

Introduction:
"The Right Use of Reason in Religion"

by

Archibald Alexander

That it is the right and the duty of all men to exercise their reason in inquiries concerning religion is a truth so manifest that it may be presumed there are none who will be disposed to call it in question.

Without reason there can be no religion, for in every step which we take in examining the evidences of revelation, in interpreting its meaning or in assenting to its doctrines, the exercise of this faculty is indispensable.

When the evidences of Christianity are exhibited, an appeal is made to the reason of men for its truth. But all evidence and all argument would be perfectly futile if reason were not permitted to judge of their force. This noble faculty was certainly given to man to be a guide in religion as well as in other things. He possesses no other means by which he can form a judgment on any subject or assent to any truth, and it would be no more absurd to talk of seeing without eyes than of knowing anything without reason.

It is therefore a great mistake to suppose that religion forbids or discourages the right use of reason. So far from this, she enjoins it as a duty of high moral obligation and reproves those who neglect to judge for themselves what is right.

But it has frequently been said by the friends of revelation, that although reason is legitimately exercised in examining the evidences of revelation and in determining the sense of the words by which it is conveyed, yet it is not within her province to sit in judgment on the doctrines contained in such a divine communication. This statement, though intended to guard against the abuse of reason, is not in my opinion altogether accurate. For it is manifest that we can form no conception of a truth of any kind without reason; and when we receive anything as true (whatever may be the evidence on which it is founded), we must view the reception of it to be reasonable.

Truth and reason are so intimately connected that they can never, with

propriety, be separated. Truth is the object and reason the faculty by which it is apprehended, whatever be the nature of the truth or of the evidence by which it is established. No doctrine can be a proper object of our faith, which it is not more reasonable to receive than to reject. If a book claiming to be a divine revelation is found to contain doctrines which can in no way be reconciled to right reason, it is a sure evidence that those claims have no solid foundation and ought to be rejected.

But that a revelation should contain doctrines of a mysterious and incomprehensible nature, and entirely different from all our previous conceptions and considered in themselves improbable, is not repugnant to reason. On the contrary, judging from analogy, sound reason would lead us to expect such things in a revelation from God. Everything which relates to this Infinite Being must be to us in some respect incomprehensible. Every new truth must be different from all that is already known, and all the plans and works of God are very far above and beyond the conception of such minds as ours. Natural Religion has as great mysteries as any in revelation, and the created universe as it exists is as different from any plan which men would have conceived as any of the truths contained in a revelation can be.

But it is reasonable to believe what by our senses we perceive to exist, and it is reasonable to believe whatever God declares to be true.

In receiving, therefore, the most mysterious doctrines of revelation, the ultimate appeal is to reason--not to determine whether she could have discovered these truths, not to declare whether considered in themselves they appear probable, but to decide whether it is not more reasonable to believe what God speaks than to confide in our own crude and feeble conceptions. Just as if an unlearned man should hear an able astronomer declare that the diurnal motion of the heavens is not real but only apparent, or that the sun was nearer to the earth in winter than in summer. Although the facts asserted appeared to contradict his senses, yet it would be reasonable to acquiesce in the declarations made to him by one who understood the subject and in whose veracity he had confidence. If, then, we receive the witness of men in matters above our comprehension, much more should we receive the witness of God, who knows all things and cannot deceive his creatures by false declarations.

There is no just cause for apprehending that we shall be misled by the proper exercise of reason on any subject which may be proposed for our consideration. The only danger is of making an improper use of this faculty,

which is one of the most common faults to which our nature is liable. Most men profess that they are guided by reason in forming their opinions. But if this were really the case, the world would not be overrun with error; there would not be so many absurd and dangerous opinions propagated and pertinaciously defended. They may be said, indeed, in one sense to follow reason--for they are guided by a blinded, prejudiced, and perverted reason.

One large class of men are accustomed (from a slight and superficial view of the important subject of religion) to draw a hasty conclusion, which must prove in the highest degree detrimental to their happiness. They have observed that in the modern as well as ancient world there is much superstition, much imposture, much diversity of opinion and variety of sects, many false pretenses to divine inspiration, and many false reports of miracles and prophetic oracles. And without giving themselves the trouble of searching diligently for the truth amidst the various contending claims, they draw a general conclusion that all religions are alike; that the whole affair is a cheat, the invention of cunning men who imposed on the credulity of the unthinking multitude, and that the claims of divine revelation do not even deserve a serious examination.

Does right reason dictate such a conclusion as this? If it did, and we were to apply it to all other concerns, it would make a sad overturning in the business of the world. Truth, honesty, and honor might, on these principles, be discarded as unmeaning names. For of all these there have been innumerable counterfeits, and concerning all of them endless diversity of opinion.

A second class, who profess to be men of reason, pay more attention to the subject of religion; but their reason is a prejudiced judge. They listen with eagerness to all that can be said against revelation. They read with avidity the books written against Christianity, and but too faithfully treasure up every objection to religion. But her advocates never obtain from them a fair hearing. They never inquire whether the arguments and objections which appear to them so strong have not been refuted. With the means of conviction within their reach, they remain firmly fixed in their infidelity. And as long as they pursue this partial method of investigation, they must ever remain in the same darkness.

A third class who wish to be considered as taking reason for their guide, are under the dominion of vicious passions of ambition, avarice, lust, or revenge. Men of this character, however strong their intellect or extensive their erudition, can never reason impartially on any subject which interferes

with the gratification of their predominant desires. And as religion forbids, under severe penalties, all irregular passions and vicious indulgences, they pursue it with malignant hatred. As one well observes, "they are against religion because religion is against them." Such men never reason calmly on the subject, and they are incapable of receiving any benefit from the arguments of others. They never think of religion but with a feeling of enmity, and they never speak of it but in the language of sneer or abuse. There is no object which this race of infidels have more at heart than to eradicate every principle of religion from the minds of men and to drive it from the earth so that not a vestige of it might remain to give them torment. Voltaire may be considered as the leader of this band, and his humble imitators have been too numerous in every Christian country.

But there is still another class of men more distinguished as masters of reason than those who have been mentioned. They are the cold, speculative, subtle sect of skeptics who involve themselves in a thick mist of metaphysics, attack first principles, and confound their readers with paradoxes. The number of those who belong to this class is perhaps not large, but they are formidable. For while the other enemies of the truth scarcely make a show of reason, these philosophers are experienced in all the intricacies of a refined logic, so that in their hands error is made to appear in the guise of truth. Should we yield ourselves to the sophistry of these men, they will persuade us to doubt not only of the truth of revelation but of our senses and of our very existence.

If it be inquired how they contrive to spread such a coloring of skepticism over every subject, the answer is, by artfully assuming false principles as the premises of their reasoning, by reasoning sophistically on correct principles, by the dexterous use of ambiguous terms, by pushing their inquiries beyond the limits of human knowledge, and by calling in question the first principles of all knowledge. But it is not easy to conjecture what their motive is. Most probably, however, it is vanity. They are ambitious of appearing more profound and acute than other men--and distinction is not so readily obtained in the common course as by flying off in an eccentric orbit. It cannot be any sincere regard for truth which influences them, for upon their principles truth and reason are equally worthless. They pull down everything but build up nothing in its place. Truth has no greater enemies in the world than this Pyrrhonic sect. And it is to be lamented that sometimes ingenuous young men are caught in the wiles of their sophistry, and are led so far into the labyrinth of their errors that they are never able to extricate themselves, and all their fair prospects of virtue and usefulness are obscured forever.

Before I leave the consideration of the various classes of persons who, while they profess to be guided by reason, make an improper use of this faculty, I ought to mention a set of men distinguished for their learning and ingenuity who profess to receive the Christian revelation and glory in the appellation of rational Christians. They proceed on the plausible and (if rightly understood) correct principle of receiving nothing as true but what their reason approves. But these very men, with all their fair appearances of rationality, are chargeable with as gross a dereliction of reason as can well be conceived; and in regard to consistency, are more vulnerable than any of those already mentioned. For while they admit that God has made a revelation, they insist upon the right of bringing the truths revealed to the test of human judgment and opinion, and of rejecting them as unreasonable if they do not accord with this standard. But the declaration of God is the highest reason which we can have for believing anything. To set up our opinion against the plain expression of his will is surely presumption of the highest kind.

Perhaps, however, I do not represent the case with perfect accuracy. Perhaps no man is chargeable with such an inconsistency as to admit a thing to be contained in an undoubted revelation and yet reject it. The exact state of the matter is this. The Scriptures, it is admitted, contain a revelation from God. But there are many things in the Bible which if taken in the most obvious sense are inconsistent with reason. Now as nothing inconsistent with reason can be from God, it is concluded that this cannot be the true sense of the Scripture. Accordingly their wits are set to work and their learning laid under contribution to invent and defend some other sense.

Upon these principles a man may believe just as much or as little as he pleases of what the Bible contains, for it has been found that no text is so stubborn as not to yield to some of the modes of treatment which have been adopted. But I maintain that this whole procedure is contrary to right reason. The plain course which reason directs us to pursue is to candidly and impartially examine the evidences of revelation; and having obtained satisfaction on this point, to come to the interpretation of Scripture with a mind free from bias; and in the exercise of a sound judgment and with the aid of those helps and rules which reason and experience suggest, to obtain the sense of the several parts of the document. And although this sense should contradict our preconceived opinions or clash with our inclinations, we ought implicitly to receive it--and not by a refined ingenuity and labored critical process extort a meaning to suit our own notions, which is not to

form our opinions by the Word of God but to cut down the sublime and mysterious doctrines of revelation to the measure of our narrow conceptions. And thus, in the creed of many called rational Christians, the divine system of heavenly truth is shorn of its glory and comes forth little more than an improved theory of Natural Religion. There is no reason in this.

But what if the plain sense of Scripture be absolutely repugnant to the first principles of reason? Let that be demonstrated and the effect will be rather to overthrow the Scriptures than to favor such a method of forming a theory from them. But no such thing can be demonstrated. The reasonings by which it has been attempted to prove that the doctrines commonly called orthodox are contrary to reason are fallacious, and a similar mode of reasoning on the truths of Natural Religion will lead us to atheism.

Deistical writers have been fond of representing faith and reason as irreconcilable. They have insinuated and even asserted that revelation cannot be conceived without a renunciation of reason, and have affected to regret that it should be subjected to the trial of a rational investigation, which they allege it can by no means bear.

This was a favorite topic with Morgan, Bolingbroke, Voltaire, and Hume. The last mentioned author in the close of his far-famed *Essay on Miracles* uses the following language: "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and 'tis a sure method of exposing it to put it to a test, which it is by no means fitted to endure." And again: "Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its [the Christian Religion's] veracity; and whoever is moved by faith to assent to it is conscious of a continual miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding."

On the insidious nature of this attack, I shall not stop to remark except to observe that it may be taken as a specimen not only of Hume's method of treating Christianity but of that of the whole tribe of deistical writers--until very recently, when they have come out boldly. Under the mask of friendship and with words of respectfulness on their lips, they have aimed the most deadly thrusts at the vitals of Christianity. But in regard to the sentiment expressed in this extract, the friends of revelation utterly disclaim it and hold it to be false and unfounded. The state of the controversy between Christians and deists did not authorize any such assertion. The defenders of the truth have ever been ready to meet their antagonists on the ground of impartial reason. They *have* met them at every point where they have chosen to make the assault; and I may safely

say that no deistical argument remains unrefuted, no infidel objection undetected and unexposed.

As Mr. Hume wrote this immediately after finishing his argument against miracles, perhaps he felt a confidence that he had achieved what none before had been able to effect. But his confidence was premature. The argument for the discovery of which he claims the honor (though this might be disputed on good grounds) has been refuted with a clearness of evidence sufficient to bring conviction to any mind but that of a sophist and a skeptic. But we shall have further occasion in the sequel of this work to consider the force of Mr. Hume's reasonings against miracles.

It may perhaps require some apology that a subject which has been so fully and ably discussed in numerous volumes should be attempted to be treated in a short essay. My only apology is that the poison of infidelity is imbibed by many who never have access to the antidote. It is much to be regretted that some of the books which are almost sure to fall into the hands of literary youth are deeply tinged with skepticism. How many read Hume and Gibbon who never have seen the answers of Campbell and Watson? Now if we can present even a brief outline of the evidences of Christianity to those who may not be disposed to read larger works, we may be contributing in some small degree to prevent the progress of one of the greatest evils to which men are liable.

Introduction from *A Brief Outline of the Evidences of the Christian Religion* by Archibald Alexander (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1825). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.