

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
February 28, 2010
Reason in Religion:
A sermon by David R. Mason

O God, grant that my words and our hearts may be presented unto Thee as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Recently I received a questionnaire from a high school student who was investigating the question: “Whether or not religion is essential for a moral society.” This question, I believe, is important for all of us to consider, and the student cast her net widely – at least I know that several of my colleagues received the questionnaire, and I suspect that she questioned a number of other adults, both religious and non-religious, in her community.

The questions I was asked to address were these:

1. Is reason or religion the center of morality?
2. Is religion to blame for most violence seen around the world?
3. Should religion stay completely separate from justice systems?
4. Is religion essential to maintain a moral society?
5. Is religion to thank for the teachings of good morals?
6. Is there a certain philosopher whose ideas of morality or a “god” you like or dislike?
7. Do you believe people raised with no religion are more likely to have worse morals than someone who is (raised with religion)?

You might think about how you would want to respond to various of these questions, but if you’re like me you will be struck by the inherent ambiguity of all of the key terms (religion, reason, morality, “god”) that you will find it nearly impossible to give a straightforward “yes” or “no” to any of them. For instance, the last question, “Do

you believe people raised with no religion are more likely to have worse morals than someone who is (raised with religion)?,” itself raises many questions. What do you mean by “religion”? That’s a word that covers a broad range of attitudes and behavior. What kind of a religion? Which religion? What do you mean by “morality” or “morals”? Explain please. What, in fact, is it to be “raised with no religion”? There are probably many different kinds of wholly secular attitudes and beliefs. Explain please. Be specific.

But it is the very first question that I want to bring before you. Remember it is: “Is reason or religion the center of morality?” Apart from the lack of clarity and precision attaching to words like “religion,” “morality,” and “reason,” there is a hidden assumption here that skews the whole questionnaire, namely, that reason and religion are opposites, opponents in fact, and that religion is inherently irrational. The “or” in the question does not mean “one or the other or both.” The center of morality it suggests must be either religion or reason, but not both; the two are wholly different. Religion, it assumes, is unreasonable; reason must be irreligious.

Let us challenge this assumption. It is one widely held by present-day secularistic or atheist critics of religion. It is also, let us be candid, held by many so-called “religious” opponents of modern secular thought. Let us call them “Fundamentalists,” and even though they live daily with the fruits of modern scientific reasoning – they drive cars, they brilliantly manipulate computers and television – they want to insist that in matters of faith we must denounce reason and believe the most preposterous things: for instance, that the Bible presents a scientific account of the creation of the world and of humanity, and that biblical account is always strictly historical. They seem to want to mimic the attitude of the third century theologian, Tertullian, who is supposed to have said (about

the death/resurrection of the Son of God) “It is to be believed because it’s absurd. It is certain because it is impossible.” The Fundamentalists think that to be faithful to God and to Jesus Christ, and so to be religious, they must shout down reason: scientific, logical, practical, and frankly, religious reason.

Yes, there really is reason attached to, issuing from, and informing the deepest religious feelings, insights and beliefs (I am thinking primarily of biblical religion, and I am taking “reason” to be any kind of critical thought that refuses to accept an answer because some “authority” [say, the Bible or the Church] said so, but thinks for itself and appeals to ordinary experience and to “logic.”). Consider the Bible: The Psalms, while either in praise of God or in lament of bad fortune, often magnify reason. The prophets, while denouncing injustice and stupidity, appeal to our reason. The Wisdom literature actually deifies Wisdom, suggesting that divine Wisdom is the source and bedrock of human wisdom.

In the New Testament Jesus is encountered as a rabbi, a teacher. To be sure he often undermines conventional wisdom and the religious practices of the day, but he is never unreasonable in turning us to the kingdom of God. And, if his parables cut straight through our ordinary modes of reasoning about life, they cause us to think again, to rethink. John portrays Jesus as the incarnation of divine reason: “In the beginning was the Word (logos = “word,” but also “reason” or “order”), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (The “Word,” of course, is also “divine reason.”) . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). Paul is the great champion of “faith.” And let me be clear that faith is deeper than, and prior to, knowledge or reasoning. Paul knew this and even I am fully aware of it: first comes

the mysterious experience of God's grace, and then the human response in faith, in trust, in confidence in God's love as making us right. But, because the humans who are thus justified by faith are humans, they must bring this to full consciousness and utilize their reasoning powers to the utmost, even if this means rejecting previously held religious beliefs. So Anselm of Canterbury said: ours is "faith in search of understanding." Reason does not precede faith, but it necessarily follows from it. So Paul, while insisting that we are "justified by faith apart from works of the Law," always tries to persuade us by appeals to reasons and to analogies. And in his greatest, most frankly reasonable, letter – that to the Romans – Paul appeals to the faithful to present themselves as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your reasonable worship" (Romans 12:1). Several recent English versions (including the RSV and the NRSV) mistranslate "logikein" as "spiritual." But this is simply wrong. Paul frequently speaks of "the Spirit" and of "spiritual" and he always uses the word "pneuma." But here he specifically uses the word based on "logos": "logikein," to be reasonable or rational. Paul knew that to have faith and to live by the Spirit, and so to worship, was to be free and reasonable.

And so, in our very reasonable Anglican tradition we pray (in Rite One of the Holy Eucharist): "And here we offer unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice" (Rite Two, while not saying this specifically, implies it everywhere, e.g., "cleanse the thoughts of our hearts," the Prayers of the People, etc.). I realize, of course, that our worship is to be "holy and living," that is spiritual and practical. But it is, too, reasonable. The entire Anglican tradition bends towards reason: it appeals to scripture which, as we have seen, is not unreasonable; it appeals to tradition which for the most part (perhaps excepting Tertullian!) appeals to

reason; it appeals to “the Spirit” and to “conscience” which not opposed to reason even if they precede it; and it appeals to reason.

I could give examples from every century, but I appeal to only two: (1) the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century who urged a “rational theology” in the teeth of the Puritans. One of them, Benjamin Whichcote, said: Nothing spoils human nature more than false zeal. The Good Nature of an Heathen is more God-like than the furious zeal of a Christian,” and “True Religion hath done only good in the world; but Superstition, which is the counterfeit of Religion, hath done the worst and greatest of mischiefs.” (2) The Broad Church movement of the nineteenth century, in particular Charles Kingsley. You have heard me on Kingsley’s “Water Babies” and the idea of a God who “makes us make ourselves.” It was Kingsley, I was reminded in a review of the movie, “Darwin,” who wrote to Darwin on the publication of the “Origin of the Species,” that this was wholly compatible with the deepest springs of Christian religion. Yes, to be sure, there were bishops who were shocked, but Kingsley and all advanced Anglicans saw this work as a triumph of science and of religion. So you have heard me say that I learned of Darwin and of the theory of Evolution positively in Sunday School (this was not, by the way, in the nineteenth century!). And, alas, when I went to high school it was a biology teacher who told me that “Evolution” was “the work of the Devil.”

Naturally, a young student could hardly stand up to his teacher. But whenever you hear an atheist deride all religion as irrational superstition bring that person up short; “in quietness and in confidence” explain the many ways that reason is woven into the warp and weft of our religion. And whenever you hear a Fundamentalist or a biblical literalist attack the theory of Evolution or promote Creationism or Intelligent Design somewhat

more passionately and feeling explain that this is not Christian, and show the person why:
it is contrary to reason.

Ours is a reasonable, holy, and living worship of the One God, especially as
decisively revealed through Jesus Christ.

Amen