

FAITH IN SCIENCE AND RELIGION (A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION)

BY

JOHN NWANEGBO-BEN

Department of Philosophy of Science and Technology.

School of Management Technology,

Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria.

E – mail: johnjnb@yahoo.com

johnjnb5005@gmail.com

IJSER

FAITH IN SCIENCE AND RELIGION (A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION)

ABSTRACT

Faith in science and religion can be compared and contrasted taking cognizance of their subject matter and to what extent they have common object. Faith is believing that certain things are true, it is a habit a state of mind by which we have truth. The question is, does faith play any role in science just as we think it revolves as the pivot of religion? The contrast of reason and faith as a method, or even as cognitive disposition is a common trope in discussions of science and religion. The position of this paper is that the contrast perceived to exist between the man of faith in science and religion is misplaced or does not exist.

INTRODUCTION

Science and religion can be compared and contrasted in many ways. It is instructive, for example, to raise the question of whether, and if so to what extent, they have a common object. Is there in other words any overlap with respect to their subject matter? The possibility of overlap raises the possibility of conflict, to the extent that any of the overlapping disciplines uses probable reasoning, there is a possibility that the conclusion that is most probable to the practitioners of a given discipline on basis of evidence currently available to them will be inconsistent with the results of another discipline based on probable reasoning from a different evidence base. Nevertheless this is not the only pleasant support for similarity and difference. The difference of reason and faith as a way or even as action of natural qualities are usual bases in the interaction of science and religion. It may be connected to the tendency to compare the medieval "Time of belief or faith" with the modern period of reason. Louis L. Snyder¹ calls the "Age of reason" the Age of faith in science and looks at it as a great breakthrough. The modern man of science despises medieval scholasticism and sooth to explain the world, the universe and himself in conditions of reason, logical processes and inductive procedures. It is expedient that anybody who thought that reason, logical process and practices appear more prominently in modern than in medieval work would do well to examine the writings of say faith in the Voltaire's philosophical works with that of St Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*. Writers of medieval times studied logic as an important part of medieval life. One can find many thinkers in the eighteenth century who lack faith. Examples are Hume and Voltaire. What is harder to find are medieval scholars who lack respect for reason. This lack of respect for reason is a feature not of the medieval thinkers, but of their Romantic successors. This paper posits that any attempt to

make a contrast between science and religion on the basis of reason and faith is misconceived.

THE CONTENT OF FAITH

The only way to comprehend the content of faith is to explicate its meaning. Faith can be defined as an attitude of the entire self, including both will and intellect, directed toward a person, an idea, or as in the case of religious faith –a divine being. Modern theologians agree in emphasizing this total existential character of faith, thus distinguishing it from the popular conception of faith that identifies it with belief but goes far beyond it, and in the history of theology the distinction has more often been drawn between faith and works than between faith and knowledge.

The purpose of our paper does not require that we start conceptualizing faith to include 'faith in democracy' or faith in God and the like. Even within that conception, there is no need to focus on every dimension and implication of having faith. Since the topic of this paper is faith in science and religion. What is really needed is merely the epistemic component of faith, independent of how that is related to any other component.

Most of our findings will start from the lines laid down in epistemological writings of Aristotle with much respect to book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics and of St. Thomas Aquinas, the treatise on faith seen in his Summa Theologiae. In the lay man's perception of reasoning and basic understanding, we can say that faith means believing without physical evidence or logic. It may be seen as a state of mind, a positive habit, a discreet virtue. However before delving proper we must factorize the exact habit of mind in question and how it defers from other habits of mind. According to Aristotle², who gave certain discrepancy of two basic parts

of the human mind, the first is that by which we describe as fixed. To the first he addressed as epistemic part to the second the conscious part. He went ahead to differentiate three kinds of human activity which tells ones character as an intellectual being. These activities are Knowing, Making and Doing. Each of these activities portrays the human nature, and ability to carry out these intellectual acts is termed as human perfection .Aristotle, being aware that not all knowledge can be established by demonstration, posits that they could be known immediately.

When Aristotle says 'immediately' he meant not at first hearing and rather not on the basis of demonstration and if these findings is to work, Aristotle must give factual theories of habits of mind by which if exposed to the world one can easily recognize the truth of some propositions. He (Aristotle) believes that one could also have factual theories and findings. Unlike Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas gave fundamental theories of faith in three forms in which there is less evidence than is necessary to compel assent, for example Doubt, Suspicion and Opinion. One may have double mind about the truth of some propositions one did not know to be false, or that one may hold as ones opinion a proposition that one did not know (in the strict sense) to be true is easy to understand. Suspicion on the other hand is the state that the scientists have with respect to working hypothesis. Both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas argue that opinions are not products of intuition hence it is not intellectual since it does not anticipate error.

There are many writers who are more inclined to the Aristotelian philosophy³. Some in the minority position argue that it was possible in ethics. He surely did not think it was possible in history, since all historical truths are contingent. His criteria require us to make the same judgment about most of modern natural

science, since the best results of modern science –evolutionary theory, *Mendeleean* genetics, the atomic theory of matter, etc – are accepted because they are the best explanation of the phenomena so far observed, not because their principles are self evident⁽⁴⁾ We need, therefore a better account of the human intellectual life, one that will be more explicit about the knowledge of particulars as well as about contingent truths.

Some aspects of our intellectual life, including all of modern science, depend upon our having the ability to make observations and to carry out probable reasoning. Successful observation and probable reasoning requires skill. One has to recognize one's good observations and set aside one's bad ones. Similarly, there is a skill in disguising better from worse explanations. Given the multiplicity of desirables in a good theory viz accuracy, consistency, coherence, simplicity, elegance, scope, fertility,⁽⁵⁾ one must develop an eye when a theory's elegance or scope is great enough to allow for inaccuracy.

We cannot know everything we need to know on the basis of our own intellectual work. Sometimes we may lack the intentional or observational basis which underlies the know-ability of certain truths. Are there really planets beyond Saturn? Those who do not have access to large telescopes must take it on faith that there are, at least until they can check it out for themselves. Had John Flamsteed and others really seen the planet Uranus unawares in the years before William Herschel's discovery in 1781? This question was useful for the purpose that if their views were completely correct as we see Uranus did not follow the line made for it by Newton's laws. Astronomers faith and believe in the first views

of their predecessors led to the finding of Neptune. In other words we might lack the mathematical knowledge to arrive at a truth and may therefore create room for others to mathematically prove us right. The question we may ask ourselves is did the position of Uranus as at the early 19th century deferent from the Newtonian theory? It is worthy of note that approximately all historians of science had faith in the calculations made by the 19th century scientists, hence they accept their postulations without much doubt.

Faith is an unusual virtue which comprises of two objects, the individual or personal⁶ object in which the subject has faith and the propositional object which the subject accepts as a result of that faith. The content of faith as it has to do with virtue has an exciting similarity with moral virtues. Aristotle in his Nichomachean stated that two virtues, intellectual and moral are habits which perfects the will and moral virtues are habits of choosing the 'Mean'⁷ and this is acknowledged by Aquinas that faith is a matter of will and also of reason. The same can be said about the virtue that makes probable reasoning possible, one must decide that the proper standard of evidence is met, and one must decide how rigorous a standard is relevant to the matter at hand. For that reason, Aristotle's definition applies to faith; faith is a mean between the extremes of gullibility and excessive skepticism. It is a virtue when it is a habit of making the

right choice with respect to belief. Aristotle's conception of faith is a natural faith of the kind that one human being might have in another. St. Augustine recognizes a qualitative similarity between natural faith and faith in God in the city of God.⁽⁸⁾

St. Thomas conception of faith focuses exclusively on the theological virtue of faith in God. St. Paul defined faith as "the evidence of things not seen"⁽⁹⁾ while St. Thomas saw faith as a habit of the mind... making the intellect assent to what is not apparent⁽¹⁰⁾ from our discussion, faith however, is not only a habit of mind but a good virtue that will get us to some truths that would otherwise be inaccessible to us.

FAITH IN RELIGION

Religion can be defined as "The attitude of individual in a community to the powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their destiny and interest"⁽¹¹⁾ AC. Bouquet defined religion as "the relationship between the human self and some non-human entities, the sacred, the supernatural, the self existent, the Absolute or simply God"⁽¹²⁾ Another writer such as T.N.O, Quarcoopome defined it as "the belief in a supernatural being, who is the creator and controller of the universe and establishing a moral relationship with man"⁽¹³⁾ In fact the philosophical search for an all pervading supreme being led to religious experience. The existence of religious revelation and its distinctness from all natural methods of acquiring knowledge makes possible a definition that sees religion as the science based on revealed truth. The fact that religion unavoidably by this very nature begins with revelation – truth accepted by faith makes it different from all other sciences. Revelation according to St. Thomas is useful for two reasons; first there are some truths necessary to our salvations which are

beyond the reach of unaided human reason. Second, even those truths necessary to salvation which are not in principle beyond the reach of human reason are often difficult to attain – knowledge only to a few, and that after long study. Making salvation available to all requires that these truths be revealed.

The fact that religion is grounded in revelation does not, of course, mean that there is nothing for religious individual to do other than to repeat those truths. Since not all revelations are propositions in character, they must use their interpretative skills to draw propositions from the stories, poems, and myths of scripture as needed in the light of new controversies. Revealed propositions provide the foundation for a variety of kinds of work. Religious people see proofs for those revealed truths that are also knowledge by reason. They can seek probable arguments for any revealed truths. They can answer objections to revealed truths. They can draw conclusions from the revealed principles, either alone or in combination with proposition known by reason alone. And they can attempt in various ways to draw the various propositions known by revelation in the systematic structure. Reason is subservient to faith, as handling, examining, explaining, recording, cataloguing, defending the truths which faith, not reason, has gained for us, as providing an intellectual expression of supernatural facts, eliciting what is implicit, comparing, measuring, connecting each with each and forming one all into a whole.

Dogmatism is the product of authority and this is the bane of those with little or no knowledge of science and philosophy. However, the scientists as well as the religious individual could be dogmatic in their faith in science or in God that answers or appears to answer and provide whenever He is called upon for assistance. The problem concerning faith in religious practices can be analyzed

from another perspective. An example is the issue of prayer, why is it that some prayers seem to be answered and others not answered. There are situations that people have prayed for weeks, months or years, while some get positive instant results, others pray endlessly without success. Various perceptions as to the reason for this have been postulated. Some would say he or she “prayed amiss” or that the individual did not offer the right type of prayers. Some would say the individual had no faith that was why prayers were not answered. Others may conclude that God has decided from eternity, on the basis of His infinite knowledge and goodness not to give or answer that particular prayer. Thus, no amount of prayer addressed to Him will induce him to change His mind. This they term as “God’s will for the person” which invariably is proposing a philosophy of fatalism – what will be will be.

The issue of prayer is philosophically important when we view why some prayers seem to be answered while others are not. Faith plays a major role when we view it from fideist point of view. But the issue of man’s prayer not being answered due to lack of faith can be contested in the sense that a man who kneels down to pray cannot do that if he has no element of faith that his prayers cannot get to God, even if the faith is as small as “a mustard seed.”⁽¹⁴⁾

FAITH IN SCIENCE

Does faith play any role in science? It may be natural for us to say that science, philosophy, mathematics, economics, history and all other disciplines except religion does not begin with revealed truths. Some have insisted that it does. Richard B. Bliss, once wrote that for the past 100 years, Darwin’s idea have become a not –to be challenged by word of science.⁽¹⁵⁾ Many accept evolution as a fact as against the Eden theory. Even a pastor in a Journal of March 5th 1966

stated “There is no doubt about the fact of evolution.”⁽¹⁶⁾ The Encyclopedia Britannica stated “we are not in the least doubtful as to the act of evolution. The evidence by now is overwhelming”⁽¹⁷⁾ however, as far back 1966, the world Encyclopedia stated “No one should make the mistake of saying that evolution is fully understood”⁽¹⁸⁾.

This theme and discoveries has been picked up by others like L. Harrison Mathews in his, Introduction To Modern Edition of Charles Darwin’s origin of species, posits that the fact of evolution is the back bone of biology and biology is thus the peculiars position of being a science founded on an unproved theory, is this then a science or a faith? Belief in the theory of evolution is thus exactly parallel to belief in creation –both are concept which believers know to be true but neither of them can proof. Biologists appear to accept the Darwinian theory of evolution for the same reason they accept others because it is the best explanation they have encountered. Evolutionary biology like most of modern science, does not meet the standard set by Aristotle.

CONCLUSION

There is a difference between the faith scientists have in one another’s research and the one religious individual have in God. The faiths of the scientists are provisional and limited by plausibility constraints while the faith by religious individuals is unlimited. Although any given scientist must rely for much of what he believe on faith in other scientists, the scientific community, as a whole, does not have to have faith in any non-human or supernatural beings. Science is purely a human enterprise.

It would not be reasonable to say that one does not need merely provisional faith in all persons (including God) to do science, nor does one need to believe that a

completely human enterprise is the only intellectual enterprise worth pursuing. There is no basis for any claim that the habits of mind required for being a faithful Christian or religions individual are in tension with those required for doing science. The contrast perceived to exist between the man of faith or the religions individual and the man of science or the scientist is absolutely misplaced.

IJSER

REFERENCES

1. Louis .L. Snyder. **The Age of Reason**. Van Nostrand 1955. P.7.
2. **Nichomachean Ethics** VI.I.1139a8
3. Mortimer Adler. **The Four Dimensions of Philosophy**. N.Y. Macmillan. 1993. PP.233-237.
4. Charles Misper, et.al **Gravitation**. Freeman 1973. P. 1208
5. Read Thomas Kuhn. **The Structure of Scientific Revolution**. Chicago. 1962
6. Personal object here is restricted, because one might also have faith in an institution e.g the church
7. For example, the virtue of courage is a mean between the extremes of rashness and cowardice.
8. St. Augustine **The City God**. BR. 11.3
9. Hebrews 11:1
- 10.St. Thomas Aquinas : **Summa Theological**.2a2ae, 4.1
- 11.John Lewis, **Made Simple Self-Teaching Encyclopedias. The Religion of the world**. New York: Cadillac Publishing Company Inc. 1968.P.14
- 12.A.C. Bouquet: **Comparative Religion** Middlesex Penguin book. 1941.P.16.
13. T.N.O.Quacoopome, **West African Traditional Religion**. Ibadan University Press. 1987. P. 144
- 14.See John Nwanegbo-Ben, **The Mind of Philosophy** Owerri: Advanced Graphics. 2009.PP.85,86.
- 15.Richard Bliss 'A two-Model Approach to Origins: A curriculum Imperative! In J.Peter Zetterberg(ed) **Evolution Vs creation: The Public Education Controversy**. Oryx.1983 P.195.

16. "Did man get here by Evolution or by Creation?" **Watch tower Bible and Truck Society**. New York. 1967. P.7.
17. Ibid P.9
18. World Book Encyclopedia. 1966. Vol. 6 P.334
19. Harrison Mathew "Introduction" to **The Origin of Species** Dent 1971. px

IJSER