

Reason and Will in the Experience of Faith

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We are truly fortunate to have Richard Rice's carefully reasoned paper as a basis for a discussion of the relation of faith and reason. The subject has needed critical scrutiny for some time. The urgency of the need for an analysis of this issue has increased with the study of such issues by Seventh-day Adventist scholars. We must be careful to avoid (*a*) intellectualism that might undermine the great verities of the faith and (*b*) unresponsiveness to the spirit of truth.

First, I will list a number of Rice's concepts which, in my mind, advance the discussion. Then I will state what I understand his paper to say. This approach should give an opportunity for correction and supplementation that may clarify the full intent of the paper. It is to be hoped that a set of commonly held concepts emerging from the discussion may become a basis for resolving differences where they exist.

I

When Erasmus emphasized the importance of the action of free will guided by a scholarly treatment of the available evidence, Luther objected that such a role for the will was a legalistic rejection of righteousness by faith alone.¹ Rice also warns against a use of will which might exclude righteousness by faith. Regarding faith he asks, "Does it originate in an act of the human will, in an exercise of human freedom? Or is it the result of divine activity, such as the influence of the Holy Spirit?" (p. 19). By means of a rhetorical question, he clearly conveys the idea that faith is not a human work but a gift of God. I agree that we must not describe the role of the will in such a way that we claim it is able to generate faith.

Rice is in the Lutheran tradition when he emphasizes the damaged character of reason after sin. He speaks of the "disastrous effects of sin on man's rational

faculties" (p. 20). Any solution of the problem of the relation between faith and reason must take into account the distorted character of all human reason in a world of sin.

The transition from unfaith to faith is not produced by an action of reason. "There is no rational explanation for the transition from unfaith to faith; it can only be described" (p. 27). Rice explains the inability of reason to account for this transition by saying, "Faith always believes more than what reason can account for; what faith affirms always extends beyond the evidence which reason supplies" (p. 25). Reason is able to produce only greater or lesser probability for a concept and is not able to produce absolute certainty. I agree that carefully reasoned weighing of evidence is not able to produce certainty of knowledge and that the transition to faith is not produced by reason. I would say that the transition to faith is produced by God when man accepts this gift of faith.

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All inferential reason is based on a prior immediate starting point. Rice differentiates between mediate knowledge (which is inferred from something else that is known) and immediate knowledge (for which no reasons can be given) (pp. 21-22). I agree that all attempts to give reasons for a position begin with a self-evident starting point.

God takes the initiative in all knowledge of faith. Rice approves of Augustine's position that "human reason can know nothing of the divine unless inwardly moved by the Spirit of God" (p. 20). I would go even further and say that man cannot generate any truth independently of God. "Every gleam of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world."² If man knows the truth about anything, that truth has not been generated by human reason apart from God.

There is a difference between belief in which there is a "mere entertainment of certain ideas" and faith in which there is "commitment to the content of these ideas as determinative of one's entire existence" (p. 20). When there is commitment, there is a modification of one's ability to be immediately aware of evidence from which inferences may be made (pp. 23, 25). I agree that the type of faith commitment a person makes has a far-reaching effect on his ability to be aware of evidence and to weigh its value.

II

At this point, I turn from agreements to some questions that need consideration. Because these questions are related to the positions on which we agree, they are the basis on which to develop common answers.

The first question has to do with the role of free will. Although I recognize that there is value in rejecting the idea that the will produces faith, I believe that free

will should have a role in accepting or rejecting faith. The power is God's and the responsibility for acceptance or rejection is man's. Luther is wrong when he likens the will to a horse which "goes where God wills" when God rides it but sins when Satan rides it — with the self having no control over who rides.³ Before God irresistibly grants grace, the will is in bondage to Satan. This makes God responsible for the rejection of faith, which is sin. Erasmus is wrong when he seems to say that part of the work is done by the unaided human will, and most of the work is done by the grace of God.⁴ Rice is not clear in his treatment of freedom. *Is he able to demonstrate that faith is given by God in such a way that its acceptance or rejection is the responsibility of man?*

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The second question deals with the extent of damage to man's cognitive powers resulting from sin. Rice makes a contribution to the solution of the problem of the relation of faith and reason when he points out that inferential reason is damaged. When he says, "To be seen as evidence, the facts always depend on the assumption of a particular perspective" (p. 23), he suggests that the quality of immediate awareness is improved after faith. If a person were to use his freedom to reject a right perspective, would not his subsequent immediate awareness be damaged? If my ancestors rejected truths, would they not hand on to me a distorted cognitive structure that would issue in faulty immediate awareness? Londis calls attention to the Moslem who experiences immediate awareness that has the same "self-authenticating" character as that of the Christian (p. 33).⁵ I believe that the damage to reason corrupts both inferential reason and immediate awareness. *How can Rice identify and correct delusive and erroneous immediate awareness?*

The third question is related to our agreement that reason does not produce the transition from unfaith to faith. Rice says that the "very essence of faith, then, is maximal conviction" (p. 29). He explains the inability of reason to produce this maximal conviction by showing that the conviction is stronger than the available evidence supports. It seems to me that he is in danger of equating faith with the content of maximal conviction in such a way that he would not be able to revise the content of an immediate awareness if inferential reason seemed to make this necessary. When John the Baptist witnessed to his faith by pointing out Jesus as the Messiah, he meant a messiah who would conquer the Romans. Early Christian disciples revised the content of their faith commitment in the light of an inference from sense-perceived evidence when Jesus was crucified and did not conquer the Romans. Early Adventists revised the content of their faith commitment on the basis of inferences from sense-perceived consequences when Christ did not come on October 22, 1844. *Does Rice's position allow the correction of a faulty maximal conviction in the light of inferential reason?*

The fourth question deals, again, with the relation of immediate and mediate

awareness. We agree that all inferential reason is based on a prior immediate starting point. Rice seems to suggest that correct starting points identify themselves by being “self-authenticating” (pp. 20-21, 27). He even speaks of them as being “absolutely certain” (p. 29). I have spoken of the need to revise a maximal conviction in the light of inferential reason. It seems to me that the Bible does not recommend that revelation be identified as a certain type of immediate awareness. Not every concept for which there is maximal conviction should be accepted as revelation. It is necessary to test the contents of immediate awareness by comparison with other concepts believed to be revealed. (See 1 Corinthians 14:29-32, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, 1 John 4:1.) Both the testing of agreement with other revelation and the checking of fruits require inferential reason. *How does Rice identify revelation if immediate awareness always has priority over inferential reason?*

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The fifth question concerns the relation between maximal conviction and faith. In one place Rice speaks about the difference between belief and commitment in a way that would permit a demon to be absolutely certain that God exists, but to be without faith (p. 20). In most of the paper he seems to say that if maximal conviction is present, faith is present (pp. 21, 27, 29-30). I believe that a person cannot be responsible for his commitment unless he is conscious of the alternative that is supported by the weight of evidence prior to his decision. For me, faith is not necessarily present when there is maximal conviction. Faith is present if the person commits himself in action on all truths that are clearly supported by the weight of evidence. The commitment is the way by which a person receives the gift of faith from God. *Should we equate faith with maximal conviction in the light of the suggestion of James that the demons have maximal conviction?*

These comments and questions seek to call attention to two important requirements for a description of faith. There must be an action of free will in receiving the gift of faith, so that God will not be responsible for evil in the case of rejection. Through the action of reason — comparing with other revelation and evaluating the fruits or consequences — it must be possible to correct errors that are held in faith.

REFERENCES

1/ Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1969), vol. 17, pp. 113-117.

2/ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1903), p. 14.

3/ Luther, vol. 17, p. 140.

4/ Desiderius Erasmus, *On the Freedom of the Will*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 17, pp. 79, 82, 84.

5/ James J. Londis, Comment on Rice, *SPECTRUM* 5(2):32-37 (Spring 1973).