

Reason and reconciliation

Summary

Anglican method in theology is usually described in terms of a balance between a variety of authorities, characteristically listed - following Hooker - as scripture, reason and tradition. This method provides tools for conflict resolution which are not available to those who claim to deduce all truth from a single unchanging authority.

In the Bible and the early Church reason was characteristically affirmed. The strongest rejection of it was among Gnostics who were rejected by the majority. In the early Middle Ages educational standards declined and it became common to subordinate contemporary reason to the wisdom of the ancients. From the eleventh century onwards, when educational standards began to rise again, conflict developed between traditional teachings and new ideas. This resolved into the late medieval dualism which taught that all truths in matters of faith were derived from divine revelation without the use of reason.

The Reformation produced a situation in which competing authorities offered contrasting accounts of divine revelation, and without the use of reason it was impossible to resolve disagreements. In time, reason was reaffirmed. One development, characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy, sought knowledge with certainty on the basis of a narrowly-defined reason, and over time produced arguments against the existence of God. Another, characteristic of classical Anglican theology, appealed to a wider concept of reason and rejected the expectation of certainty.

It is this Anglican account of reason which has the resources to resolve conflict in matters of faith today.

Text

Anglican method in theology is usually described in terms of a balance between a variety of authorities, characteristically listed - following Hooker - as scripture, reason and tradition. This method provides tools for conflict resolution which are not available in traditions which claim to deduce all truth from a single unchanging authority. Far from being exclusively Anglican, it is largely a reaffirmation of an older tradition. It has characterized the Church of England through much, though not all, of its history. Its main feature is a strong affirmation of the role of reason, not as a supreme authority, but as one among others.

Reason in the Bible and the early Church

Some biblical texts emphasize the value of wisdom as one of God's greatest gifts, or an attribute of God. At the time of Christ, Stoics and Platonists speculated about the relationship of God, wisdom, mind and reason. The beginning of John's Gospel echoes them: 'In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God'. Although *logos* is usually translated 'word', it can equally well be translated 'reason'.

Some early Christian apologists, out-argued by better educated pagans, occasionally denounced reason. However the only systematic opposition to it was polytheistic: some Gnostics taught that human minds have been created by evil gods who deliberately intended to deceive us about the nature of reality. The majority retained monotheism and, with it, a positive affirmation of reason. Scholars have shown that not even Tertullian's often-quoted remark 'What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?' was intended as a general rejection of reason; indeed, Tertullian made extensive use of his legal training to present rational arguments for Christianity.

To most early Christians, the principle of monotheism implied both that God's manner of creating the world was rational and therefore ordered and comprehensible, and also that human minds have been

designed to perceive and reflect on physical and spiritual realities. This naturally led to the stance, expressed by Augustine and reaffirmed by Anselm, that 'I believe in order to understand'. Faith in a good God, who provides us with suitable minds, provides a basis for trusting our normal reasoning processes. More recently, as faith in God has declined, it has become once again an open question whether any of our reasoning faculties can be relied on, and pragmatist and non-realist philosophies have become popular.

Medieval dualism

After the fall of the Roman Empire educational standards in Europe declined. Reason was still highly valued, but it became natural to think that greater wisdom could be found in the writings of the ancients than in the new ideas of contemporaries. When standards began to rise again in the eleventh century, the Church invested in universities and encouraged new learning.

One development was empirical studies of the physical environment. New ideas gradually challenged tradition and generated controversy. As the forerunners of modern science found their researches repeatedly blocked by church authorities, they looked for ways to justify their activities without threatening Christian doctrine. Despite Aquinas' attempts to retain a unified account of reality, by the end of the Middle Ages the dominant resolution was the dualist one expressed by William of Ockham.

Ockham argued that God can, in principle, do anything at all. There is no obligation on God to do anything in an ordered ways, and whatever is unordered is beyond the scope of human reason. He acknowledged only one exception: God, he believed, has decreed that the laws of the created physical order should be constant. He also believed that all our knowledge comes from the senses, which only give us awareness of individual things.

The conclusion was that reason applies only to physical matters; it cannot know anything about spiritual matters. The Christian faith was thus restricted in two ways: it depended entirely on divine revelation, and it was nothing to do with physical matters.

This dualism, with its severe restriction of reason, provided the philosophical basis to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and as a result is still highly influential today. Some of its weaknesses are as follows.

1) It flies in the face of history. In the late Middle Ages there was no shortage of evidence to show that the classic Christian doctrines, like the Incarnation and the Trinity, had been hammered out through centuries of debate in the early Church. After Ockham, though, they were usually presented as though they had been divinely revealed without human mediation.

2) It makes theology backward-looking. By denying the role of reason, it devalues new thoughts. If all truth in matters of faith is to be inherited from the past, there are no new insights yet to be learned. Truth is fixed for all time.

3) It makes theology exclusive. If there is no religious truth at all outside the Church's divine revelation, it appears that non-Christians cannot have even partial knowledge of God.

4) It claims absolute certainty in matters of faith. If divinely revealed statements transcend all reason, it would follow that they must be true even if they contradict all reason.

5) It provides a voluntarist account of ethics. Right and wrong are right and wrong only because God says so, and for no other reason. It becomes impossible to explain *why* some acts are right and others wrong. As a result, moral rules become oppressive.

6) Reason is narrowed. For others, like Aquinas, natural theology draws on all the human knowledge-seeking faculties except divine revelation. Ockham limits reason so that it only knows what the senses perceive.

7) Authoritarianism is enhanced. Since reason is not permitted in matters of faith, disagreements can only be resolved by direct appeal to divine revelation. Every disagreement therefore becomes a question about which authority correctly interprets divine revelation.

These features of late medieval dualism characterize not only major themes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but also a great deal of Christian discourse today. Many of the difficulties churches face, as they struggle to resolve disagreement, stem from the weaknesses of these presuppositions.

The Reformation

Ockham lived at a time when there was a single recognized authority on Christian doctrine, the Catholic Church. From the Reformation onwards there were competing authorities, each claiming to be faithful to divine revelation. Since they disagreed with each other, not all the claims could be true. In practice Protestants and Catholics alike used all the reasoning powers available to them to defend their beliefs; but both sides also appealed to the principle that reason has no place in matters of faith.

In principle, those who believe divine revelation is the only source of truth cannot resolve disagreements with each other except by direct appeal to revelation. However, since all such revelations come from the one God, it should be impossible for two revelations to contradict each other. Since the disputants had also inherited the idea that revelation provided absolute certainty, it seemed that their opponents must be certainly wrong. *Why* their opponents held their false ideas was difficult to explain within this paradigm. The most common explanation was the Devil's influence, but accusations of this type only hindered communication even further.

Although the many disputants did, in practice, use reason to resolve their disagreements, they were aware that theory forbade it, and because their theories also encouraged convictions of certainty, they often felt duty-bound to refuse negotiation and compromise. The result has been a long history of Protestant sectarianism in which irresolvable disagreements cause one schism after another. The refusal to be part of the same Communion as a church with a gay bishop is but the latest expression of this sectarian spirit.

Enlightenment reason

The tragedy of the religious wars was largely caused by the widespread conviction, by Protestants and Catholics alike, that revealed truth, with certainty, was on their side. Reconciliation demanded a reaffirmation of reason. It took a variety of forms.

The dominant form, as developed by Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant, retained the commitment to seeking knowledge with certainty, but expected to achieve it through reason as opposed to traditional authority. To justify the idea that certainty was possible, they retained a narrow account of reason. Descartes proposed to establish certainty through deductive logic, Locke through the evidence of the senses. Their successors recognized that both processes are essential to knowledge, but during the eighteenth century it became increasingly clear that the existence of God could not be proved in these ways.

Scientific research based on this account of reason produced theories of the universe in which everything, including human beings, consists of nothing but atoms obeying eternal laws of nature. Many believed that science had disproved human free will and had reduced our minds to deterministic chemical processes in the brain. Some argued that all religious belief had been refuted. In the first half of the twentieth century Logical Positivists argued that the very idea of God was meaningless.

The Romantic movement and the nineteenth century religious revivals reacted against this stark, reductionist account of reality. Characteristically they emphasized the emotions and intuition, and looked for non-physical, spiritual phenomena to justify their beliefs.

Philosophers today no longer expect to gain certain knowledge through logic and empirical evidence. They recognize that we must live with uncertainty. Nevertheless the influence of this tradition is still strongly felt, in two contrasting ways. On the one hand many people still believe that reason has refuted the existence of God, and dismiss religion as nothing but dogma; on the other, many religious traditions still express hostility to reason and science.

Reason without certainty

An alternative response to the religious impasse of the Reformation era was to reaffirm the centrality of reason but abandon the hope of certainty. The Church of England took a leading part in this movement, and acknowledged Richard Hooker as its founder.

So much is at stake that scholars still debate what Hooker really believed. His writings are not always clear, and he was constrained by circumstances; in particular, he had to ensure that he could not be accused of contradicting any of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Nevertheless he denied that Scripture alone is an adequate authority for Christians, and argued that reason and tradition are also needed. His successors developed the theory, producing what is now known as the classical Anglican theological method, the balance of scripture, reason and tradition.

Hooker's philosophy owed more to Aquinas than Ockham. Once the expectation of certainty was abandoned, wider accounts of reason again became possible; it could include not only logic and the evidence of the senses, but also imagination, intuition and instinct.

Contrasting definitions of reason still cause differences of religious interpretation. For example, people often wake up in the morning aware of the solution to a problem which has been troubling them for days. Those with a wider account of reason are likely to interpret this naturalistically, as the work of the subconscious mind using a variety of God-given processes; those with a narrower account may prefer to interpret it as the direct voice of God.

Hooker's followers explored the relationship of reason to scripture in greater detail. Some, at first, restricted it to judging the true meaning of difficult biblical texts. Later it was given wider roles. John Locke taught that each of us inevitably gives our own reason the highest authority. Even if we decide to accept scripture as the only authority, he argued, it is we who are deciding so to do, and nobody grants it this authority unless they have *reasons* for doing so. One of his illustrations was Noah's flood: even if we feel absolutely certain that it took place, since it is recorded in the Bible, we are not as certain as Noah was, because he saw it with his own eyes.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the reaffirmation of reason. The tensions of the Reformation debates and the religious wars were exacerbated by the widespread view that there is a single authority - the Bible - from which all truth can be read or deduced. As long as that view prevailed, a new idea had to be by definition untrue, unless it could be deduced from the Bible. Restricted in this way, religion was unable to develop and was therefore destined to become out of date, a relic of past quarrels.

For this reason, Anglicanism's balance of authorities, and suspicion of claims to certainty, provides an essential tool for reconciling conflict in the present and permitting new insights in the future. Truth is revealed not through deduction from a single infallible source, but through the interactions of a variety of authorities. The interactions allow for endless possibilities. As new circumstances arise, new insights become possible. It may be a new insight of our age that we have been designed so that a minority of us practice homosexuality with God's blessing.