

THE KNOWLEDGE OF FAITH

Three discussion papers responding to the paper presented by

RICHARD RICE

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Perspective and Tension with Faith and Reason

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I

When a person does theological reflection, he seems inevitably to come up against concepts such as God, grace, guilt, sin, redemption, atonement, church, sacraments. Man has always sought to find meaning in his universe; so he will probably try to organize these concepts in some way. He may appeal to reason as the primary (even the only valid) organizing method. Or he may appeal to experience, revelation, or a combination of methods. But whatever the method, the result is a religious philosophy that is unique to him and that can be understood only from within his phenomenological world.

But if we use the same method, why do we come up with results unique to us? Apparently we each come to religious concepts with a perspective that is prior to our organizational method and that strongly influences the final results. For this reason, I wish to support the position taken by Rice that man comes to religion with a faith perspective that is prior to reason. Moreover, I believe that such a

position has significant implications for Christianity. I will discuss briefly three of these implications.

1. Man has both a cognitive and an affective domain. If religion is to be properly understood, it must be seen as touching the whole of man, including both domains. Fifty years ago William James, on the occasion of his giving the Gifford lectures in England, said that in religion, as in other human endeavors, feelings tend to be more important than thoughts. I have not yet seen any data that would disprove this thesis. I would suggest that the irreducible core of faith has more to do with the affective state than with the cognitive. I am not sure Rice would agree with this; however, two of his illustrations of immediate knowledge (recognizing pain and loving a woman) are not primarily cognitive.

It is significant that the Deuteronomic rule of the religious life, as well as the first of the two great commandments, is to "love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." A religion so narrowly conceived that it does not recognize and encourage the affective side of man's nature is in danger of concretizing symbols and statutes and propositions and ceremonies — and making them, rather than the experiencing of the love of God, into sacred things and sacred activities.

2. An understanding of the faith perspective we bring to religion can help us understand why two reasonable men can differ radically, and with conviction, about religion. To put reasoning at the base of religious faith forces us to conclude that when men disagree on a religious topic it is because one or the other has approached it with faulty reasoning and therefore is wrong. In fact both may have a secure relationship with God but simply begin with different faith perspectives.

3. This position also has important implications for an understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. We have not been very successful in the past in explaining at what level the Holy Spirit functions. If there is a core perspective that is prerational and not of our own creation, then we can begin to understand the importance of choosing to let the Spirit come into our lives and transform this level of our being.

II

I wish to mention three areas of concern that I have over Rice's position.

First, Rice defines reason as the capacity for giving reasons. He illustrates this by saying that the ability to reason is similar to a person's understanding why a car runs in contrast to the person who knows that a car runs but does not know why. Does he mean that I cannot reason about a topic unless I fully understand it? What if the topic itself is reasonable, that is, capable of rational explanation, but my understanding is limited? Take, for instance, the topic of the expanding

universe. Can only an astronomer reason about it? Is there any astronomer who fully understands it? For that matter, is there any topic which is so well understood that it can be reasoned about by use of the narrow definition that Rice has given? A definition that is too narrow has little value in religious discussion.

My second concern has to do with Rice's treatment of immediate knowledge. I concur that we come to religious concerns with a perspective that is self-authenticating, prerational, and that may seem to be immediate. But knowledge that seems to be immediate at one moment may be revealed to be mediate knowledge at a later time.

For instance, through the years I have noticed that I have a definite preference for brown shoes. I cannot explain why. I just like brown shoes. My preference for brown seems to be immediate and self-authenticating. However, I suspect there are, in fact, reasons why I prefer brown; and if I could spend sufficient time with an analyst, I might come to understand my bias toward brown. If I should, then I would come to understand what has seemed to be immediate knowledge.

In counseling, we often see people gain insights into why they have certain perspectives about life. As this process of self-discovery goes on, they may choose to retain or reject these perspectives. Their reasoning process now becomes important — for not only does reasoning test the validity of the original perspective, but it determines the influence the perspective will have in the future.

In the realm of religious values, this tension between faith and reason is especially essential. What we think is an irreducible element of faith may be only the result of childhood conditioning or peer pressure. There will always be a gap between that for which reason can provide a basis and that for which faith believes. But we should be seeking constantly to close the gap between the two.

Finally, I question the use of the phrase "maximal conviction" in relation to a faith perspective. It is true that a prerational bias is often held with tenacity. But is the term maximal conviction appropriately applied to a perspective that may be the result of childhood conditioning rather than divine revelation? Would it not be better to say that a faith commitment is held with maximal conviction when it has been verified through the process of reasoning to be fully consistent with all that is known about God?

When faith seeks and finds understanding, man can then know with certainty what was once known only in faith, for it now carries with it both the conviction of the original perspective and the authentication of reason as well. An over-emphasis on either the power of reason or self-authenticating knowledge can lead to delusion. Is it not important, then, to seek an appropriate tension between the realms of faith and reason to bring maximum conviction to our religious commitment?