

The Science of Faith

To some contemporary ears, the assertion in the Epistle to the Hebrews this morning that faith can prove realities will sound faintly ridiculous. For the minds to which such ears are connected, faith is the very antithesis of proof: People who believe, in the sense of faith, critics would say, cannot prove what they believe.

By a sleight of argument, they move from this proposition to two further suggestions. First, that since the tenets of faith cannot be proved, they must be trivial – often characterised as fairy stories or some such pejorative reference; and, secondly, that being ungrounded in empirical demonstration, they have no place in the public realm: people should indulge their delusional fantasies in private.

The problem with which people of faith contend is that this view is seeping into the very fabric of our society. We are forced onto the defensive even to the point, in practice, of conceding the argument. We can be reticent to assert the rights, which this secular framework accords to us, to hold our religious views and embody them in the manner in which we live our lives.

To be swayed by this assault on religion is to fail properly to understand the nature of the Faith we profess.

In the first place, it is extraordinary to suggest that the content of our Faith is trivial. If there is a God and He has a Purpose for His creation, it surely follows that understanding that Purpose is of crucial and ultimate significance for all of us. It is our view that the attempted exile of God from the public realm is an aspect of the sin gripping our world: and a rejection, on which is predicated the greed, corruption and injustice endemic in our midst – a connexion, which has been made since the times of the Prophets.

The phenomenon of Christ's risen Presence in the world, calling humanity to revoke the ostracism of God, we consider a fact in the same way that it is a fact that Summerhill Street runs past the West door of this church. Scholarly inquiry has not, as yet, developed the means of demonstrating this fact just as it has not yet unearthed the capacity to discern most of the facts about the Universe in which we live; but it is a fact, none-the-less.

However, God has sown into the human character the capacity to recognise His Presence. This is what we mean when we say that man is made in the image of God: there is a seed of the divine within each of us, which can respond to the encounter with its Maker. It is this in which inheres the faculty of faith. Faith transcends the limitations of human investigation, affording us glimpses of realities far beyond the progress of scientific discovery.

Why, then, people might ask, does not everyone experience this insight? The answer lies in a complex interaction of factors, which include the reality that few human beings achieve their full inherent potential; that we have a capacity to ignore and suppress things to which we do not wish to animadvert; and that this faculty, like all others, requires education and training if the inchoate promptings of the divine image are to be given an intelligible form and structure.

This last observation indicates that Faith creates the science of theology, which endeavours to interpret and understand the pieces of evidence that it yields. It is not, as some would maintain, a dimension of the supernatural; but very much rooted in the natural order, which God has created; it is not, therefore, an alternative to the other branches of scientific activity, but complementary to and integral with them.

Like any academic discipline, progress is at an intermediate stage. There are some questions we consider settled; some matters are still subjects of debate; and there are myriad issues of which, as yet, we know nothing; and, of course, we have our fringe groups proffering minority outlooks.

It is unfortunate when we are caught in the middle of a discussion, presenting differing, even conflicting views to the world; since such occasions supply an impetus for our detractors to renew their assault. However, in all spheres of human exploration, there are some areas that are at this midway stage of consideration and when experts espouse conflicting opinions – it is just part of the untidiness of human life.

Gone are the days when theology is considered by most the Queen of the Sciences. None-the-less, we should not lose confidence in the importance of Faith and its dependant reflexion. The fruits of Faith are indispensable for the restoration of a healthy human society.

To us, who have been given the gift of Faith, falls the responsibility to stand firm in that Faith. The temptation may be, like the devout children of worthy men in the first reading, to offer our sacrifice in secret – in private, waiting for more propitious times.

Of course, it may come to that whatever we do: the Christian Faith was, after all, born and nurtured in persecution and its image hangs over our assemblies. Even then, however, we would need always to be alert to opportunities profitably to stand by and for the Faith to which we commit ourselves.

This is the significance of the words of Jesus in the Gospel reading. We can never know when Christ shall call us publicly to stand witness to the realities, which He has revealed to us; but we must ever be ready to respond to His summons regardless of the pressures to confine our knowledge to the privacy of our homes.

If we are withstand the tide of resistance to religion, we must maintain within ourselves confidence in the identity and stature of the Faith we profess; for if we don't appear to believe in it, we shall struggle to convince the sceptics.

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