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## THE USES OF REASON IN RELIGION

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Anyone who stakes out two territories as vast and impenetrable as Reason and Religion has not exactly hemmed himself in! I feel at the beginning of this venture as David Hume felt at the conclusion of his Treatise:

"Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd ship-wreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous circumstances. My memory of past errors and perplexities, makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions."

I have deliberately chosen a title which has an old fashioned ring to it, with overtones of the ironic. Take the first term I have used, "reason." If you care to go back a few centuries you will find the great philosopher, John Locke, contending that Reason—pronounced with a capital R—is "natural Revelation, whereby the father of light, and foundation of all knowledge, communicates to mankind that portion of truth which he has laid within the reach of their natural faculties."

Five years later, in 1695, Locke applied this notion to just one religion and one culture and wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. He tells us in the preface to this book why he wrote it:

"The little Satisfaction and Consistency is to be found in most of the systems of Divinity I have met with, make me betake myself to the sole reading of the Scripture (to which they all appeal) for the understanding of the Christian Religion."

It is a proper function of reason to elucidate experience, including the religious experience. Reason interprets; reason discerns meanings; reason makes explicit that which was only implicit. And if you want an example of this as it applies to religion, go back to first century Athens and listen to a man named Paul. Chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul's spirit was troubled within him as he contemplated a city wholly given over to idolatry. We read that he disputed with the Jews in the synagogue and tangled with certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the marketplace. In short, Paul engaged people in argumentation and debate; he attempted a rational explanation of his beliefs.

Then, we read, these intellectuals took him to Mars' hill, located just west of the Acropolis, and asked him to expound his new doctrines. The account in the 17th Book of Acts continues:

"Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, 'Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions. I found an altar with this inscription. TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore you ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.'

im•pri•mis (im-pri'mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things)...

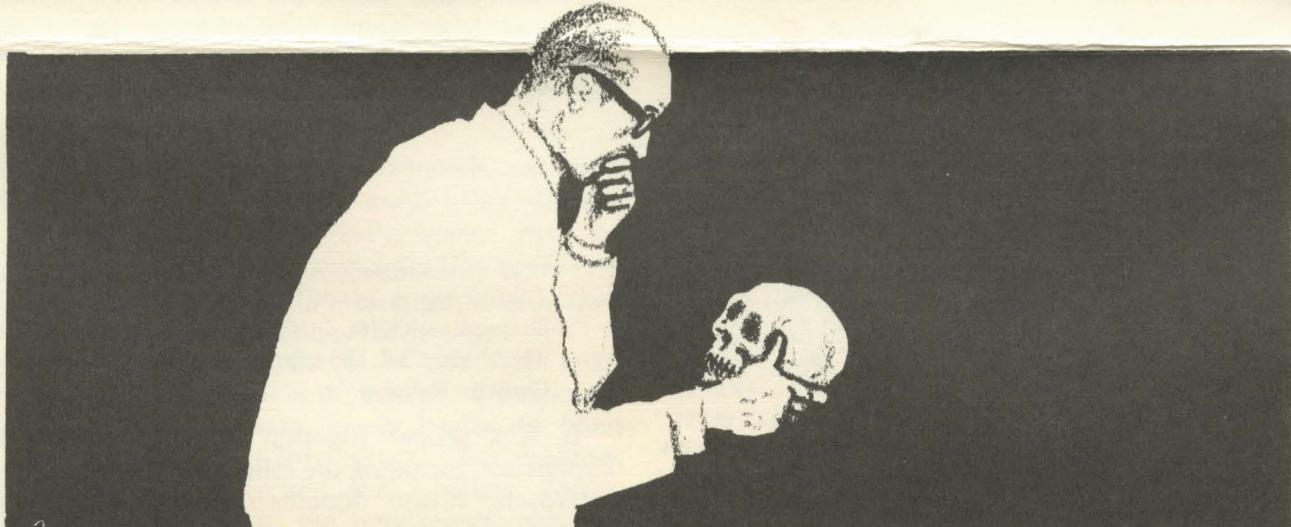
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So Paul proceeded to explain to them the meanings of the religious vision that had come to him. This effort was quite in keeping with the biblical faith in which Paul had been reared; the crux of biblical faith is the conviction that God had entered into a dialogue with His peculiar people, saying: "Come now, and let us reason together." (Is. 1:18)

It would not be correct to refer to John Locke as a child of the Reformation, but it is certainly true that if he had lived two centuries earlier he would not be the Locke we know. The Reformation did one supremely important thing—it opened the doors to scholarship, as Professor Harbison of Princeton reminds us in his study of the period. The Reformation began, he writes, "in a scholar's insight into the meaning of Scripture. It was to a large extent a learning

the examination of the history of Nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain fixed axioms, so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its author as a legitimate conclusion from its fundamental principles. By working in this manner everyone will always advance without danger of error—that is, if they admit no principles for interpreting Scripture, and discussing its content save such as they find Scripture itself—and will be able with equal security to discuss what surpasses our understanding, and what is known by the natural light of reason."

Note carefully two of the things Spinoza tells us in this paragraph. First, he joins that large group of exegetes who believe that the principles for interpreting the Bible are to be found in the Bible itself. In the second place, Spinoza draws an important dis-



movement, a thing of professors and students, a scholar's revolution." So keen were the reformers for learning that the Protestant clergy shunned priestly garb and donned the medieval scholar's gown as their official vestments. Harbison tells us that "the prestige and influence of Christian scholars probably never stood higher in all of Western history than during the two generations which embraced the lifetimes of Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin. (From about 1500 to 1560). In no other period is there anything quite like the zest for learning, the respect for scholarship, the confidence in what scholarship might accomplish—and the revolution it did accomplish—of the age of the Reformation."<sup>1</sup>

Standing apart from the men just mentioned—and virtually everyone else as well—is the lonely scholar, Baruch Spinoza. In his *Treatise on Religious and Political Philosophy*, written in 1670, Spinoza laid down maxims for the study of the Bible which have a very modern ring. I quote from Chapter VII:

"I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ widely from the method of interpreting Nature—in fact it is almost the same. For as the examination of Nature consists in

tinction between the things we know, or may know, by employing reason; and the realms of being which surpass understanding, where reason has no competence. In other words, a reasonable man like Spinoza acknowledges the limitations of reason. To take a simple example: You cannot know what chocolate tastes like by reasoning from first principles. There's only one way to know what a Hershey bar tastes like, and that is to chew it up! There is no logical demonstration anywhere near as powerful as the immediate knowledge conveyed by your taste buds. Seeing may be believing, but tasting is knowing.

Now, unless a man hears voices from another world, in which case we are forewarned; or affirms he has a special pipeline to the Deity, which is blasphemous—then every one of us fallible, sinful human beings is naturally limited in the same way in our efforts to understand our planetary home and live out our years as we should. It goes without saying that there are enormous differences in talents and opportunities but no matter who we are, knowledge and understanding seep into us through the old well worn channels, and not otherwise. We learn in different ways. We learn by experiencing things through our

several senses, as we experience the taste of chocolate. We reflect upon our experience and frame theories. If our theories are sound we derive wisdom from our experience; otherwise, experience simply confirms us in our mistakes.

There is, in other words, the empirical route to the truths in certain realms, and science—by and large—takes this route. Then there is the route of rationalism, where you start with a self-evident truth and proceed to draw inferences from it. The model here is mathematics. The matter is really more complex than this, for mathematics is not a wholly *a priori* discipline; and empirical science does rely on hypotheses and hunches for which its early mechanical paradigm had no place.

Beyond empiricism and rationalism there is another dimension of experience whose doors are opened wide for us by the several arts. I suppose there are some people for whom music is nothing more than rhythm and agreeable sounds, painting no more than pretty pictures, poetry no more than words that rhyme. But if the arts do have significance beyond this, then they do provide us with some clues as to the meaning of life.

Then there are the artists and geniuses of the spiritual life—mystics, seers, prophets and saints—men and women of every culture and clime, who have penetrated deeply into “the Beyond that is within,” exemplifying the true life of the mind and spirit, manifesting goodness, pointing humanity the way it should go.

But that was yesterday’s covenant, and today the “eternal verities” of our forebears are being battered by the tides of unreason, irrationality, and the absurd which sweep over the modern world. We live in an age that has released “the dark gods of the blood.” Philosophers write books on Irrational Man; playwrights give us the theater of the absurd; poetry is unintelligible. In politics we have abandoned the Rule of Law, and under the new economics we expect to achieve prosperity by lowering productivity. It’s the Age of Anxiety, the Aspirin Age. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

A few lonely nineteenth century thinkers probed beneath the surface of events and prophesied that the depths would erupt and spread the dark passions into Western politics and philosophy, psychology, art and economics. The prophecies have been fulfilled in our time, with the result that reason has never been held in such low esteem. The paradox is that reason will not be restored to its rightful role in life until we recover the religious world view; and our dilemma is that the religious *Weltanschauung* cannot be reinstated without the help of the critical intelligence!

Today’s revolt against reason is being fed from several secondary sources, and these in turn stem from a root cause; this latter being the world view of Mechanistic Materialism which has seeped into the Western mentality during recent centuries. Let me describe the philosophy called Materialism.

The Materialist is one who professes to have analyzed and assessed the contents of this universe without finding anything genuinely real except material particles. Materialism maintains that, at the primary level, there is no such thing as mind; mental activity is a secondary function of matter. Basically, nothing is real except things which can be weighed, measured, and counted. Materialism is the prevailing ideology, explicit in the Communist world, implicit elsewhere.

The Dialectical variety of Materialism is associated with Marxian Communism. From Communism comes the notion that a man’s thinking is determined by the interests of his class. There is no such thing as the disinterested pursuit of truth by reasoning, for there is not just one logic, the Marxist tells us, there are several logics. Ludwig von Mises refers to this notion as “polylogism.” The proletariat may exercise a sound logic, but only a warped logic is available to the luckless bourgeoisie. The philosophical systems men erect and the religions they practice owe little to the human mind and spirit; they are dictated by the prevailing mode of production. So long as the mode of production is capitalistic the unfortunately situated middle class must forever grope in darkness.

Karl Marx wanted to dedicate his book to Charles Darwin, but Darwin wisely refused. He was not, after all, a Darwinist! The precise connections between Charles Darwin and evolutionism as depicted in the prevailing mythology, I leave to the experts to trace. As the matter is popularly understood, evolutionism is materialist and mechanical. As Jacques Barzun describes it:

“The sum total of the accidents of life acting upon the sum total of the accidents of variation thus provided a completely mechanical and material system by which to account for the changes in living forms.”

Viewed in these terms, evolutionism connotes the idea that life originated accidentally as a stirring in the primeval ooze, and that living things became what they are now by random interaction with the physio-chemical environment, moved by no purpose, aiming at no goal. Darwinism offers an account of organic development which has no need to invoke intelligence of any kind to guide it; only chance and necessity.

Unreason is further fortified by popular psychology, whence comes the notion that reason is nothing but rationalization, that conscious mental processes and ideas are but a gloss disguising primitive

and irrational impulses erupting from the depths of the unconscious mind. And then there's Freudian psychoanalysis which discredits mind by subordinating intellect to the Id.

Darwin, Marx, and Freud helped shape the modern mind into conformity with the world view of Mechanistic Materialism.

A world view is not something we can pick up and look at. We cannot see it because we see everything else through it. But we have to ponder our world view because, as a great contemporary philosopher E. A. Burtt, points out in his classic study entitled *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*: "In the last analysis it is the ultimate picture which an age forms of the nature of its world that is its most fundamental possession. It is the final controlling factor in all thinking whatever."<sup>2</sup>

view was felt first in the field of religion. Now, just as a clock runs by itself after someone winds it, so God had performed his only conceivable function when he wound up the world machine, after which he was bowed off the world stage. This was the outlook of 18th century Deism.

God's dismissal looked at first like mankind's gain; it meant that mankind had come of age! But if you retire God, the Spiritual Being, on the ground that only the material is real, it finally occurs to someone to hang a question mark on the non-material part of our own being—is the human mind real? Not unless it can be weighed and measured. What about thinking? Thinking was reduced to brain matter in motion, a mechanical response to an external stimulus, a matter of physiology merely.

A contemporary like B. F. Skinner embraces



The modern age—the period since the Renaissance—has framed a picture of the universe along the lines of a great machine, an intricate piece of clock work, a system of masses moving in space and time. The emergence and development of this world picture has been traced by Professor Burtt. "Galileo," he writes, "conceived the whole physical universe as a world of extension, figure, motion, and weight; all the other qualities which we suppose to exist *in rerum natura* really have no place there but are due to the confusion and deceitfulness of our senses. The real world is mathematical."<sup>3</sup> Descartes constructed the first mechanical cosmology, and Hobbes reduced everything, including thought, to matter and motion. The great authority of Newton was put behind the "view of the cosmos which saw in a man a puny, irrelevant spectator. . . . of the vast mathematical system whose regular motions according to mathematical principles constituted the world of nature."<sup>4</sup>

It takes a long time for the innate logic of such a world view to work itself into the various departments of life. The effect of the Mechanist world

"the behaviorist principle that ideas, motives, and feelings have no part in determining conduct and therefore no part in explaining it. . . ."

"Behaviorism," he continues, "begins with the assumption that the world is made up of only one kind of stuff—dealt with most successfully by physics but well enough for most purposes by common sense. Organisms are part of that world, and their processes are therefore physical processes."<sup>5</sup>

Skinner asserts that ideas have no part in shaping human action, for the very simple reason that, when you come right down to it, there are no such things as ideas! If the universe contains no other processes than physical processes, as Skinner asserts, then we are mistaken in our belief that mental activity occasionally occurs inside our skulls. We don't think; we're mistaken in thinking we do! What we thought was a chain of reasoning is properly interpreted as merely matter in motion.

It does not fret some philosophers that they have lost contact with their minds, nor are they concerned with what this does to the concept of the person.

It is the religious view that each individual *encapsulates* some portion of the divine, and thus there is a sacredness about him. The sacredness of the person is translated into politics as his "rights," which are, as the Declaration puts it, endowed by the Creator. Abandon the idea of a Creator, regard the human being as just another by-product of natural and social forces, and he has no more "rights" than any other facet of nature. The State will of course protect him along with other forms of wildlife, and otherwise use him for its own ends when necessary. And so will psychologists like B.F. Skinner, who informs us that "the issue of personal freedom must not be allowed to interfere with a scientific analysis of human behavior."<sup>6</sup>

And if anyone raises the objection that this is morally wrong, he is silenced by being reminded that the only ultimate reality is material, which means that the world view of the Mechanist has in it no accommodation for the moral order, nor any place for moral values. But even if moral values were real, man is unable to exercise the free choice a moral decision requires; people are trapped in the inexorable cause and effect sequences as rigidly as any other physical object.

By the same token, the universe has no niche for beauty to occupy. The artist once believed that his experience of the beautiful was his response to something lovely in the nature of things. But for the Mechanist there is nothing in the universe that shares man's values or responds to his aspirations. Man is a waif in an alien universe, buffeted by forces he cannot comprehend, doomed at last to complete his pointless journey with as little distinction as he began it, his proudest achievements reduced to dust and forgotten.

The mood of our time is begotten by this world view, and today's mood is a compound of rebellion, resignation, sadness, defiance, and despair. All too many of our contemporaries come to feel that life is meaningless. But it is only at this point, when a person begins to ponder ultimate questions about the meaning of life, that religion can have real significance.

It is the crux of the human situation that the answers we give to the central question in life are not subject to demonstration. Your answer to the question: "Is life worth living?" cannot be proved correct, nor disproved. You are required by your situation as a human being to obey the unenforceable and *live out* the unprovable.

Ultimate questions of life and death are not capable of proof or disproof. And the ultimate question, the question which presses in on every one of us, is: Is life worth living? This is a unique question, for in the nature of the case you can never know the answer with complete assurance; you can

only live *your* answer. You can live *as if* life does have an ultimate meaning, and therefore is worth living; or, you can live *as if* life is meaningless and therefore *not* worth living.

Either way, the choice you cannot avoid is, and must be, an act of faith; faith in the goodness of life, or an acceptance on faith that life is evil. The proof is in the living; not in a syllogism, nor in a proposition from Euclid, nor in a laboratory demonstration. But there's a kind of divine alchemy at work here; once we choose to embrace the nobler hypothesis, that is, to live our lives as if life were worth living, then the universe begins to respond to us to confirm the wisdom of our decision. But only if our image of the universe makes sense—as the Materialist image does not.

Materialism climbs out onto a limb when it reduces persons to things, and then it saws that limb off when it denies the reality of mind and the efficacy of thought. Of course, if matter is the only reality, then mind is discredited. But if this discredited instrument—the mind—is all we have to work with, it is obvious that we cannot use it to arrive at Materialism as a reasonable conclusion. The Materialist distrusts reason, but if untrustworthy reason tells us that reason cannot be trusted, then we have no logical grounds for accepting the conclusion that reason is untrustworthy!

This absurd *Weltanschauung* has done untold damage, but it's on its way out. Oswald Spengler wrote: "Materialism, Monism and Darwinism, which stirred the best minds of last century to such passion, has become the world view common to country cousins."<sup>7</sup>

All right then, what's the alternative? The alternative is the religious world vision which I call Theism.

The first step in the restoration of the religious vision is to arrive at some understanding of the major term, God. When a religious philosopher declares, "God is," he is really saying a bookful. What would be some of the items in the table of contents?

To say "God is," affirms, in the first place, that man is not a cosmic accident. Life is not a mere fluke, an offshoot of matter. Life, as a matter of fact, is primordial energy, using matter for its own ends, shaping and reshaping it purposefully. Life is a dynamic transformer of the raw materials of this planet. Theism gives life a primary role, especially life in its human manifestation.

The human person occupies a unique place among living forms. He shares some features in common with the other primates, but no other organism can match his capacity for abstract thought. We have the ability to generalize and classify; we are uniquely able to know and understand. And the universe we

live in is infinitely intriguing, exciting our curiosity, inviting us to learn and feel the sheer pleasure of knowledge for its own sake.

Life and mind play a significant role in the scenario offered by Theism. Man may be frail as a reed, but he is, as Pascal called him, "a thinking reed." By taking thought we can knit together the diverse elements of our experience into a comprehensive whole. Not everything is knowable, but the mysteries we do bump into are where a Theist would expect them.

Employing our capacity to reason and figure things out we expand the knowledge gained by means of our senses. We employ reason to generalize from experience and frame principles, and we construct logical and mathematical systems on the basis of reason alone. Sound reasoning gives us valuable truths about the world outside our minds. Which means that there is a resonance between thought and things, and this tells us that we live in a rationally structured universe, a universe where the knowing mind is the basic component.

Unless we are willing to downgrade our own thinking processes by reducing mind to an offshoot of brain matter, we must acknowledge that the mental part of the individual is linked to something akin to it which is an ultimate and original ingredient of the universe. Mind with a small "m" is related to Mind with a capital "M." Capital "M" mind exists in its own right, it is *sui generis*, it was in the beginning. In this universe, in the beginning, Mind was at work; there was Intelligence, Consciousness, Rationality, Will, Purpose, and Creative Power. Reflect on the nature of our own minds, pursue a chain of logical implications and we glimpse the God of natural theology.

When someone says "God is," he is stressing the preponderance of order, harmony, beauty and economy in the workings of this universe. There is disorder, too, of course, as well as disharmony, ugliness, and waste. But these negative features do not preponderate; apply a little more intelligence and they might become recessive.

If God is, then the universe has a moral dimension. If the universe is simply brute fact, a random collection of material particles, then the moral law is a myth. But if the universe is rationally structured, it may also provide us with the moral guidance we need for flourishing social and personal life.

The moral life is the freely chosen life. The birds and the bees do not have to decide what to do with their lives; but we do. Creativity is built into the universe, as the universe is conceived by the Theist, and this means that the human being has

free will. The human person is not simply acted upon by circumstances; he acts, and his freely chosen decisions change the future from what it would be had he not acted. Man is a shaper of history. He is, because of his freedom, a responsible being, accountable for what he makes of his life.

The affirmation that "God is" connotes a whole world outlook, a *Weltanschauung* diametrically opposed in every particular to that of Mechanistic Materialism. The world view of Theism is one that accords man his proper dignity; it vindicates mind and reason; accommodates the moral law; allows for free will. Furthermore, it opens up the mind to the beauty and significance of everything hitherto deemed commonplace. Things take on a sacramental quality. William Blake's familiar lines illustrate this point:

To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower;  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour

The ideas a person entertains about himself and the universe can make or break him. Every period of history has a characteristic philosophy or ideology, and most people absorb it through their pores. If the ideology of an age is hostile to emergent human life the growth and development of all but the hardiest will be stunted. The ideology of the past couple of centuries is now giving way; it is being replaced by a world view more congenial to human nature and destiny. Within the religious world vision reason has a home, and reason in turn helps us understand the place of the individual person within the totality, here as well as hereafter. Civilizations rise and fall, empires collapse; but the person presses on to eternal life.

Emerson put the thing in his usual striking fashion when he remarked: "The genius of man is a continuation of the Power that made him and that has not done making him." And that Power is at work . . . forever.

<sup>1</sup>E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1956), preface.

<sup>2</sup>E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, revised edition (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>5</sup>B. F. Skinner, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research" vol. xxviii, no. 3 (March, 1967), pp. 3-5.

<sup>6</sup>B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 322.

<sup>7</sup>Oswald Spengler, quoted in *The Revolt Against Reason* by Arnold Lunn (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951) p. xii.





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