

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 79

The Age Of Reason – Part 1 Modern Mind and a Modern Church

In 1633, an Italian math professor named Galileo Galilei stood before the inquisition of Rome on the charge of heresy. Galileo published his beliefs and his scientific proofs that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the sun around the earth. The official Church position was that the earth was the center of the universe surrounded by the sun, moon, stars, as well as other planets.¹ This earth-centered mindset was based not only on biblical interpretations, but also on the philosophy and teachings of Aristotle and other ancient philosophers.

The biblical basis for believing the earth as the unmovable center of the universe came from passages like Psalms 93:1 (“The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved”); Psalms 96:10 (“Say among the nations, ‘the Lord reigns.’ The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved.”); 1 Chronicles 16:30 (“Tremble before him, all the earth! The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.”); Psalms 104:5 (“He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.”). Similarly, Ecclesiastes 1:5 states, “The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.” From these passages, Galileo’s teaching that the earth in fact moved and the sun stood still was considered contrary to Scripture, faith, and hence, was rank heresy.

On Galileo’s side, he had his observations and mathematic formulas based upon his usage of the newly invented telescope. Galileo was able to show that there were moons that revolved around the planet, Jupiter. That alone indicated that the entire heavens did not revolve around the earth. Galileo also set forward mathematical theories of the rising and falling tides as proof that the earth itself was in motion (For Galileo, these tides were a sloshing of the water based upon the earth rotating on its axis and revolving around the sun).

This is not to say that Galileo was an irreligious man. In fact, Galileo was a devout Catholic. Galileo believed that Scripture contained poetry, songs, and passages written from the perspective of someone standing on our world. Thus, the Scripture could write that the sun rises and sets even though the sun itself does not move. One would need to understand Scripture in light of the different kinds

¹ This was not simply a “Catholic” position. Luther also believed the same, writing, “The fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, not the earth.” Calvin believed and wrote similarly. *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 22.

of literature contained within it, rather than as simply a book of science or instructions.

Fast-forward a hundred years after Galileo – by the mid-1700s, the majority of educated people no longer thought that the universe revolved around the earth. Science vindicated the observations and beliefs of Galileo on this astronomical issue. In this class, however, we ask the question - how? Was there simply an overwhelming force of science that validated Galileo? Or, were there changes in the worldview of the thinkers and teachers between the time of Galileo and the mid-1700s that affected general knowledge? That is the focus of this class.

Galileo was at a transition time, where the medieval mindset was transformed into what many scholars now call the modern mindset. In the medieval mentality, the authority of the church was above all else (the church was even “over” Scripture, to the extent that the church was the sole interpreter of Scripture). Similarly, the church was over science, as matters of faith were deemed the greater reality over and against matters of simple science. This mindset changed for many over the next one hundred years following Galileo. We will attempt to trace some of the key points of change as well as the effects of those changes on the church in faith.

THE CHANGING MINDSET

Most every philosophy book that has a section on modern philosophy will begin that section with a discussion of Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Many scholars denote Descartes as the “father of modern philosophy” as well as the “first modern thinker.” The reason Descartes carries such labels stems from his revolutionary approach to knowledge shown in his writings and teachings.² Unlike the medieval mindset, Descartes believed that “Reason” (*i.e.*, “rationale processing” or “logic”) was the final arbiter of truth. Descartes believed you could understand the world through mechanistic terms, much like a mathematical formula. Toward this end, a major work of Descartes, titled *Treatise on the World*, set forward a view of the moving earth consistent with that of Galileo. After Galileo was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, however, Descartes set aside publishing his *Treatise on the World* until after Descartes died.

Notwithstanding the delayed publication of that work, Descartes did publish a number of other writings setting forward his philosophy and approach. Because Descartes believed that reason could appropriately determine truth, Descartes searched hard for a foundation from which he could begin to apply such reason.

² His approach will not seem revolutionary to us because we are products of his thinking and approach. That is why he is considered a “modern thinker” as opposed to the thinkers that preceded him.

Descartes was aware of the skepticism with which he and others could view the world. Descartes recognized the challenge of understanding whether anything was actually real. In other words, is there a real house or building where one might be? Is there a real meal one is consuming? Is there a real life one is living, or is it merely all a dream?

Descartes decided the rationale thing was to doubt everything except for that of which he was certain. The one thing that Descartes was certain of was that Descartes was thinking through all of these questions. Because Descartes was thinking, Descartes knew that Descartes himself must really exist, and to that end, Descartes coined the phrase: “I think, therefore, I am.” After this, Descartes began to proceed forth in logical fashion to build out his reasoned structure of understanding the world. In this regard, Descartes believed that logic, reason, and understanding were perfect. A failure to understand was not an imperfection in the understanding, but rather an imperfection in the will of one who refuses to properly apply understanding.

This thinking of Descartes turned the world on its head. It laid the groundwork for others to follow rationally questioning the reality of all aspects of life and belief.

In England, a number of influential people took Descartes’ challenge and mindset and sought to use reason to explain aspects of the world that had previously not been understood. For example, Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1728) used basic mathematics and reason to explain the theory of gravity, rotation, trajectory, descent of canon balls, elliptical rotation of planets around the sun, and many other aspects of basic physics.

While Descartes believed that people are born with innate ideas that can be rationally and reasonably developed for ultimate truth, another philosopher in this time period took a different route. John Locke (1630-1704) was an English philosopher who approached knowledge from a different angle than Descartes. Like Descartes, Locke believed in the supreme value and usefulness of reason for determining ultimate truth. However, unlike Descartes, John Locke believed that the human mind was born a blank slate (a *tabula rasa*). Locke took Descartes’ love of reason, combined it with Newton’s use of mathematic precision to expound truths of the universe, and fostered a school of thought later called “Empiricism.” The fancy word “Empiricism” refers to the idea of finding truth through observation and experience as opposed to mere development of ideas.

Locke took this approach of reason and applied it beyond the mere physical world of Newton. Locke applied this empirical rational approach to philosophy, psychology, politics, and even religion. Locke was one of several during this time period who believed that religion and faith were properly subject to the same laws

of reason and to the same strict rationality that explained nature and science. It was Locke who wrote and published “anonymously” in 1695 a work entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*. In this work, Locke argues that the doctrines of orthodox Christianity were by and large true, and the Bible is trustworthy. But, the key importance of this work is that Locke was subjecting scripture and orthodoxy to human reason. Locke was setting up human reason as the final arbiter of truth rather than divine revelation itself.

This time period is often referred to as the “Age of Reason.” As reason trumped all else, science was making great advances in understanding many aspects of the world that had previously been unexplained. These advances hurt the misplaced faith and theology of many. Scholars use a phrase “God of the Gaps” to help explain some of the role of theology during this time and earlier days. The “God of the Gaps” terminology references mankind’s temptation to explain matters beyond comprehension as a “God thing.” In other words, if we are unable to give an adequate explanation for some event or occurrence, then we will attribute that event or occurrence to God.

As an example of the God of the Gaps, consider comets. Prior to the Age of Reason, comets were generally considered omens that mysteriously appeared in the sky with no explanation other than a message from God. It was during this period of time, that a man named Edmond Halley (1656-1742) was spending time trying to apply reason and rationality to his observations in the astronomical sky. Halley observed a comet in 1682. He was aware from his historical readings that a similar comet had also appeared in 1607 as well as 1531 (Halley could have gone back and looked at the famous Bayeaux Tapestry depicting William the Conqueror’s invasion of England in 1066 and see the comet portrayed in that tapestry as well!).

Halley determined that rather than the comets being an omen from God, they were in fact orbiting bodies in the universe. This one particular comet that brought his attention to the issue he determined was the same comet that had been noted in the historical references mentioned above. Halley predicted that this comet would continue to visit earth every 76 years,³ with the next visit due in 1758. When the comet appeared as predicted 17 years after Halley’s death, the comet took Halley’s name and has been known as Halley’s Comet ever since.

This comet experience is a good illustration of the frailty of the God of the Gaps’ approach to both understanding the universe and understanding God. The idea that God must be the answer for things humans cannot explain has resulted in a great shifting of faith on the issue of where and who God may be. This shift

³ Subsequently, the comet’s appears has been modified to every 75-76 years.

comes about because human understanding has grown successively throughout generations, at least since the Age of Reason began.

EFFECTS OF THE AGE OF REASON ON FAITH

What happened to the church and to faith with the advent of modern thinking? Once man begins to subject his faith, his church, and his scriptures to rational objective thought, are we surprised to find changes? Scholars, both theologians and historians, point to this change in thinking as the cause of many significant alterations in church practice, doctrine, and theology itself.

Of course, the changes in thinking as well as the related changes in church doctrine have had a substantial impact on the historical development of society as well. The United States of America is a country founded upon principles that were John Locke and others promulgated. Among the founding fathers of America were “deists” when it came to religious faith. Deism as a faith found great growth and ammunition in this Age of Reason and the teaching of Locke and others. The Deists believed that there was in fact a creator God who had created the world with all of its natural order and processes. Having completed that creation, however, this God retreated back into his heavenly realms leaving the earth to operate on its own much like a watch operates once it has been made and wound.

The Age of Reason subjected not only science to rigorous scrutiny, but also government as well. In the Deists’ mind, there was no longer any concept of a divinely appointed king. If God was in fact leaving the world to operate on its own terms rather than intervening in history, then no government was divinely appointed. Instead, governments existed “by the people and for the people.” This became the mantra by which the United States of America rebelled from the King of England and proclaimed certain inalienable rights that were endowed by the Creator including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Hence, we have the American Revolution and a government that is set up with political independence from any set religious system.

While the American Revolution proceeded in ways that at least continued to unfold Christian principles, revolution took a different tilt in Europe. As “Enlightenment” thought took hold in France, the French king and French church were both seen as contrary to what reasoned people might conclude was right and appropriate. Hence, the French revolution came (1789-1799), the King was decapitated, and the church dismantled. After Napoleon’s rise to power (1804-1814), both the church and the monarchy were restored, albeit with severely curtailed powers and authority.

The impact of the Age of Reason on the church is the subject of writings by many theologians and historians, and the impact is classified differently depending on whom one studies. Historical theologian, Alister McGrath, who teaches historical theology at Oxford University, has set forward six areas where he perceives changes occurred in theology as a result of the Age of Enlightenment.⁴ McGrath sets forward these six areas as those where traditional Christian thought was challenged and altered by many who used reason to trump tradition and faith:

1. *The Possibility of Miracles*

As Reason sought its preeminence in the minds and teachings of men, miracles were one of the first areas to be challenged. Dave Hume (1711-1776) wrote an essay on miracles in 1748 where he asserted that miracles were a physical impossibility (yes, to some it seems obvious that such is the meaning of the word “miracle”). Hume believed there was no place in a reasoned, rational, and logical system for a miracle. The recitation of miracles in the Bible must therefore be either legends or misunderstandings of events. After Hume, many others would start writing explanations of the miracles in the Bible seeking to excuse the occurrence with any number of different explanations from illusion to chicanery, to lies or gossip.

2. *The Notion of Revelation*

Part and partial of the Age of Reason was the concept that the natural world itself would produce an understanding through logical deduction of all that is true and accurate. To that extent, there would be no need for revelation, for indeed any truth found in Scripture could also be understood through the logical deduction and analysis of the natural world. In 1793, Thomas Payne would write in America in his work the *Age of Reason* that it was absurd to think that God’s word could be written or there would be such a thing as our inspired Scriptures. Payne was a principle founder of the American Revolution writing the widely read *Common Sense* (1776) which advocated independence for the American Colonies.

Payne was a Deist who ultimately believed there was a God, but this God was not the God of Christianity. In the *Age of Reason*, Payne wrote that his opinions,

are the effect of the most clear and long established conviction that the Bible and the testament are impositions upon the world, that the fall of man, the account of Jesus Christ being the son of God, and of his dying to appease the wrath of God, and of salvation by that strange means, are

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology, an Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, (Blackwell Publishing 1998) Page 223ff.

all fabulous inventions, dishonorable to the wisdom and power of the Almighty; that the only true religion is Deisms, by which I then meant, and mean now, the belief of one God and an imitation of his moral character, are the practice of what are called moral virtues - and that it was upon this only (so far as religion is concerned) that I rested all my hopes of happiness hereafter so say I now - and so help me God.

3. *The Doctrine of Original Sin*

The Enlightenment produced a number of people that vigorously opposed the concept of human nature as flawed or corrupted. If Reason is to be the ultimate trump card, then one must set aside a doctrine of original sin because inherent in the doctrine of original sin is the concept that man is a fallen creature. As a fallen creature, man is affected not just physically, but mentally as well. So, the doctrine of original sin teaches that while man is able to think rationally, the rationality of every thinking man is still fallen and somewhat affected. In other words, man is not capable of pure reason with all that he does and thinks. This runs contrary to the entire thesis of the Age of Reason. The Age of Reason in the hands of many of its proponents was an age where reason would trump all other matters. Reason must be seen as pure and unadulterated. The idea that humanity might not be able to think 100% purely reasonable was clearly in conflict with the mantra of the age. The Enlightenment found humanity's release from bondage as found in pure Reason, rather than God's redemption from original sin.

4. *The Problem of Evil*

With the advent of the Enlightenment, the problem of evil was seen as a serious critique to the validity of Christian faith. The argument was that if the Christian faith was in fact valid, there would be no adequate explanation for evil. This teaching evolved to a point where man was thought and taught to be innately good. Evil was seen as something that was rapidly disappearing as man applied himself and his mind to Reason. Reason was seen to bring virtue.

5. *The Status and Interpretation of Scripture*

As mentioned earlier, John Locke in 1695 put forward a critical analysis of Scripture that by in large supported Scripture. Others were also seeking to apply "pure Reason" to Scripture, but some came up with different results. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was a Dutch philosopher of Portuguese Jewish birth. Though his life was relatively short, Spinoza has become famous for his dedication to philosophy seeking to apply human reason to matters of theology and politics. Spinoza applied reason to his understanding of the Bible, and produced a biblical criticism that saw the Bible as a historical human product as

opposed to a divine revelation. Following in his tracks and that of others in the Age of Reason, many scholars would begin challenging the authority of Scripture and the historical accuracy of Scripture in a number of different ways.

6. *The Identity and Significance of Jesus*

As Scripture was challenged and examined under a hypercritical eye of “Reason” and as miracles were set aside, as the idea of revelation was considered nonsensical, as original sin and the problem of evil were discounted, naturally the nature and identity of Jesus was challenged as well. In the Age of Reason, we see some scholars trying to analyze under a historical microscope using hypercritical reasoning a determination of the actual historical figure they thought ultimately became the Jesus of the Bible. Many critical commentaries and works are published even to this day in an effort to reconstruct the actual person of Jesus, trying to determine what parts of the Bible they believe have any historical accuracy or validity.

POINTS FOR HOME

Where does this leave us? Is reason valid? Can we say with certainty that $2 + 2 = 4$? Of course, $2 + 2$ does $= 4$. Reason and rationality are genuine. They are part and parcel of the world in which we live and the natural order of things. To a biblical Christian worldview, reason and rationality are not a troublesome issue. A reasoned Christian worldview understands that there is a God who set the world in motion. As Augustine, Aquinas, and countless others would admonish us: “All truth is God’s truth!” God is a God of reason, a God of justice, and a God of consistency. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

There are limits to humans’ abilities to use their minds reasonably. These limits stem from several aspects of Christian teaching. First, man was created finite. The Genesis creation account shows man and woman with limitations of thought and action (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:5-6). By this, we mean man was never created with omniscience or full understanding. Man had limitations inherent as a creature in his ability to think, understand, and know. Additionally, there is a second aspect of man after the fall. Biblically, we understand that man after the fall is man under a curse. Part of that curse is darkened thinking, irrationality, and a failure to perceive or understand matters of spiritual import. (Romans 3:11 “There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God”; 1 Cor. 2:14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them;” Eph. 4:18 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts”). Can we not simply look at the people in our lives and see from matters of conflict and other matters that not

everyone thinks the same, not everyone has clear rationality on all issues, and our thoughts are certainly blurred at times by events, emotions, and personal histories.

So, we see a place for reason, and yet we also see a place for revelation. Reason alone is insufficient for man to see and know God or true wisdom. (Pro. 9:10 “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”). Left on its own, “the world through wisdom did not know God.” (1 Cor. 1:21). And so we see from God a revealing of Himself, primarily through His Son but also through revelation. (Heb. 1:1-3 “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”)

Does that mean that revelation should not be closely examined? Of course not. It is appropriate to examine revelation within the light of the reason that we have. We must always do so, however guardedly, recognizing that there are limits to our understanding, knowing that knowledge alone “puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1). So with careful and prayerful examination we study and rationally scrutinize God’s word. So doing, we unfold the riches of God’s word as written in poetry and stories as well as historical narrative. This gives us a reasonable faith, rather than a simple assignment of God to the gaps!

But it is not just faith that should be examined carefully. The ideas propagated by many in the name of “reason” are frankly unreasonable! Everyone should heed Paul’s admonition to the Colossians to “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” (Col. 2:8).

We certainly are in a position to examine those around us, the various world views that have been set forth by the various faiths as well as philosophies of humanity and history, and compare those to the biblical world views set forth in scripture. In future lessons, we will have an opportunity to do this in more detail and see that the biblical world view, the explanations and revelations contained in Scripture about man, God, history, and destiny, are most clearly consistent with the world that we see around us. In other words, no other worldview, philosophy, or belief system adequately explains the world in which we live, our bodies and minds, hearts and emotions, than the Christian worldview. The Christian worldview, “reasonably,” is the most adequate rationale explanation for why things are as they are.

Faith is not simply accepted blindly, nor is it a leap from Reason that allows us to confidently believe what we believe. Rather, reason, hand in hand and guided by revelation, explain the human condition in ways that make more sense than anything else. We can therefore give reasonable support for our beliefs. We can

also live confidently in the revelation of God for our church and ourselves. We find that with humility we bow before the Creator and live in obedient relationship. As Habbakkuk 2:4 notes, “Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by faith.” All too often, pride keeps people from faith in God, not uncertainty!