose one of them. I conclude that the choice now facing each of us is between Mohammed, Descartes, Nietzsche and the Pope.

The four worldviews are:

- 1) Fideism, which says that faith is the sole means at our disposal in the quest for truth; we can therefore refer to it as the philosophy of *sola fides*;
- 2) Modernism, also known as rationalism, scientism or positivism, which says that reason is the sole means we have in our quest for truth; we can refer to it as the philosophy of *sola ratio*;
- 3) Postmodernism, also known as cultural or moral relativism, or nihilism, which says there is no such thing as objective truth and that, therefore, faith and reason are of no use; we can call this philosophy that of *nec ratio, nec fides*; and
- 4) Catholicism, which says that the search for truth requires both faith and reason; we can thus refer to it as being based on *fides et ratio*.

Before describing these worldviews in greater detail, one must specify what is meant by “truth”, “faith” and “reason”. By truth is meant an agreement or concordance between intellect and objective reality. Faith means *believing* in something to be true, as opposed to *knowing* it to be true. There is faith when a truth claim is accepted, not on the basis of solid evidence, but rather on the basis of the testimony of someone else. We believe something because we believe someone. Faith does not say “I believe something”, but rather “I believe *you*”. It is trust in a person. This does not mean, however, that faith is “blind” to evidence. Indeed, faith is usually reinforced by some experience which it cannot fully explain, as when I trust my doctor that his medical prescription will relieve my pain, although I can’t explain how it does so.

Reason means *knowing* something to be true on the basis of either what our senses tell us or what our mind or intellect tells us. Knowledge acquired through our senses is sense knowledge, also known as empirical knowledge, i.e. knowledge of things material and

measurable. Knowledge acquired through our intellect is knowledge of abstract truths, like logic and mathematics. Logical and mathematical truths are sometimes referred to as necessary truths because the formulation of truth claims is impossible without them.

What this means is that faith and reason are quite different. Faith requires a free assent of the will, while reason calls for compelling evidence or self-evident truth. However, the two serve a common purpose, which is to serve as foundations in our quest for truth. Put another way, both make sense only in relation to truth. Reason is a way of understanding truth, discovering it or proving it. Faith is a way of discovering it. Without this relationship to truth, faith and reason make no sense. Both are roads to truth with respect to religious as well as non-religious matters.

### Fideism or *sola fides*

The first worldview is fideism, or *sola fides*. It includes all systems of beliefs that proclaim a God without reason. Whereas modernism divorces reason from faith, fideism divorces faith from reason. The Catholic Encyclopedia defines fideism as “a system of philosophy or an attitude of mind, which, denying the power of unaided human reason to reach certitude, affirms that the fundamental act of human knowledge consists in an act of faith, and the supreme criterion of certitude is authority”.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, the most prominent form of fideism is Islam.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, Islamic theologians began to reject Greek philosophy. What this led to is a theology where God is understood as pure will and the universe as devoid of any rational order. This in turn led to a denial of the principle of causality.

For example, in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, an important 11th Century treatise, the Muslim theologian Al-Ghazali, perhaps the most influential Muslim thinker after Mohammed, fought against the Hellenizing influence of Avicenna’s disciples by arguing that “the source of their infidelity was their hearing terrible names such as Socrates and Hippocrates, Plato and Aristotle”. He emphasized that God is not bound by laws of nature and that, consequently, there is no sequence of cause and effect. Things act according, not to their nature, but to God’s will at the moment.

Fideism is not unique to Islam. One can find examples of it in Judaism, Protestantism and Catholicism. There are particularly strong manifestations of fideism amongst 19<sup>th</sup> Century Protestant theologians, particularly Friedrich Schleiermacher, who claimed that religion constituted its own sphere of knowledge, utterly unrelated to the realm of science, and Soren Kierkegaard, who viewed faith essentially as a “leap” beyond the grasp of reason.

As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his Regensburg Address of 2006, there have also been manifestations of fideism within Catholicism, including in the Middle Ages. However, the Catholic Church has generally held fideism to be heretical. The reason for this is that, while it has always affirmed God’s omnipotence, Christian Revelation also asserts Christ as Logos in the Gospel of John. If the Second Person of the Holy Trinity is

Logos, it follows that God is *ratio*. This is what has been thought by all the great theologians of Christianity, in particular Augustine, Bonaventure and Aquinas. Indeed, the Catholic Church holds that authority, even the authority of God, cannot be the unique criterion of certitude, and faith cannot be the primary form of human knowledge.

### Modernism or *sola ratio*

The second worldview we consider is that of modernism -- *sola ratio* – which says that reason alone enables us to experience true knowledge.

The central issue in modernism is epistemology: what is knowledge and how can we know? Very broadly, modernist philosophers are divided into two camps: the rationalist-idealist camp (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel), which asserts that knowledge flows essentially from reason, and the empiricist-positivist camp (Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Comte), which asserts that it derives from the senses.

Another distinctive feature of modernist thinking is its propensity to create *systems* of their own, i.e. systematic and all-encompassing explanations of reality unbeknown prior to them. For example, Descartes thought that he could explain everything through his theory of innate ideas. Hume felt the same about his theory of emotions, Marx about his concept of dialectical materialism and Freud about his notion of repressed desires rooted in our childhood. The trade mark of a modernist thinker is that he has a pet theory of some kind that explains almost everything.

The reason for this is that modernist thinkers all presuppose that true knowledge begins by positing Descartes' *tabula rasa* – the notion that each individual mind is born “blank” and endowed with a power to understand things without the help of an inherited spiritual or intellectual tradition. Indeed, says the modernist, all that is necessary to allow for the discovery of truth is to “free” the mind, i.e. to ensure that it remain “uncluttered” from any prejudice, and particularly from any religious prejudice. In short, modernism claims that all that is required to know truth is the free exercise of reason, and nothing else. This is the basic test of what we call the “Enlightenment” – the notion that clear thinking requires an intellectual cleansing, a deleting of any preconceived idea that might clutter up the mind, failing which there is no sound starting point in the search for truth.

As already mentioned, modernism has evolved over the past two and a half centuries along two broad traditions, rationalism and empiricism. The rationalist tradition is perhaps best represented by Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who believed that Newtonian physics called for an entirely new theory of knowledge, known as Transcendental Idealism, which redefined truth itself as being subjective, not objective. Kant rejected the assumption common to all earlier philosophies that truth means conformity to objective reality. In his own words, “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects...more progress may be made if we assume the contrary hypothesis that the objects of thought must conform to our knowledge”.

Kant is largely responsible for the commonly-held view that virtually all knowledge, including religious knowledge, is subjective. Unfortunately, it did not occur to him that if “all knowledge is subjective”, that assertion is itself subjective, thus making our intellect prisoner in an infinite hall of mirrors. His subjectivism led to the rapid erosion of the classical synthesis of faith and reason that had prevailed amongst philosophers and theologians up until the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century. While considering himself a Christian, Kant denied the possibility of establishing the existence of God through reason. We must simply assume that God exists because God is necessary to sanction our moral beliefs. In short, Kant believed in God not as a matter of truth but as a matter of practicality. He is largely responsible for the view held by Protestant and dissident Catholic theologians that faith and reason are incompatible and that “supernatural” is a synonym for “mythical”.

Kant’s views were developed largely as a reaction to those of David Hume, the leading figure of empiricism, which evolved into what came to be known as positivism, naturalism or scientism. Positivists argue that the only things that exist are those that are either visible or measurable. Anything that does not fit that requirement is deemed not to exist. As David Hume put it in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics...let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

What this means is that any proposition outside the realm of logic, mathematics and empirical sciences is should be considered subjective – a matter of opinion. It can never claim to be truthful in the sense we generally understand that word. Thus, positivists view faith as utterly irrational and all religions as so many superstitions.

One major implication of this position is that reason is self-sufficient to explain everything about man and his world. Positivists reject Plato’s view that “God is the measure of all things” and reaffirm the pre-Socratic view, held notably by the Sophist Protagoras, that “man is the measure of all things”. In other words, the world is measured by us rather than the other way around. And if the world is measured by us, there can be no real certitude about things. The only thing we “know” about the world is what reaches us through our senses and mental impressions. There is no way for us of being absolutely sure that those impressions correspond to reality. We believe certain ideas to the extent they can be said to “work”, but we have no absolute certainty about how they actually fit with reality. Positivists thus define knowledge as no more than “true justified belief”, i.e. belief justified by experimental testing.

Another implication of positivism is materialism. Anything that is not visible or measurable, including God, is deemed not to exist. And since God does not exist, there can be no such thing as moral absolutes. Indeed, as Alasdair MacIntyre as shown, positivism cannot even admit of essential human purposes or functions. Unlike the classical tradition, which views man as being destined by nature “to fill a set of roles each

of which has its own point and purpose: member of a family, citizen, soldier, philosopher, servant of God”, positivism envisions man “as individual prior to and apart from all [such] roles”, thus making it “implausible to treat moral judgments as factual statements.”<sup>5</sup> A true positivist admits of only one value – utility. Properly understood, utility is not a moral value, but rather an opinion about the usefulness of an action or object based on an assessment of its consequences. No materialist can believe in moral values because values are immaterial and, therefore, neither visible nor measurable. Perhaps the only intrinsic value that a materialist accepts is pleasure. In moral matters, a positivist is essentially a hedonist.<sup>6</sup> His understanding of morality boils down to a set of practical rules aimed at making social life the least unpleasant possible – in ensuring that “your right to swing your arm ends where my nose begins”.

There are several problems with the positivist worldview, not the least of which is its claim to be based on reason alone. The most important of these problems is the following: one cannot demonstrate by “reason alone” the validity of *sola ratio* because any such demonstration would be circular and circular reasoning proves nothing. In other words, those who believe in *sola ratio* do so, not by an act of reason, but of faith. Not only does faith not contradict reason, it is indispensable to it. We cannot choose between having faith and not having faith. The only issue is *where* we place our faith..

A second problem raised by modern positivism is its atheism. It claims that the existence of God has no rational foundation, that it is a matter of *blind faith*. This calls for three observations. First, it is impossible to demonstrate that God does not exist because it is impossible to prove the non-existence of something or someone.

Second, the notion that there is no God runs in the face of common sense, which tells us that there has to be some good reason for everything. This corresponds to what philosophers call the principle of sufficient reason, according to which there must be a sufficient reason for why whatever exists or happens does so. In other words, any contingent being, i.e. anything that does not exist as a matter of necessity, requires a cause sufficient to account for it. And since the world in which we live is not something necessary – something that “has to be” – there is every reason to believe that God exists. Atheists have no explanation for the contingency of the universe and no answer for the most radical philosophical question that has ever been asked – why is there something rather than nothing? Anyone who says there is no answer to such a question is, in effect, saying that there is no meaning in the universe, that everything is meaningless. This perhaps explains why the pleasure principle is so prominent in the utilitarian tradition.

Third, atheists cannot explain the emergence of rationality. If there is no God, then one is bound to argue that rationality is a by-product of biological evolution. But then, of course, that would imply that rationality grew out of non-rationality! One is reminded of G.K. Chesterton’s famous remark: “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing – they believe in anything.”

The third difficulty raised by positivism is its materialism. It assumes that thinking is a process entirely determined by chemical or electrochemical activity -- a by-product of

non-rational forces. But if that is the case, positivism is compelled to conclude that all beliefs, including belief in the non-existence of God, are the product of non-rational forces. Moreover, given that the notion of free will – what we call conscience - entails some kind of internal indetermination, which is denied by materialism, positivists must conclude that there is no such thing as free will.

A fourth difficulty with positivism is that by equating the Christian faith with some kind of mythology devoid of any rationality, it renders itself unable to explain the unique achievements of Western Civilization, which grew out of the Christian faith. Christianity borrowed from Antiquity, to be sure, but it also considerably enriched it. It created the medieval universities, from which grew our modern universities; it contributed to the development of scientific research within the Western scholarly community and, through Jesuit missionaries, introduced Western science into far-off places such as China and India; it sponsored the establishment of the first hospitals in most major European cities, and, thanks to the Catholic Church's canon law, it was instrumental in developing the modern Western legal tradition, including the concepts of human rights and separation of Church and state. Positivism cannot explain the rise of modern rationality and all the great achievements of Western civilization. It has to assume that the latter historically grew out of a system of belief that is pure fallacy.

#### Postmodernism or *nec ratio nec fides*

The third worldview is more recent and goes under the name of postmodernism. It is also referred to as nihilism, or cultural and moral relativism. Just as modernism can be said to be the prevalent view among scientists and engineers, postmodernism appears to be the dominant view in the world of social sciences, communications, the arts and humanities.

In order to understand postmodernism, we must recall briefly the worldview which it claims to replace, i.e. modernism. As mentioned earlier, modernism was characterized by a profusion of systems that sought to explain all of reality. These systems gave rise to a number of grand myths or paradigms which, for some people at least, have come to define Western culture. Among the most prevalent of these myths are the gradual elimination of various forms of suffering through science and technology, the regression of religion under the influence of progress in education, the disappearance of wars and conflicts resulting from the increase in world trade and prosperity, etc. Postmodernists refer to these myths as “meta-narratives” because of their all encompassing nature.

Because it results from a relatively recent cultural shift, postmodernism is difficult to define. It can be described as a disillusion with the meta-narratives of modernism. As Christopher Dawson has shown, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was characterized by an unlimited faith in science. Perhaps the strongest expression of this faith in human progress based on science is found in *The Future of Science*, a book first published in 1848 by French philosopher Ernest Renan, which includes the following key statement: “We proclaim the right of reason to reform society by rational science and the theoretic knowledge of that which is. It is no exaggeration to say that science contains the future of humanity and that

it alone can say the last word on human destiny and teach mankind how to reach its goal...Science is only valuable in so far as it can take the place of religion”.

The interesting point here is that, in the preface which Renan wrote for a new edition of the same book some 40 years later, a deep pessimism had replaced the naïve optimism of the first edition. “It seems possible”, he wrote in the 1887 edition, “that the collapse of supernatural belief will be followed by the collapse of moral convictions and that the moment when humanity sees the reality of things will mark a real moral decline. Under the influence of illusions the good gorilla succeeded in making an astonishing moral effort. Remove the illusions and a part of the factitious energy that they aroused will disappear. If you take away the working man’s beer you must not expect to get the same amount of work out of him.”<sup>7</sup> Renan had lost his faith in scientism, just as he had lost his Catholic faith at an earlier age.

In the half century that followed, this sense of disillusion spread to most of the intellectual world. The First and Second World Wars were everywhere experienced as the collapse of the liberal dream of ever-advancing progress based on reason alone. Writing in 1929, Christopher Dawson noted the following:

Liberal doctrines of progress and perfectibility of society by purely rational means are no longer accepted as undisputed dogmas by the thinkers and writers of the present day. The skepticism and unbelief which in the heyday of Liberal enlightenment were directed against traditional religion have now been turned against the foundations of Liberalism itself.<sup>8</sup>

It is in the wake of this general disillusionment that postmodernism seems to have taken shape as an intellectual movement, primarily under the influence of post-war French intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard. In 1967, Foucault published a book, *Les mots et les choses*, where he announced nothing less than “the death of man”. The movement soon spread to philosophy, where its attacks were focused on rationality. Postmodernist thinkers believe that the grand meta-narratives of modernism carry no credibility because man cannot grasp the truth required to construct such grand pieces of intellectual architecture. Many go further and deny the very possibility of truth claims. Indeed, they argue that any truth claim only serves to cover a hidden attempt to wield power. This might sound self-contradictory, but apparently postmodernists are not in any way bothered by contradictions. This leads American historian Thomas Storck to describe postmodernism as “the death of reason”:

Texts are no longer arguments made to convince someone of some point of view, for, as we saw, post-modernism suspects every such argument to be a covert attempt to grab power. Instead in the last resort it is play, it becomes trivial. While modernism very often espoused error and made wrong arguments, post-modernism is not interested in making an argument. Rather it seeks to destroy every argument, every possibility of argument. Many of the modernist systems of thought contained implicit contradictions, which, if pressed, would logically have destroyed the very foundations of that system, but which the systems’ creators

and expounders overlooked, and apparently hoped everyone else would overlook too. But, in theory, if you pointed out such a logical contradiction to the systems' upholders, they would be embarrassed and seek somehow to explain themselves. But if you point to the post-modernists that their arguments destroy the very possibility of argument and truth, that they can hardly uphold their own point of view if what they assert is true, they will not react with embarrassment or anger. They are likely to react instead with a shrug, a smile, a nod in agreement. For yes, they have destroyed all argument, all truth, including their own. They do not desire to replace modernist systems with a new one of their own creation, but to remove any rational floor, any starting point, any fixed position about which we can have rational confidence. Absolute intellectual nihilism is the logical result of this. Man's reason is dead..."<sup>9</sup>

The reference to nihilism appears to be quite appropriate. Nihilism is a philosophy associated with the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who is quite famous for a book titled *The Anti-Christ*. A diehard atheist, he argued that the "death of God" called for the rejection of both reason and faith, invited his readers to embrace passion, rhetoric and even deliberate hatred rather than reason, and proclaimed the supremacy of will. He became insane in his late years and died of syphilis in 1900, signing his last letters "the Crucified One". Although some philosophers say that he would have despised Nazism, German Nazis viewed him as their greatest intellectual hero. A significant portion of contemporary academics and writers consider him as an iconic figure of modern times. He is widely read by university students, perhaps more than any other philosopher.

The appeal of nihilism for the people of our time is there for everyone to see. It is part and parcel of modern culture – the air we breathe every day. It says that while the search for truth may be very noble, it is hopeless. Life is nothing more than an opportunity for feelings and experiences. Seeking the meaning of life is pointless because everything is fleeting and provisional. Life commitments become infringements on freedom.

### Catholicism or *fides et ratio*

Unlike other worldviews, Catholicism says that faith and reason are both essential to the search for truth. *Fides et ratio* could thus be understood as its true motto. As John Paul II mentioned in an encyclical titled precisely *Fides et Ratio*, they are "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." What this image suggests is that the relationship between faith and reason is not accidental or external, but rather essential.

The notion of a natural complementarity between faith and reason implies that severing one from the other can wreak havoc. In his famous Regensburg Lecture, Pope Benedict XVI said that it is precisely the unlinking of the two that causes *pathologies* of reason and of religion.

The Catholic position is predicated on the notion that reason raises questions that it cannot answer on its own and that faith provides answers that become intelligible only

with the help of reason. Thus faith and reason are said to be “symbiotically, and not extrinsically, related”<sup>10</sup>. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a symbiosis is “an interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, especially to the advantage of both”. Thus, to say that faith and reason are symbiotically related means not only that they are essential to one another, but that they are called to grow or perish together.

This symbiosis can be explained both from the point of view of reason and from that of faith. Let us begin with the standpoint of the former. We know that reason raises questions that it cannot answer on its own. There is, for example, the question of death: where do we come from and where are we going? This is the question about our origin and our destiny: each of us is bound to raise it at some point or other, and rather earlier than later in life. We cannot help asking it because it has to do with the very meaning of our existence. Even young children sometimes ask it without ever having been prompted to do so. Modernism, i.e. reason alone, cannot answer the question and declares it to be irrelevant. But faith proposes an answer, from which reason can then draw out some implications. The same may be said about the most radical philosophical question that can ever be asked: why is there something rather than nothing? This is another question that simply cannot be ignored because, whether we like it or not, the way we live necessarily presupposes a response. To ignore the question usually leads to unwittingly adopting the default position of the time in which we happen to live. Today, that position is the nihilistic postmodernism described earlier.

If we take the standpoint of faith rather than reason, the necessity of a symbiotic link between the two appears equally obvious. For example, by affirming the existence of God, faith automatically adopts a philosophical position about what constitutes the whole of reality and about its origin. By affirming the existence of one God who is *logos*, faith affirms the existence of a creative Intelligence and of a certain understanding of man as a spiritual being. By affirming that God is love, it presupposes the need for knowledge since love by its very nature seeks to know the loved object. In a talk given in 1992, then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger explained the idea as follows: “Faith can wish to understand because it is moved by love for the One upon whom it has bestowed its consent. Love seeks understanding. It wishes to know ever better the one whom it loves... Love is the desire for intimate knowledge, so that the quest for intelligence can even be an inner requirement of love. Put another way, there is a coherence of love and truth which has important consequences for theology and philosophy.”<sup>11</sup>

We may thus conclude that reason is distinct from faith as is philosophy from theology. However, the exercise of reason is inseparable from faith. There is no such thing as a *Christian* reason, but there is a Christian exercise of reason or, more specifically, an exercise of reason enlightened by faith. And if things are so, it is because the great problems to which our minds are confronted belong both to the jurisdiction of reason, i.e., philosophy, and to that of faith, i.e., theology.

Faith and reason, like theology and philosophy, are not opposed but complementary. This explains perhaps why Christendom was the breeding ground of Western universities and

modern science. But that's another big subject and we should keep it for a separate talk.  
Thank you

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<sup>1</sup> Sauvage, G. (1909). Fideism. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved August 13, 2008 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06068b.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the remarks on Muslim fideism are drawn from an article by Robert Reilly, "The Pope and the Prophet", in the November 2006 issue of *Crisis Magazine*.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second Edition, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> This is not true of all positivists. Auguste Comte, often considered as the father of positivism, was not a utilitarian and, indeed, believed in objective moral rules.

<sup>7</sup> The quotes are drawn from an essay titled "Rationalism and Intellectualism: the Religious Elements in the Rationalist Tradition", in: Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*, 1933, p. 152-153.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson, Christopher, *Progress and Religion*, Sherwood Sudgen & Company, Peru (Illinois), USA, p. 217

<sup>9</sup> Storck, Thomas, "Postmodernism: Catastrophe or Opportunity – or Both", available on line: <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=4061>

<sup>10</sup> Rowland, Tracey, *Ratzinger's Faith – The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 5

<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1995