Dichotomy or Dialectic
Sutras on the Faith-Reason Dilemma

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INTRODUCING THE PROBLEMATIC

Perceiving faith and reason as binary opposites rather than as two alternate ways in our quest for truth is more typical of Western thought, where this readily leads to an impassable divide, as between fideism and rationalism. 'What has Athens got to do with Jerusalem?' asked Tertullian at the beginning of the Christian era when confronted with Greek philosophy! But if believers would privilege faith, rationalist would reverse the hierarchy, and never the twain would meet! The resulting dualism between faith and reason would seem to leave each in an independent domain of human experience and knowledge, compartmentalising our lives and impoverishing them into bargain, even as philosophers and theologians attempted to accommodate each other across the divide.

However, our contention here, as with Eastern thought more generally, is that faith and reason are complementary not contradictory ways of seeking the truth, since in fact truth itself, *satya*, as ontological reality even more than just epistemological truth, cannot be contradictory, otherwise reality itself would be absurd. What is needed is to include both in a more comprehensive understanding, which in fact would thereby be the more human for being the more inclusive and holistic. However, we must first refine our understanding of what we mean by 'faith' and 'reason' so as to explore more incisively the dialectic between the two.

To say that the relationship between faith and reason is dialectic, does not directly address the problematic between the two, unless one further explores how this dialectic in actuality operates. For if

a 'dialectic relationship' implies that one pole must be read against the other and vice versa, then we must still ask: *what does being 'reasonable' mean to faith, and again what does the being 'faithful' to reason require?*

For, though ours is an age, which at the global level may be characterised by secularism, there are as yet strong pockets of religious resistance, at times even provoked by this very challenge of globalisation (Beyer, 1994). There is an increasing religious revivalism and fundamentalism that seems to be spreading like inkblots on the global map across countries and even continents. Then again the age of reason once seemed to have undermined our faith with its rationalism, but now with the end of the Enlightenment this very critique of reason has turned on itself and undermined our confidence in the older rationalist optimism. Today a postmodern age is putting to question all the grand narratives that once seemed to epitomize the cutting edge of our evolving rationality.

Typically in Western thought, a binary opposition between faith and reason readily leads to an unbridgeable divide between fideism and rationalism, which all too easily deteriorates into a schizophrenia between religious intolerance and rationalist dogmatism! Eastern thought more generally, however, implies a more inclusive understanding as expressed in our first sutra: *faith and reason are complementary not contradictory ways of seeking the truth.*

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FAITH

More conventionally faith is understood as giving one's ascent to a truth on the testimony of another. This is what makes belief credible, that is, worthy of being believed. Thus understood faith is a matter of belief that focuses on the content and its credibility. In so far as this testimony is external to the believing person, its trustworthiness would rest on the credibility of the one giving the testimony, and not only on the content of the belief itself. Hence our second sutra: *what we believe depends on whom we trust.* Thus if *I believe you*, it is not just because I accept what you say as true, but more so because *I believe in you*, i.e. I believe you are a trustworthy and truthful person. This opens up the interpersonal dimension of faith that focuses not on our relationship to things as to objects, but to persons as to subject, an I-thou, not I-it relationship. This is the faith that gives me access to the other person as a self-disclosing

subject. For Martin Buber such I-Thou relationships are possible with things as well (Buber, 1958). An empiricist worldview constrained by a reductionist methodology cannot but discredit such 'knowledge'.

It is then the authority of the testimony, moral or formal, that legitimates belief. However, as this testimony gets institutionalised in a tradition it can get even more distant from the original founding experiences and events themselves. Thus oftentimes claims of divine inspiration for the authority of religious testimony made by such institutional traditions, or at times the author of this testimony, the testifier, is seen to have claimed divinity itself. This would seem to put such testimony beyond human scrutiny. However, any communication, and most certainly a revelation of the divine to the human, must inevitably involve filters. Indeed, even the immediacy of a mystical experience, in its very first and necessary articulation to oneself, and in its later communication to others, necessarily involves the mediation of thought and language. This already implies an inescapable distancing from the original experience itself and the inevitable need for a hermeneutic understanding if the experience is to be relevant and reasonable. In sum then:

> To believe is, formally, to know reality through the knowledge which another person has of it and which he communicates by his testimony; between faith and reality there intervenes the person of the witness, who communicates his knowledge so that the believer may share in it and thereby attain to the reality itself (Alfaro, 1968: 316).

ARTICULATING A CRITIQUE OF REASON

The term 'reason' derives from the Latin *'ratio'* and its more restricted sense

> absorbs the meanings of 'giving an account', 'ordering things' or 'laying things or ideas out in a comprehensive way'. Other terms it may be contrasted with are *muthos* ('tale' or 'story'), *aesthesis* ('perception'), *phantasia* ('imagination'), *mimesis* ('imitation'), and *doxa* ('belief') (Finch, 1987: 223).

Logic, deductive and inductive, the experimental method, are among the various ways that have been proposed to systematise the use of such reason. Thus ascent to truth here is 'reasoned', not

dependent on testimony, but on evidence that can be verified, and which leads to conclusions that can be tested. This then is a rational method of investigation that leads not to 'belief' but to 'knowledge'. The acceptance of such knowledge is based on intrinsic criteria, and not on any extrinsic testimony or authority.

So far the focus is very much on the method of rational knowledge not on its content. In practice much of what we accept us reasoned knowledge, scientific or otherwise, is not something that we have tested or verified for ourselves using any kind of rational investigation. Often it is merely on the authority of someone who 'knows better'. In other words, on the authority of wiser, more learned, more knowledgeable persons, or sometimes it seems simply because of the formal position the person holds. For every a bit of information in our lives cannot be traced to source and verified before accepted. It is not just a practical impossibility theoretically it would leads to an infinite regress, because the very methodology of any rational knowledge rest on the basic premises, like the reality and intelligibility of the world we live in, which cannot be logically proven. They are experienced existentially.

'Rational knowledge' then has an element of 'faith', which is often neglected. But once again this refers to its content. What needs to be examined is the methodology by which such knowledge is arrived at. For even when such knowledge is accepted in 'faith' in principal at least it can be tested and verified. However, even while acknowledging the limitations of a methodology, one must also accept its validity where this applies. And so our third sutra: *a rational methodology transgressing its inherent limitations can never yield 'rightly reasoned' knowledge.*

In this context Karl Popper's distinction in his *Open Society* (Popper, 1962) between classical rationalism and critical rationalism is pertinent here. The first seeks secure knowledge from axiomatic premises, the second accepts given knowledge as 'hypothetical' and through critical testing seeks to further refine and extend it. Thus Euclidian geometry is completely rational within the constraints of its own premises, but the non-Euclidian ones start from different assumptions and has extended geometric applications substantially.

A critical examination of the methodology involved in these rationalisms would arrive at certain limitations that are often neglected and even violated by their proponents for reasons that

are external to the methodology itself. This is precisely what the sociology of knowledge has drawn attention to and has convincingly demonstrated, how the underlying presumptions, which inevitable are socially derived, prejudice our presumed rational and impartial objectivity. These presumptions and pre-judgments are beyond the investigative methodology of such reasoning itself. How then do we critique such presumptions and prejudices? For if the ideal of the Enlightenment, of an unbiased, autonomous subject, must be abandoned how does this become a positive constituent of any interpretation, and not a limiting one? It is precisely here once again that the dialectic of faith and reason must come to bear.

Thus we have the Kantian *'a priori's* that are accepted as methodological imperatives if such empirical/experimental knowledge is to be possible at all. However, there are pre-judgements and presumptions that must ground any rationality, as the hermeneutic tradition would insist. Moreover, when non-empirical/experimental sources of knowing are involved, other methods of ascertaining truth are required. Dilthey's understanding of an interpretive discipline, and Weber's *verstehen*, empathetic understanding, do offer such viable methodologies, while hermeneutics and deconstruction have today demonstrated the limits of the old Enlightenment rationalism and have offered alternative analytic approaches.

In fact seminal breakthrough in science, in the paradigms shifts in our thought, are the result of intuitive leaps of the imagination as Thomas Kuhn has established. It is only later that staid scientific methods are used to verify the theories thus proposed. In making, then, this distinction between the content and method of reasoned knowledge, we discover not just the limitations of the empirical-experimental methodology, but we once again uncover the 'faith' element that is more often than not decisive in the content being accepted.

For the prejudgments and prejudices that hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge emphasise are not subject to reason so much as to the interests and status, the 'unconscious ideologies' and fundamental options of those involved. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, the present situation of the interpreter is not something negative, but 'already constitutively involved in any process of understanding' (Linge, 1977: xiv). We can never be entirely rid of our prejudices, or more literally our 'pre-judegments', or in communication terminology our 'filters'. For 'the historicity of our

existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the world, constitutes the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience (ibid: 9). Hence it follows there can be no pre-suppositionless interpretation, since there is no pre-judgementless experience! Consequently our forth sutra: *where we position ourselves influences how we reason.*

To conclude then:

There has been a marked decline in the prestige of reason in the twentieth century, due to a changing awareness of the conventionality of what passes for reason. But the present age does not suffer so much from a want of rationality as from a too arrow conception of what constitutes rationality. To some present-day critics, rationality has been purchased at the cost of human meaning and human understanding (Finch, 1987:224).

FAITH AS CONSTITUTIVE OF THE HUMAN

We need now to make a similar distinction with regard to faith. Too much attention has been focused on faith as content, that is, 'belief'. We need to examine the act of faith, and precisely what makes such belief possible. Why in fact do we accept the testimony of others? Once again the capacity to make this act of faith is certainly an *a priori* condition for the necessarily interdependent lives we live. Moreover, if we grant that we are not the ground of our own being, then this 'faith' must transcend and reach beyond the horizons of the empirical and all knowledge to be derived from inductive or deductive logic, then clearly in such an empirical-rationalist frame of reference, there is no room for faith, or as Paul Tillich says, for 'what ultimately concerns man' (Tillich, 1958). Hence our fifth sutra: *whether or not we believe depends on our self-understanding.*

In this sense Panikkar rightly insists that faith becomes a 'consecutive element of human existence' (Panikkar, 1971: 223 – 254). And it is precisely as such, that we must test any content of faith. For a content of faith that does not fulfill the human dimension, i.e. to make the believer more human, cannot be 'god faith'. And so our sixth sutra: *if to believe is human, then what we believe must make us more human not less!* So too rational knowledge that is the result of a methodology that has not been sensitive to its inherent limitations, can never be 'rightly reasoned'. The test of

god faith then would be whether the act of faith gives ascent to a content that is in fact humanizing. And this is precisely what an experiential self-reflective rationality can do. This is where and how we must seek the reasonableness of our faith.

So too with blind faith; here the act of faith becomes compulsive rather than free, and catches on a content that promises security and perhaps even grandiosity, rather than one that expresses trust and dependency. Hence sutra seven: *faith that is not humanizing, is to that extent 'bad faith'*. But only when we accept that faith is a constitutive dimension of human life, do we have a framework for making such an investigation.

LANGUAGE AS DISTINCTIVE OF THE HUMAN

But if faith is a constitutive dimension of human existence, certainly we must say the same of reason. After all the classic definition of man that we have come to accept from Aristotle as a 'rational animal', does not quite integrate the elements of faith and reason together. It is a one-sided definition that stresses only a single dimension, which certainly might help to identify humans, as opposed to animals but it does very little to help to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of what is distinctively human.

In fact the original Greek word used by Aristotle was ' *logician*' from '*logos*', which in its more restricted sense means 'word'. Hence, Panikkar insists, Aristotle's definition would more correctly be translated as man is a 'verbal animal', or in other worlds it is language that becomes the distinctive and defining characteristic of human beings. This of course implies reason but much more than that as well. Anthropologically this makes sound sense. And it is precisely because language implies inter-communication and inter-relationship, that it expresses so well the inter-dependence of humans, for there is no such thing as a private language. It is only such a comprehensive understanding of the human, that would give us a framework in which faith and reason can be included, as distinct but complementary dimensions of the human.

Unfortunately however, reason is often used to investigate, challenge and even rubbish the content of faith, by applying a rational-empirical methodology. This is precisely to misunderstand the language of faith, which is not at the level of rational-empirical discourse. What is needed rather is an interrogation that derives

more from a hermeneutic investigation that contextualises content, and to interpret the content at the various levels of meaning that are often present therein, from the literal and the direct, to the symbolic and the metaphoric. For when it comes to the act of faith, an experimental methodology with its objective emphasis, is quite inadequate to such a subjective act. What we need is a more self-reflexive and experiential methodology, which while being subjective is neither arbitrary or irrational, but one which focuses on meaning and 'meaningfulness', rather than just on measuring quantities and determining cause and effect. Thus our eighth sutra: *only a self-reflexive, experiential methodology is meaningful to the discourse of faith; a rationalist, empirical one is alien to it.*

Besides inductive and deductive logic, there are many kinds of rationality as Max Weber has emphasized, and in fact has demonstrated in his *Sociology of Religion* (Weber, 1964). If with him we understand rationality as the application of reason or conceptual thought to the understanding or ordering of human life, then in *so far as there can be many understandings and orderings of human life and society, there must correspondingly be many kinds of rationality as well.* This is our ninth sutra. Instrumental and value rationality are just two classics examples of this, but they are other complex ways in which reason can impinge on human life as when it rationalises or 'orders' it on the basis of law, bureaucracy, tradition or charisma.

DILEMMAS AND DIALECTICS

The institutionalization of religion involves fundamental dilemmas that must be lived in tension since they cannot be resolved or wished away. For as Thomas O'Dea (1969) so insightfully point out: *religious experience needs most yet suffers most from institutionalization.* This is our tenth sutra. Precisely because such experience is so fragile and impermanent it needs institutions to preserve and communicate it across generations; and yet it is so ephemeral and ineffable that it cannot but be distorted and alienated by this very institutional process. In Max Weber's phrase, the 'routinisations of charisma', is both necessary and subverting. There is a correspondence here between the charisma-experience and routinisation-institutionalisation dilemma, and the faith and reason dialectic discussed earlier. Hence sutra eleven: *'experience' is necessary to vitalise institutions, and vice versa, 'institutions' are needed to preserve experience.*

For even as new experiences precipitate new understandings,

they cán alter óur consciousness in radical ways, which then demands a renewed faith. For 'on the one hand, there is an interpretation of the faith conditioned by one's view of reality nurtured by one's interpretation of revelation' (Libano, 1982: 15). In other words, we have sutra twelve: while it is true that faith does not 'create' reality, it does make for a *'definition of the situation' that is real in its effects; and vice-versa, our experience of reality affects our faith-understanding.*

Religious traditions that have stressed 'orthodoxy' (right belief) tend to focus more on the content of faith, whether this be the intellectual content of the belief or the moral one of the commitment. The first focuses on intellectual truth, the second on moral goodness. However, such orthodoxies tend to neglect the act of faith, which as a constitutive dimension of our life represents precisely an internal critique, an intrinsic guarantor of a content of faith, which ought to fulfil our deepest human desires and hopes.

For this a religious tradition must emphasise an 'orthopraxis' (right practice), where the focus is on the act of faith. For here the crucial emphasis is neither on belief in the true or the good, but rather a commitment to the true and the good to authentic human living, an existential engagement with, and a critical reflection on living. It is at this fundamental existential level that the reasonableness of faith must be sought. For it is at this level of living praxis, that truth must have relevance and value must be meaningful. So to with reason the critical stress must not be so much on a rationalist logic as on a sensitivity to the real boundaries of its discourse.

Indeed, this dialectic between faith and reason can be very fruitful. Reason must critique faith for its fidelity in humanizing our life, rather than for its belief-content; just as faith that must commit reason to make it serve this same humanizing enterprise, not merely by affirming its validity but also by constraining it within the domain of its own discourse. Hence the constant search for an ever deeper and more relevant 'orthopraxis' and 'orthodoxy', rather that than an uncritical faith in a tradition, as also the continuing quest for a more adequate and pertinent 'rationality' beyond the rationalism of the Enlightenment. And so our thirteenth sutra: *faith and reason must complement and critique each other in an ongoing humanizing dialetic.*

A HUMANISING DIALOGUE

Our hermeneutic suspicions can now become the points of departure for us to initiate and continue this dialogue across the apparent divide between faith and reason. But we must first be clear with regard to the horizons of understandings in which it takes place. Only then can there be a 'fusion of horizons' which can give the dialogue 'the buoyancy, of a game, in which the players are absorbed,' (Linge, 1977: xix) as the later Wittgenstein had observed (Wittgenstein, 1962). And it will happen as in 'every conversation that through it something different has come to be' (Linge, 1977: xii).

In making a distinction between the content and the act of faith, we realise that the content may vary across various cultural and religious traditions. However, the act of faith in so far as it is constitutively human, will necessarily have a great similarity across cultures and religions because at this level we begin to touch on the most fundamental aspects of the human. Here again it is our faith, both as act and content that can help us discern the human authenticity of these pre-judgements and presumptions.

This precisely becomes the basis for an enriching inter-religious dialogue, which can begin to bridge the divide between religious traditions, and in which one can recognize oneself in the other and vice versa! For unlike the content, which may vary across various cultural and religious traditions, *because act of faith is constitutively human. it will necessarily have a common religious basis across varying cultures and traditions; thus it is the act of faith rather than its content that must become the primary basis of inter-religious dialogue.* This is our fourteenth sutra.

Today religious revivalism justifies the unreasonable and even the irrational in the name of faith, while a rationalist secularism dismisses all religious beliefs as irrational and unscientific. This merely turns and the dilemma between faith and reason into an irresolvable dichotomy not an enriching dialectic. And so our fifteenth and last sutra; *an inclusive humanism must embrace both 'meaningful faith', as well as 'sensitised reason'.* The 'hermeneutics of suspicion' must eventually yield to the 'hermeneutics' of faith', as Paul Ricoeur would say (Ricoeur, 1973). For it is only thus that we will be able to bring a healing wholeness to the 'broken totality' of our modern would, in Iris Murdoch's unforgettable phrase. This gives our sixteenth and last sutra: *the dialectic between faith and reason*

must be pursued in the context of a hermeneutic circle as a dialogue or it will degenerate in a debate across an unbridgeable divide.

It was Jonathan Swift who said that we have enough religion to hate each other but not enough to love each other. To conclude this discussion it can be rephrased thus: *we seem to have so much 'dogmatic belief' we become intolerant of each other, and not enough 'human faith' to appreciate and learn from each other!*

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