

## Philosophers respond to Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*

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**T**he issuance of *Fides et Ratio* is an extraordinary event. That a subtle philosophical discourse should be issued by the head of a vast ecclesiastical bureaucracy! We must all behold with awe and astonishment this achievement of the Church of Rome. Those of us who are not members will find a good dose of envy mixed in with our awe and astonishment.

Pervading the entire document is the *both/and* style of rhetoric: as in—above all—both faith *and* reason. We, in our time and place, are not much drawn to this rhetorical style. We prefer the disjunctive over the conjunctive. The conjunctive style smacks to us of indecision; we prefer the confrontational, attention-getting bite of *either/or*. But *Fides et Ratio* is by no means indecisive. Its *both/and* is full of bite.

With one single discourse, *Fides et Ratio* addresses two quite different sorts of intellectual ills in contemporary society: on the one hand, the skepticisms of immanentism; on the other, the suspicions of fideism. *Both/and*.

On the one hand, there are those who, in the words of the encyclical, "distrust...the human being's great capacity for knowledge." They "rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence." They have "lost the capacity to lift [their] gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being. Abandoning the investigation of being, modern philosophical research has concentrated in stead upon human knowing. Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned." We are, it is said, "at the end of metaphysics." In thus speaking, philosophy has "forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them."

That is one of the intellectual ills to which the encyclical is addressed: the skepticisms of immanentism. The other is the suspicions of fideism. The *fideist* is one who, again in the words of the encyclical, "fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed, for the very possibility of belief in God." Among the manifestations that the encyclical cites of the skepticisms of fideism are biblicism in scriptural interpretation and disdain for philosophy and speculative theology.

The pope addresses both these intellectual illnesses at once by offering a discourse, informed and subtle, on faith and reason. That discourse grounds, in turn, a vigorous and

visionary call to boldness. To the immanentist the pope says: do not be content with exploring the subjective and the anthropological; inquire boldly into what lies beyond the self. To the fideist the pope says: Do not be content with "mere faith"; appropriate boldly the riches of the philosophical tradition so as both to deepen our understanding of the faith and to exercise "critical discernment" on the intellectual endeavors of humanity generally. *Fides et Ratio*, to say it again, is a vigorous and visionary call to boldness—boldness in the use of reason, boldness in the exercise of faith. Once again: *both/and*.

I am a philosopher who stands in the Reformed tradition of Christianity—that tradition that traces its roots to the Reformation, which originated in the Swiss cities and was shaped, above all, by John Calvin. When I read the pope's discourse on faith and reason, I read it with the eyes and mind of such a person. Calvinists have been known to say some rather bracing things about Catholic modes of thought in general, and about popes in particular. Could it be that those disputes are on the way to disappearing? For I find myself in almost complete agreement with what the pope says about the relation of faith and reason. I would want to debate with him some of the things he says about the history of philosophy. I think, for example, that there is rather less core consensus than he seems to think there is. And I have some hesitations on a few peripheral matters: what he says about the authoritative status of tradition, for example, and some of what he says about the role of Mary. But what he says on the topic of faith and reason seems to me both true and needing to be said. Such convergence between these two traditions, though disappointing to the agonistic spirit implanted in all of us by life in a competitive society, is a wonderful thing for anyone formed by the spirit of the gospel.

Let me move on to state what it is I am agreeing with—that is, what I understand the pope to be saying. And let me begin by offering you what I regard as the key for unlocking the interpretation of the whole discussion—the hermeneutic key. I suggest that if one is to understand what the pope is saying, one must constantly keep in mind the distinction between *properly functioning* human reason, and human reason as it *actually functions* in its fallen state. When the pope is speaking of the former, he can sound exceedingly confident and optimistic concerning the powers of reason; when he is speaking of the latter, he can sound eminently realistic and, on occasion, even judgmental. If one fails to take note of the always implicit distinction between properly functioning human reason and actually functioning fallen reason, one will think he is contradicting himself—wanting things both ways. But not so.

We in the Reformed tradition have thought that our brothers and sisters in the Catholic tradition speak too little of the actuality of fallen reason, too much of the ideality of properly functioning reason; those in the Catholic tradition have thought exactly the opposite of us—that we Calvinists have majored in fallenness and minored in proper functioning. Whatever the accuracy of those historical judgments be, the pope, in *Fides et Ratio*, splits the difference. "At the deepest level," says the pope, "the autonomy which philosophy enjoys is rooted in the fact that reason is by its nature oriented to truth and is equipped moreover with the means necessary to arrive at truth." But then, after a few intervening paragraphs, comes this reminder: "it is necessary to keep in mind" that the "formulations" actually offered by philosophy "are shaped by history and produced by

human reason wounded and weakened by sin." Well! "Reason wounded and weakened by sin"—no Calvinist could ask for more. "Reason oriented by its nature to truth and equipped to arrive"—no Catholic could ask for more than that. Indeed, in one brief extraordinary paragraph of just two sentences, the pope puts both themes together: "it was part of the original plan of the creation that reason should without difficulty reach beyond the sensory data to the origin of all things: the Creator. But because of the disobedience by which man and woman chose to set themselves in full and absolute autonomy in relation to the One who had created them, this ready access to God the Creator diminished." Of course, there will continue to be disagreements on the details of reason's powers when properly functioning, and on the extent to which the wounds impair proper functioning.

Using as my hermeneutic key this distinction between proper functioning and actual fallen functioning, let me now briefly summarize the encyclical's pattern of thought. A central component in what singles out the human being from the rest of God's earthly creatures is that the human being is "*the one who seeks the truth*." Truth comes, of course, in many forms, and as the answer to many questions. What especially impels the search for truth that we find exhibited in philosophy and the sciences is the innate human impulse "to ask why things are as they are" and the impulse to discover the meaning of life. These impulses impel us beyond partial and fragmentary truths toward "universal and absolute truth." People, says the pope, "seek an absolute which might give to all their searching a meaning and an answer—something ultimate, which might serve as the ground of all things. In other words, they seek a final explanation, a supreme value, which refers to nothing beyond itself and which puts an end to all questioning." "It is unthinkable," he adds, "that a search so deeply rooted in human nature would be completely vain and useless." On the other hand, there are distinct limits to the powers of human reason, even when functioning properly. Though reason can "discover the Creator," it can do relatively little by way of discovering the nature and deeds of the Creator.

And now for the role of faith: "underlying all the Church's thinking is the awareness that she is the bearer of a message which has its origin in God himself." This message is revelation, the loving acceptance of which is faith. This revelation comes not as the repudiation of reason, but as its perfection. For just as the goal and attainment of reason is truth, so too, the content of revelation, and hence of faith, is truth—truth about God, truth also about God's dealings with humankind and the world. This truth of revelation "perfects all that the human mind can know of the meaning of life" and of the explanations of things. Accordingly, reason accepts it gladly—even though it comes to reason as gift rather than achievement.

It must not be supposed, however, that reason simply stands passive before this gift. The long tradition of *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, testifies otherwise. Faith enables reason to exercise its powers within realms to which it would otherwise have no access whatsoever; we are able now to reflect, for example, on the Trinity. In the words of the encyclical, faith serves "to lead the search for truth to new depths, enabling the mind in its autonomous exploration to penetrate within the mystery

by use of reason's own methods, of which it is rightly jealous." Mystery, of course, remains and will always remain; God is not to be grasped. Yet, though revelation appears within our existence as something gratuitous, it not only "seeks acceptance as an expression of love" but also "itself stirs thought."

This, so far, is about reason when functioning properly, and about its relation, when thus functioning, to revelation and faith. Now for reason in its fallen actual functioning—"weakened and wounded" reason, as the pope calls it. Weakened and wounded reason ever and again fails to achieve what it could achieve; it fails, for example, "to recognize God as Creator of all,...not because [it lacks] the means to do so, [but] because...sinfulness [places] an impediment in the way." And worse than failing to achieve what it could achieve, it takes "wrong turns," these wrong turns often bringing its results into conflict with revealed truth.

As a consequence, revelation and faith stand to the results of unaided reason not just as supplement, stimulus, and aid to further endeavor; they also stand to those results as *corrective* and *guide*. Accordingly, it becomes the church's duty, mainly through her philosophers, though also through her theologians and bishops, "to indicate the elements in a philosophical system which are incompatible with her own faith." Thereby the church fulfills "a humble but tenacious ministry of service which every philosopher should appreciate, a service in favour of *recta ratio*, or of reason reflecting rightly upon what is true."

What this presupposes is *critical discernment* on the part of the philosophers, the theologians, the bishops, and indeed all the members of the church. The church must speak neither a blanket "yes" nor a blanket "no" to the results of philosophical endeavor; she must speak always and only a critically discerning *both* "yes" and "no." This theme of critical discernment first gets sounded about a third of the way through the encyclical when the pope is discussing the attitude toward Greek philosophy of those two great, and customarily opposed, fathers of the church, Clement and Tertullian. Once sounded, the need for critical discernment remains one of the dominant themes for the remainder of the encyclical.

A presupposition of this insistence on the need for critical discernment is worth bringing to the fore. A common strategy in the modern world has been to construe revelation in such a way that it could not possibly come into conflict with philosophy, nor with any of the other disciplines. The pope will have nothing to do with this—rightly so, in my judgment. The concern of both reason and revelation is with truth. And given the impulsive character of those fundamental questions of meaning and explanation that drive reason on its journey, and given the expansive character of revelation, what we must expect, when reason becomes weakened and wounded, is that conflicts will arise between revelation, on the one hand, and academic learning, on the other. Hence the need for critical discernment.

*Fides et Ratio* is an extraordinarily rich and dialectically subtle encyclical. I have tried to communicate some of its dialectic subtlety by laying out what I interpret as its central

argument— an argument with which, as I have already noted, I am in full agreement. Its richness cannot be communicated in any summary.

Let me close with some brief comments on the significance of the encyclical. As with most encyclicals, *Fides et Ratio* is an intervention—an intervention, in this case, into two developments within the Christian community and in society more generally—one of them, a development within theology, the other, a development within philosophy.

To my mind there can be no doubt whatsoever that the pope has put his finger on the fundamental ill from which theology has been suffering in recent years. All too often in recent years theology has been in headlong flight from metaphysics—that is, from a willingness to speak about God in particular and reality in general. Sometimes this flight takes the form of repudiating philosophy in general. About 25 years ago it often took the form of embracing phenomenological or linguistic philosophy. In recent years it regularly takes the form of embracing one and another sort of deconstructionist philosophy. Whichever form it takes, traditional philosophy is treated either with suspicion or disregard; and the theologians of the tradition are either ignored, or reinterpreted as deconstructionists, phenomenologists, or whatever, born out of season.

Into this *mélange* of metaphysical timidity the pope issues a ringing call for boldness on the part of the church's theologians: having the boldness to acknowledge that revelation, whatever else it may be, is a revelation of truth—truth about what transcends us, but also truth about what surrounds us. Revelation is not just "God-talk" but talk *about* God—*true* talk.

But *Fides et Ratio* is also an intervention into philosophy. And there can be no doubt that the pope has also put his finger on at least one of the ills from which philosophy has been suffering in recent years. One of the reasons theology has become so metaphysically pusillanimous is that philosophy has become that. What has characterized large stretches of philosophy in the twentieth century is that reality has receded ever further away, to the point where some have asked: What's the point of speaking about reality at all? Many philosophers and their devotees have understandably drawn the conclusion that truth and goodness, if they are not simply to be discarded, will have to be relativized.

To this, the pope's response is not that the church repudiate philosophy, which is what so many among my fellow Protestants would say, but that the philosophers of the church have the boldness to develop what he explicitly calls "Christian philosophy"—that is, "philosophical speculation conceived [and practiced] in dynamic union with faith."

How surprising and ironic that roughly two centuries after Voltaire and his cohorts mocked the church as the bastion of irrationality, the church, in the person of the pope, should be the one to put in a good word for reason, and for faith as reason's ally. Surprising, ironic, and gratifying! It's my own deep hope, speaking now both as philosopher and as Reformed Protestant, that the pope's call for boldness will embolden theologians and philosophers to do exactly what he is calling for. In doing so, they will both respect the extraordinary dignity of human reason and honor the love displayed by

God in revealing to us dimensions of truth that would otherwise forever have eluded us, or left us in wavering indecision.

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