

Topic 10: Faith and the Expressions of Faith

We do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch. "The believer's act [of faith] does not terminate in the propositions, but in the realities [which they express]" (St. Thomas Aquinas). All the same, we do approach these realities with the help of formulations of the faith which permit us to express the faith and to hand it on, to celebrate it in community, to assimilate and live on it more and more. CCC, #170

I. The Distinction between Faith and Beliefs: It is necessary to distinguish faith in a transcendent object and the expression of faith that uses language taken from this world to characterize that transcendent object of faith. Faith is the act of a finite being who is grasped by and turned to the infinite. A belief is an expression of faith; rooted in religious experience it characterizes the object of such faith experience by means of images, concepts and words. Faith and beliefs are inter-related but distinct. However, it is hard to distinguish them because every experience already connotes some form of interpretation. We assess new interpretations of Christian faith in terms of their fidelity to the originating religious (faith) experience - salvation through Jesus Christ.

II. Faith and Beliefs Are Distinct but Inseparable: Beliefs spring from faith: Their meaning and validity can only come from faith itself. Hence, the significance of beliefs emerges out of what is deeper than beliefs, namely, the experience of faith and surrender to faith's object. This implies that beliefs have no real status apart from the faith that they express.

At the same time, faith needs beliefs. Faith does not survive in a vacuum. It necessarily coexists with beliefs (imaginative interpretations of faith's object), for it needs to be expressed in order to remain a living faith. Beliefs embody faith's response to its object; they facilitate the lived response of worship and action in community.

Confusing faith and beliefs can result in a fundamentalism that objectifies faith and loses credibility or, worse, slips into dangerous forms of religious idolatry. Jesus attacked this temptation when it surfaced among the religious leaders of his time.

Beliefs do not represent "knowledge of divine things" or "facts and information about God," but interpretations and expressions of faith that springs from and gives homage to the transcendent. Beliefs do not serve as "containers" of divine truth but as "sacraments of encounter" with the God-of-the-faith-experience that gave rise to the faith community.

III. Beliefs Are Historically Conditioned: Expressions of faith, including the classic texts and symbols of a religious tradition, are precious but are not absolute as God is absolute. Adequate interpretation of such expressions of faith requires both faith in the originating transcendent mystery and knowledge of the culture that produced the belief.

The criterion for judging the truth of a religious experience is not the doctrine that gives it classical expression. Rather, the faith experience serves as the norm of the belief that expresses it. The truth of a doctrine is not contained in another doctrine.

The distinction between faith and beliefs helps explain the development of doctrine. The beliefs of the Christian community need to be continually reinterpreted. This is the task of theology. That is, interpretation and new expressions of the Christian faith are not only possible but necessary. Correlatively, the mere repetition of a belief formulated in one context can distort the faith that it should express if/when the context changes.

IV. The Relationship between Faith and Reason: Faith and critical reason are not enemies. The adoption of an anthropological starting point in theology can facilitate the integration of religious faith and scientific reason.

A creative, constructive tension arises in the interactions of faith, belief, and reason. Because faith is not faith apart from reason, beliefs fashioned to express the object of faith are strengthened, not weakened, by the questioning of critical reason. In the same way, beliefs must be coherent with what we know through critical reason.

Faith is not knowledge. Since the object of faith is transcendent, it cannot be known in the ordinary sense of human knowing. By definition, knowing deals with finite reality, depends on empirical verification, and results in a human "grasp" of that which is known. Faith would not be religious faith, would not be the dynamism of basic hope and trust toward a transcendent object, if it were an object of knowledge. Faith is assent by means of a commitment to something that transcends this world.

Although faith is not knowledge, it does involve a form of reasoning (Newman.) "The action of the human spirit that is reflective freedom, in its dynamism for an object of ultimate commitment and loyalty, unfolds in and through the human mind" (DT, 40). The reasoning involved here is not limited to Kant's pure reason. Newman speaks of implicit reasoning embedded in the whole life of a free human

being. "Faith has its reasons which critical reason may not be able to supply" (DT, 40).

Because the object of faith is transcendent, it must be given (revealed) to a person. That is, faith is a gift, not an achievement. Moreover, what is given cannot be controlled. The object of faith remains mysterious and incomprehensible even as it is revealed. While faith is not ordinary knowing, as an act of the whole person and in the process of coming to expression in beliefs, faith involves a kind of knowing.

Faith and knowing are different but inseparable. Faith interacts with the human power of imagination. The imagination creatively reacts to the data of religious experience and produces a constructive interpretation of it. Faith's interpretation of its transcendent object bends back to interpret the world. Faith has implications for how one lives in and understands the world. Faith makes use of basic ways of understanding the world (ideologies), even as our ways of understanding the world inevitably involve faith.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How can belief and faith co-exist together?
2. Can you easily differentiate your faith and beliefs?
3. What are some instances where tension is created between reason and faith?