

Are faith and reason essential to one another?

To Think or To Believe

Many of us have been told as children that if we eat the seed of a watermelon, it will grow into a watermelon tree in our stomachs. Naturally, after becoming utterly terrified, we meticulously singled out every little seed from the watermelon and tossed them aside until we grew older and realized we had been fooled. Why did we believe it initially though? According to psychologist Jean Piaget's theory of child development, it isn't until the ages of roughly 7-11 that a child begins to reason beyond tangible objects and into hypothetical and abstract phenomena.¹ Thus, the relationship between faith and reason can be compared to the mind of a growing child. A young child is naive, predominantly relying on their faith in the knowledge given to them by others; however, as they grow, they can rationalize information to determine truth. Furthermore, exemplifying that without reason, faith alone can lead to superstition or ignorance; however, as St. Clement of Alexandria says, "Indeed it is not safe to commit these things to bare faith without reason, since assuredly truth cannot be without reason."² Without faith, our reason alone can lead to nihilism and separation from God. Pope Shenouda III emphasized the compatibility of faith and reason, declaring that "faith seeks understanding" while reason serves as a tool to deepen our spiritual insight.³ Central to our Coptic Orthodox theology is the understanding that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are intertwined and complementary to our spirituality and lives.

While faith relies on beliefs that may not have physical concrete evidence or rational proof, and reason involves intellect, rationale, and logical evidence, they are both essential to our relationship with Christ, spiritual growth, and understanding the complexities of theology. Some may argue that anything can be interpreted through science and logic. Although our ability to

¹ Thompson, "2.1 Cognitive Development: The Theory of Jean Piaget."

² "Philip Schaff: ANF08. The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, the Clementia, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Age - Christian Classics Ethereal Library."

³ Pope Shenouda, *Life of Faith*.

rationalize things is a gift from God Himself, reason has its limitations. Science cannot be questioned in the same way faith can, it is purely objective. This hinders its ability to contribute to subjective experiences and “metaphysical” matters involving God and the meaning of life. These aspects of reality, particularly those related to our faith and the existence of divine nature, cannot be fully explained through reason alone; rather, they require the combination of reason and faith. This is because faith related subjects and complicated theological concepts such as the trinity and incarnation cannot be tested and analyzed in a lab the way scientific and logical data is usually determined. Instead, faith is based upon personal experiences and a connection with God. Faith allows us to deepen our understanding beyond what reason can achieve alone. As reason clarifies and defends the beliefs of faith, faith fills in the gaps that reason overlooks, creating the best possible vision for the complex reality of spirituality. God intentionally did not reveal everything to us in a way that our minds can fully comprehend. He gave us tools like reason to help us begin to fathom the complexities that lie beyond our capabilities. Complexities that only faith paired with reason can begin to digest.

As established, faith works alongside reason as it is grounded in it, providing a framework in which believers can begin to understand the mysteries of God and grow in their spiritual lives. One of the most prominent examples of this is the many heresies shattered in the ecumenical councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus. St. Athanasius is a profound example of the immense importance of using faith and reason to destroy false theories like that of Arius, who claimed that Christ was not of the same essence as God the Father. Having his faith as his backbone, he used his rationale and understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity to refute the false claims of Arius.⁴ Instead of blindly accepting the statements or interpretations

⁴ “The Orthodox Faith - Volume III - Church History - Fourth Century - Saint Athanasius and His Defence of Nicea.”

of others, reason is our guiding template, enabling us to use our faith in our fundamental beliefs to further our spiritual growth and enrich both ourselves and others. Fr. Matthew the Poor, a Coptic theologian, strongly believed in the significance of critical thinking and intellectual engagement when interpreting the scriptures or understanding theology.⁵ While faith is important, questioning it is arguably more important as this is how it is solidified. Reason allows us to question our faith and clear what may have previously been clouded which in turn builds up our faith that is deeply rooted in reason. This further emphasizes that reason, far from being contradictory to faith, is instead a partner to it, crucial to deepening one's understanding of the divine truth revealed in scripture and theology.

Beyond spirituality, the significance of faith and reason is apparent in our lives. Relying on one over the other too heavily comes with consequences and, in turn, goes against scripture. Hypothetically, if one were to deny necessary medical treatment and claim that only their faith in God will heal them, that would be ignorance. In the book of Sirach, this specific example is mentioned in chapter 38 as God says that we ought to “honor doctors for their services since indeed the Lord created them.”⁶ Although healing does ultimately come from above and we must have faith in God’s power; God uses those on earth as instruments for healing such as physicians and medication. Therefore, it would be unwise and illogical to forsake rational thought entirely and exclusively rely on faith, as both are essential in navigating all aspects of life. Similarly, if one were to claim that they could achieve anything without relying on God's power and assert that faith was unnecessary, they too would be mistaken. Ultimately, we are not in control of this world and are not all-knowing and all-powerful. Leaning too far into our understanding with no

⁵ Matthew the Poor, Fr. (2003). "The Communion of Love"

⁶ “Sirach 38 (CEB).”

faith leads to the loss of morals, the development of pride, and a sense that this life is meaningless with no higher purpose beyond ourselves in sight. The popular realist phrase that “religion offers false comfort in a meaningless world” stems from a lack of faith in a society that worships solely robotic thought—thought that fits inside a box of things deemed “possible” while the rest is not. Moreover, our faith brings forth our moral qualities along with a higher purpose and our reason allows us to decipher between what aligns with our faith and what does not, allowing us to live virtuously in a culture where that is not the priority.

Faith and reason are essential to one another, especially concerning our spiritual growth and discernment. We must be able to establish reasoning that grows faith and faith that accepts and understands reasoning as we journey through the intricacies of life. A lack of faith or reason hinders our relationship with Christ and our ability to understand things that may seem initially unfathomable. We must utilize faith and reason in duality as their purpose is only complete together. Otherwise, we may find ourselves absorbed in our own rationale or faced with the naivety of a child picking out their watermelon seeds, unable to uncover the truth.

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