

RELIGION WITHOUT THE LIMITS OF REASON ALONE?

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Following upon Jason's presentation, I will attempt to situate the theological reflection on the issue of globalization in our region using three distinct sources which all seem to point to theology's capitulation to a rationalized scheme which is typified in the Kantian understanding of religion within the limits of reason alone. This rationalized form of theology and religion has clearly shaped both the way in which we understand what it is to be a religious person and what is religion in the Caribbean. My first source is the increasing interdisciplinary field of religion and science. The second, Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. The third, philosopher Jacques Derrida's understanding of religion and its sources- faith and knowledge. I contend that all three sources point to the need for theology to be liberated from a rationalistic framework. I further contend that such liberated and liberating theology must overcome the Kantian limitations and attempt to understand religion not within but without the limits of reason alone. Perhaps some clarification of this latter term is necessary. Religion without the limits of reason alone does not mean that one must suspend the use of reason, nor that reason is bad. However it does mean that reason alone cannot provide the full support required for understanding and practicing religion. Hence we must go beyond the limits of reason and attempt to forge a theology that is grounded in this extra-rational context.

1. Religion and Science

Our popular notion of the relationship between theology/religion and science tends to be one of antagonism. Somehow religion and theology are not scientific endeavours, science is about fact and objective truth while religion is about our personal and subjective feelings. We often point to the Enlightenment period (and earlier to the Galileo episode) as proof of this. However, as John Hedley Brooke states about the 17th century, "It has long been recognized that natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton saw the study of nature as a religious duty". Indeed, to know the workings of the world was to know the workings of God's creation and thus to get a glimpse of the mind of God. What has developed as modern science therefore was a logical and perhaps necessary extension of the queen of the sciences, theology. In some ways, it cannot be said that the scientific revolution created a separation of science from theology since science was still done to find out about the glory of God. Even the much touted Galileo affair, though occurring some centuries earlier was not about a fight between theology and science but about Galileo's insistence in telling the Church how she should interpret holy scripture. Galileo's heliocentric model was not a new concept and was actually considered bad science by his contemporaries. However, what did occur with this greater sense of science leading to better understandings of the creator was that "theology began to be secularized precisely because God's attributes were increasingly described through categories of natural philosophy and by scholars who were not members of the clergy". Clearly what was developing was the possibility of describing the same events in terms of both natural causes and divine providence. One would think that this is a wonderful state of affairs in that scientific understanding could be better integrated into theological reflection. But this allowed the rise of natural theology as an attempt to make theology more reasonable and amenable to science and "the God now more sharply defined by his discernable activities in nature became a more immediately identifiable target for those wishing to destroy him". With the rise of the natural sciences, and given the earlier understanding that science was done in the framework of finding out more about God's creation, and thus God, there was a sense

that science could reinforce arguments for design about the existence of God.

This would accomplish two important things, first it would show that science was in the service of theology and religion, and second, it would give theology the respectability required in an age of reason. Unfortunately, in reality, it limited theology to a rational scheme and set up theology within the limits of reason alone as the universal revelation given in nature which was to this way of thinking more primordial, prior to, and infinitely better than the late comer- biblical revelation. In significant ways, theology capitulated to natural science willingly in order to maintain rational respectability. But the real problem this shift created was that it gave the sciences too much of a burden to bear. Science and natural philosophy, by default, became the arena for understanding truths about God. The ensuing “secularization of knowledge” was thus the result of theology not attending to its specific nature and creating a “natural” theology that by the end of the 18th century was seen to be spurious and founded on shifting sand. (Anyone who has done Hume’s and Kant’s critiques of natural design can see this). The sacred had now been subsumed and described by the secular, and the collapse of this sacred/secular distinction was the basis for a secular description of our reality that could only give religious and sacred overtones through a denounced natural theology. There continues to be in theology today this need for a religious creed that could withstand rational assault, a rational theology that gives sacred justification to one’s position irrespective of the stance. We see it in some of the movements spawned by the natural sciences in ecological concerns vested with holy traces. It is a continuing use of a rational theology that has abrogated its responsibility to the natural (and later on social) sciences.

As a region, as Jason so aptly pointed out, defined and shaped by a rational framework of conquest which was consistently legitimated by rational theologies and buttressed by an emerging economic system using new forms of human and mechanical industry, our theology and religion have always been determined by a rationalistic context. And if this is so, one cannot withhold a

further comment, that our theology and religion still suffers from this religion within the limits of reason alone.

2. Fides et Ratio

In his recent encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II attempts to highlight the role of philosophy in today’s world, in the Church and specifically its relationship to theology. He continuously wants to show that both faith and reason need to be held in a balanced relationship and are necessary to one another. “It is an illusion to think that faith, tied to weak reasoning, might be more penetrating: on the contrary, faith then runs the grave risk of withering into myth or superstition. By the same token, reason which is unrelated to an adult faith is not prompted to turn its gaze to the newness and radicality of being”. Reason is necessary for an adult faith, and faith is necessary for mature reasoning. However, in speaking of the separation of faith and reason (which he refers to as a drama) at the beginning of the Enlightenment, he says, “In short, what for Patristic and Medieval thought was in both theory and practice a profound unity, producing knowledge capable of reaching the highest forms of speculation, was destroyed by systems which espoused the cause of rational knowledge sundered from faith and meant to take the place of faith”. In going through the history of philosophy the Pope sees the rise of an instrumental reason that denies the true role of reason. I will quote at length paragraph 47 of the encyclical:

‘It should also be borne in mind that the role of philosophy itself has changed in modern culture. From universal wisdom and learning, it has been gradually reduced to one of the many fields of human knowing; indeed in some ways it has been consigned to a wholly marginal role. Other forms of rationality have acquired an ever higher profile, making philosophical learning appear all the more peripheral. These forms of rationality are directed not towards the contemplation of truth and the search for the ultimate goal and meaning of life; but instead, as “instrumental reason”, they are directed—actually or potentially—towards the promotion of utilitarian ends, towards

enjoyment or power. In my first Encyclical Letter (Redemptor Hominis) I stressed the danger of absolutizing such an approach when I wrote: “The man of today seems ever to be under threat from what he produces, that is to say from the result of the work of his hands and, even more so, of the work of his intellect and the tendencies of his will. All too soon, and often in an unforeseeable way, what this manifold activity of man yields is not only subject to 'alienation', in the sense that it is simply taken away from the person who produces it, but rather it turns against man himself, at least in part, through the indirect consequences of its effects returning on himself. It is or can be directed against him. This seems to make up the main chapter of the drama of present-day human existence in its broadest and universal dimension. Man therefore lives increasingly in fear. He is afraid of what he produces—not all of it, of course, or even most of it, but part of it and precisely that part that contains a special share of his genius and initiative—can radically turn against himself”. In the wake of these cultural shifts, some philosophers have abandoned the search for truth in itself and made their sole aim the attainment of a subjective certainty or a pragmatic sense of utility. This in turn has obscured the true dignity of reason, which is no longer equipped to know the truth and to seek the absolute.

This is a very strong statement from Pope John Paul II. But it correctly identifies that reason in its instrumental capacity not only loses its true dignity but forces us to fear reason itself since it can turn against us. It is this instrumental reason that was created by the use of the natural sciences to bolster theological claims. Theology itself, in its use of this instrumental reason, thus became based on reasoning that can only lead to a lack in dignity of the theological enterprise, and to rational theological systems which have the ability to ensure subjugation to, and control by, existing dominant structures. No wonder theology (and religion) in this capacity was and is an alienating experience. If theology abrogates its responsibility to the natural and reflection, is it any wonder that our religion and theology continues to thrive best in a rational framework that bolsters the dominant context? Jason has already pointed out that of the two strands of theology historically exhibited in the Church in

Trinidad, it is the strand that maintains the status quo which always dominates. This is not a coincidence. It is so because the framework and structure of our religion and theological reflection in the region has been forged out of an instrumental rationality that, even in our so-called local expressions, cages us within the limits of reason alone. This may be difficult to agree to, but I contend that we cannot have sincere and meaningful theological reflection, and thereby sound religion, until we have faced squarely and realistically the full-fledged rationality that defines our intellectual, religious, cultural and social contexts.

3. Faith and Knowledge.

In a book entitled *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present*, some notable postmodern philosophers share their thoughts on the phenomenon of religion. What is surprising about this book is precisely the title. For those of you familiar with what is termed postmodern philosophy you know that religion of all things is the foremost example of the grand narrative (following Jean Francois Lyotard) of Western civilization which had been deconstructed. However, these thinkers admit to the “return” of religion and end up reflecting on what it could mean today. Foremost among the thinkers in the book is Jacques Derrida, whose essay on religion poses some interesting questions for theological reflection. Derrida’s essay deals with faith and knowledge as the two sources of religion at the limits of reason alone. Derrida says “religion is at the same time involved in reacting antagonistically and reaffirmatively outbidding itself. In this very place, knowledge and faith, technoscience and belief, credit, trustworthiness, the act of faith will always have made common cause, bound to one another by the band of their opposition”. Derrida is here pointing to the reflection that is created by the opposition between that which is within the limits of reason alone and that which is beyond it. In some senses, the opposition between the secular and the sacred. It is in this opposition that there is the possibility of a reflecting faith. However, as a reflecting faith it is within the limits of reason alone and does not “depend essentially upon any historical

revelation and thus agrees with the rationality of purely practical reason". In other words, a solely practical and reasonable theology must divorce itself from the demands of an historical revelation. This is the same practical reason Immanuel Kant in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, allows religious reflection. But because of the rational inconsistency of arguments from design, of natural theology, which Kant himself critiqued, the existence of God cannot be proven nor taken for granted in a rational manner. Hence Kant developed a "moral" (meaning active) religion whereby we act knowing that the idea of God is simply and only a postulate, an empty thought. But this, though an attempt to have a religion within the limits of reason alone, effectively kills God and places religion at the service of the highest "moral" agent, meaning the one who has the power to act and enact. In significant ways, religion (monotheistic religion) becomes a universal rational scheme that perpetuates its originary culture and society. More than that, it actively (morally) aids in the "globalization" of the rational religious agenda. This is no more than colonization with religious conceptualities. Derrida calls this "globalatinization" a "strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and tele-technoscientific capitalism". This is where Derrida thinks religion is today and in some ways it heralds the conquest of Christianity over other religions. A clear example is the Y2K issue. Notably an issue generated by merchantile economies based in a rationalized Christianity, everyone's calendar became Christian at midnight December 31, 1999. Derrida seems to be quite poignantly showing that religion (Christianity) and technology not only aid one another, but are the essential opposites that will last into the foreseeable future. But before we take pride and joy from that let us ask what type of religion? It seems a religion within the limits of reason alone.

4. Religion Without the Limits of Reason Alone.

Let me situate what I have done so far in a more clarified manner. First, developments in religion and science have indicated theology's misuse of the natural and social sciences

which has left theology without its own two feet to stand on. Second, the increasing use of instrumental reason as a basis for theological reflection causes the alienation that theology currently enjoys. Third, attempts to understand the phenomenon of religion within the limits of reason alone force us to deny the real existence of God. That these issues are germane to the Caribbean is supported by the fact of the region's colonization and globalization that has been on tap since 1492. Our challenge, then, given the historical and rational context that we inhabit is to found some form of theological reflection that is not within the limits of reason alone. This is no simple task, because replacing rational religion with popular religious expressions is not the answer. Nor is indigenizing our religious expressions a way of being without the limits of reason alone. Our problem is similar to a problematic Derrida poses in his essay, "is revealability more originary than revelation, and hence independent of all religion? Independent in the structures of its experience and in the analytics relating to them?....Or rather, inversely, would the event of revelation have consisted in revealing revealability itself...?" In other words is our Caribbean reality and our expression of it one and the same thing? Are we just reveling in our expressions and taking that for Caribbean reality? Or is the expression all that we have? To put it in theological terms, are we talking about God and his people in the Caribbean or some rational image thereof? What are we to do? I have spoken previously about our forced context in the Caribbean and I think such an understanding is important as an initial step, but it is hard to divest oneself of a faith that is grounded in a manipulative reason. I don't think that adequate description (forced context or not) can suffice as a way to overcome such an obstacle. Clearly there has to be some theological effort to understand evil in our context (which ironically Kant does but ends up with a dead God) and to suggest modes of struggle to overcome it. Perhaps a religion without the limits of reason has to start with precisely that which confounds rationality - grace and evil.

