

Some Thoughts on Reason and the Christian Religion

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It has become a cliché of modern culture to consider belief a sign of lack of sophistication and intelligence. This attitude has lately been taken to extremes by the so-called New Atheists. They say that they are speaking out on behalf of rationality itself, and call on their readers to reject religion and Christianity because, they claim, it is contrary to reason. These same authors, unsurprisingly, declare that they are guided by science, but a more precise name for their methodology is ‘scientific materialism.’

Before continuing, I should quickly point out that there are also, among Christian (and other) believers those who are ready to embrace a sharp division between faith and intelligence, between faith and reason. Faith, for this group, is something completely separate from reason and ‘rationality.’ The view that I wish to share with you today argues against the view of the New Atheists, but it argues against this latter ‘faith vs reason’ approach as well. Now, faith, to be sure, transcends, goes *beyond* reason, but faith by no means simply rejects reason: quite the contrary. Reason itself is only made possible by the ‘beyond’ (in a sense that we will begin to explore below) that faith illuminates.

That faith and reason are tightly bound to one another is an insight that has been intuitively obvious to many of the greatest thinkers in history (I would go further, and say that this insight has been shared by all those whose thinking is truly profound). In saying this, I am not making some sort of new discovery, by the way. Consider the following ‘aha!’ moment experienced by a young Soviet student, who, after having been brought up (back in the 1970s) in the spirit of ‘scientific materialism,’ suddenly realizes that there is a sort of inverse relationship between profundity and atheistic materialism:

As we discussed the eternal questions of humanity and studied the history of the past centuries, grappling with the problems of our own 1970s and 1980s—in our classrooms, our dorms, and the cheap cafés thronged by students, as well as during our frequent long nocturnal meanderings through the ancient side streets of Moscow—we came to the firm conclusion that our Soviet state was deceiving us . . .

... [G]radually we came to a surprising revelation. All the great figures of world and Russian history with whose philosophies we became acquainted during our studies—all those whom we trusted and loved and respected—all of them had thought about God in a completely different way than we did. Simply put, they were people of faith. Dostoevsky, Kant, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Goethe, Pascal, Hegel, Losev—there were too many to list. What’s more, people of science, too—Newton, Planck, Linnaeus,

Mendeleyev—all of them were believers ... (Archimandrite Tikhon, *Everyday Saints*, 5 – 6)

The author, who many years after his student days (in a film school, by the way) came to be known as Archimandrite Tikhon, goes on to list some of the names of those whom he and his friends, at that time, most particularly disliked and disrespected; he lists Lenin, Trotsky and Marx, all of whom were atheists.

Now, to be completely honest, I find Archimandrite Tikhon's short list of atheists a little odd, among other reasons because it omits Stalin. At the same time, since we are already on this point, let's go ahead and take advantage of an opportunity to refute a common accusation against Christianity (and religion generally): the claim that it makes people violent, whereas the *absence* of religious faith leads to tolerance and peace. But this claim in itself already demonstrates the failure of the reason that materialists claim they have a monopoly on: Stalin, Mao and Hitler were without any doubt the most violent mass murderers in all of history, and they were precisely men who were not only atheists, but violently so. Quite often those who resisted these monsters – and particularly when such resistance appeared most hopeless -- were men and women of faith. But let us return to the topic at hand.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, in his *Journals* (which I would urge all of you to read: his diary entries are refreshing in their honesty; include occasional moments of self doubt, along with much wisdom and humane beauty) regularly returns to this same theme of the necessary link between reason and faith. What is more, he makes an explicit link between *lack* of faith and foolishness:

This morning while walking to church I thought about foolishness. I thought that it is the most frightening fruit of original sin. The devil is intelligent, they always say. No, the truth is that the devil is exceedingly foolish, and his foolishness is the source of his strength. If he was intelligent, he would not be the devil; he would have long ago repented and “covered himself with ashes.” To rise against God is, before anything else, very foolish. The essence of evil: pride, envy, hatred, longing for freedom (“be like the gods”) comes from foolishness. Stalin was foolish; Lenin, Mao were foolish. Only a metaphysical fool can be so totally possessed by one idea, one passion. But then foolishness, by being a simplification, is very powerful. The whole fallen world is foolishness, skillful in its inventiveness. Foolishness is a fraud, a self-deception. The devil is a liar from time immemorial. He eternally lies to himself and to others. And his intoxicated lies seem intelligent, mainly because they give quick satisfaction. Foolishness is always content and contentment is impressive ... Christianity and the Gospel begin with *metanoia*—with the conversion, the transposition of intelligence, literally with becoming intelligent ...

I hope it is obvious that this short overview is precisely only that: a tiny introduction to a complicated, important and most definitely *large* topic. We are simply sampling some of the issues connected with faith and reason, not making an exhaustive investigation of them (that, I am afraid, will be a quest for the rest of your lives!). My goal is simply to make you aware of some of the questions.

However, I could not in good conscience conclude this little essay before addressing one additional aspect of the question of reason, one that is not, at first, obviously related to faith. I am referring to the relation between technology and reason. This time I will use as my ‘source material’ the meditations of one of my favorite modern writers, the theologian and philosopher David C. Schindler. Schindler published a few years ago a book (*Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic*) the goal of which was to demonstrate that what in the final analysis makes reason itself possible is its grounding in the Good. Reason, by its very nature, can have no meaning unless it is something that is illuminated by what is true. But truth itself – and here Prof. Schindler’s argument is clearly Christian, but it is also Platonic – is only possible if it is a sort of overflowing of a *wholeness* which, in its very generosity of self-giving, is necessarily good.

I myself admit that that last sentence is not sufficiently clear and precise, and may be hard to understand. (In my defense, it is an attempt to summarize in a single sentence an argument Schindler takes some 335 pages of close philosophical argument to make.) But even a vague or approximate understanding, in this case, is perhaps enough, and will be helpful as you try to grasp Schindler’s critique of technological reason.

When Schindler talks about technology, it is important to realize that he is not simply talking about certain devices – smart phones, for example. He is talking about a *style* of responding to the problems that we necessarily confront in the world. It is a style that, first of all, refuses to confront the wholeness of the world, which could only be accomplished by a willingness to first contemplate what things are in themselves, before we even begin to think about *manipulating* them. Technological thought in a sense is a product of being in a hurry to come up with a solution before one fully knows what the ‘problem’ is.

The following gives a flavor of Schindler’s argument:

The first problem with a technological approach to solving a problem is not necessarily that it is a ‘bad’ approach – it may not in fact be bad, as far as it goes—but that it is incapable of considering the nature of a problem in fundamental terms, so that it is essentially blind to all but a technological approach. In this respect, by its very nature, technology simultaneously *cannot* claim to be the ‘best’ approach, since that would require a comparison with alternatives, and *cannot avoid* claiming (however implicitly – i.e. without saying so directly [PRG]) to be the best, since it presents itself as the only alternative. To understand this point, we

may consider Charles Williams's comment on a modern approach to the problem of overeating. If a drug could be invented, he suggests, which simply eliminated at one stroke all of the bad effects of overeating, technology would deem [consider (PRG)] the problem solved, when in fact the problem has not yet even been considered. (Is gluttony merely a problem concerning the location of matter? Whatever the answer to this particular question, technology is incapable of raising it.)

This narrowing of the world, without admitting that one is narrowing it, is an extremely common feature of our modern world and culture. The world of reason and faith, by contrast, is wide and deep.

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