

RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

IV. RATIONALISM

GEORGE CROSS, PH.D.

Professor of Systematic Theology in Rochester Theological Seminary,
Rochester, New York

The term "rationalism," like so many other hybrids, is commonly used by controversialists in a somewhat derogatory sense. No such implication is intended in the present discussion. To some readers, however, it may occasion surprise to find rationalism treated as one of the typical interpretations of Christianity, for people have been accustomed to hearing it characterized as a foe to Christianity and, indeed, to all religion. For they will say, perhaps, "Does it not seek to discredit the authority of the Bible? Does it not repudiate the essential Christian doctrines? Does it not deny the need or the reality of any revelation whatsoever? Does it not, in fact, ignore the supernatural altogether?"

That there have been forms of rationalism that, to the minds of their advocates, were synonymous with religious unbelief is not to be disputed. There have been not a few thinkers who, in the name of what they call reason, have undertaken to show the absurdity of religious hopes and beliefs. Such a type of rationalism is pretty sure to misinterpret the religion it seeks to combat. But in history there has appeared also another type of rationalism that has sought to be friendly to religion and particularly to Christianity, a rationalism

that professes, not to destroy, but to fulfil faith by freeing it from the influences of ideas that seemed to confuse and corrupt it. There has been and there is a rationalism that seeks to minister to faith by insisting that the utterances of religion shall harmonize with the canons of thought.

It is not easy to define rationalism. It lacks the concreteness of Catholicism and Protestantism. We cannot point to any institution or mode of religious life that professes to embody it. It lacks the distinctness of mysticism, for it does not seek retirement from the world, but professes an intimate relation to everything we do or say. Moreover, all men claim to be rational, though, according to Carlyle, there are comparatively few who can make good the claim! To be rational is to be possessed of reason, that is, the power of orderly, consistent thinking. But in addition to the power of thought there are other functions of nature or forms of experience, such as feeling and volition, which seem very different and almost, if not quite, independent of thought. Unthinking emotions seem to spring up from some unfathomed depth of our nature and to carry us on by the force of their impulse to unthought and unintended results. Many

people seem to be governed by unreflecting feeling. Others, again, lack both thought and feeling, it would seem. For by the mere force and doggedness of will they do things which set both human feelings and human thinking at naught. A rationalist in general is one who, while recognizing a place for the play of feeling and of will in our nature, seeks to subordinate both to the controlling force of thought. He stands for the rightful supremacy of intellect in men. Emotion and will are wayward and fitful in themselves and they may become wanton and harmful. Mere animalism lies in that direction. The distinctive dignity of man consists in that intelligent discernment or judgment which makes him superior to all the fluctuations of feeling and volition and gives his life an order and steadiness like that of the ordered cosmos around him. Thought is legislative in relation to emotion and will. Man understands, man reasons, he is logical. That is what makes him man. A rationalist in religion is one who stands for the absolute supremacy of the logical understanding in the determination of the true and the false in religion as in everything else.

It is held, then, that a direct contradiction in anything is intolerable. The illogical is the false. Men cannot permanently believe anything but the truth, whether it be in matters of fact or of conduct or of faith. Science is concerned with matters of fact, ethics with matters of conduct, and theology with matters of faith or religion. The principle that determines ultimately what is to be held for truth is the same in all three realms. This means, then, that

as little as, for example, science can endure a contradiction in fact, so also it is impossible to admit a contradiction between science and ethics or theology. Anything that would destroy the harmony between these is to be rejected. Nothing can be held to be theologically true that is scientifically false. A true religion is one whose doctrines are true and a false religion is one whose doctrines are false. Religion must stand the logical test.

Now, in assigning this primacy to the logical understanding, we are assigning to it at the same time priority. It is the first in the field. Apart from it nothing whatever is known. It discovers truth. All supposed truth that is communicated to us through extraordinary channels, whether it be by revelation or by mystical or subconscious processes, is to be compelled to make good its claim by being built upon the prior truth of the reason. Reason is the true organ of all knowledge in all realms. The true religion is, in the end, the religion of reason. There can be no other. If we hold that Christianity is the one true religion, it is because in it reason comes to her highest utterance or self-expression. This, it seems to me, is the position of a thoroughgoing "Christian rationalism."

It will be admitted that religious people commonly shrink from applying this rigid test to their own faith, even if they do apply it to the faith of others. There seems to be something dearer to them than logic. They will persist in believing things which seem to others illogical and impossible. In fact, all the historical religions have had traditions of occurrences that seem to defy

the power of reason to explain or justify. They have been characterized by explosions of emotion or daring acts of will that offend the sober sense of conventional humanity and boldly challenge reason to do its worst—and apparently with success. A stalemate often arises. Reason, it seems, *cannot* abandon its prerogative, and religion *will* not. One shrinks from disorder. The other shrinks from the commonplace, the conventional, the uninspiring. It is no uncommon thing to find men even of great intellectual power and willing to accord to reason a directive relation to external things at the same time scorning its claims to dictate the terms of religious belief. The great Tertullian, with all his confidence that the soul was naturally Christian, nevertheless shrank not from flouting reason in the realm of faith: “I believe, because it is absurd.” Luther, while granting the value of reason in morals and even while inferring on rational grounds the existence of an eternal divine being, called reason a harlot when it claimed to discern and judge the higher “things of the Spirit.” Reason has only a negative place in religion. It comprehends what God is not, but cannot comprehend what God is. Therefore Luther could still believe in the saving efficacy of sacraments, though reason denied it. Nothing is more common in great popular revivals of religion than to find people under the power of torrents of emotion scouting all appeals to consistent reflection because they feel themselves carried into a realm that reason cannot reach.

It is when people attempt to explain their religion or to justify it by bringing it into relation to the common conditions

of life that they get into trouble. For to explain it is to rationalize it. This is precisely what is attempted in theology. The effort to interpret one’s religion is an effort to assign to it an orderly and constant place in the spiritual world to which we belong. The attempt to prove the occurrence of a miracle or explain the significance of a miracle is, in effect, an attempt to show that, so far from its being an inexplicable or wanton occurrence, it conveys an intelligible meaning to us; that is, the belief in it is rational. The same is true of the attempt to establish or expound the truth of a revelation. Indeed, all theorizing in support of religion is of the nature of an attempt to naturalize the supernatural in our thinking, to make the sway of reason coextensive with the experience of the highest realities. No wonder, therefore, that this should result in testing religion by the canons of thought and in tracing its origin, in part at least, to thought.

It has come about somewhat naturally that in the histories of rationalism, its critical—particularly negatively critical—side has received the emphasis. In the progress of Christianity rationalism has attacked the superstitions and immoralities of paganism and prepared the way for the higher faith. It has appeared as a protest against the dim, dreamy, and indescribable self-contemplation of the mystics or as a reaction against the hallucinations, visions, trances, or absurdities of a crude and enthusiastic revivalism. It has attacked the ocerdotalism and sacramentalism that constitute the Catholic system and prepared the way for a Protestantism that dissolved that

system. It has turned upon the Protestantism that it helped to create and undermined its professions of a supernatural authority for its doctrines. Or, again, it has pricked the bubbles of a soaring speculation and exposed its vacuity. One might almost say that the rationalist is he who claims to be the exponent of "common-sense," were it not that in seeking so persistently to explain he ends so often by explaining away. Rationalism seems to feed on other systems.

If we seek to reduce the contentions of rationalism to their ultimate basis we may say that they repose on three pillars: first, the constancy and value of the natural order of the universe; second, the competency of the human mind to discover that order; third, the adequacy of this discovery for our practical needs. The first of these is commonly admitted to be an assumption underlying science and philosophy in their final sweep. There is a universe; two universes are an impossibility. This universe embraces all objects of possible knowledge, whether they be presented to us by external perception or by introspection. It is a universe in which change is observed, but the changes are continuous and regular. It is a universe of a developing order. If we distinguish the spiritual order from the material order, nevertheless, in the end, both are reducible to one, which we may call the order of nature. But when it comes to the question of the method of procedure in discovering that order, the question remains open whether we shall proceed from a knowledge of the spiritual to the material, or the reverse. The second

assumption flows from the first, since an order of nature undiscoverable by us has no meaning for us. If the world has a meaning for us we must be competent to discover it. The mind knows only that which it discovers. The third assumption is the logical inference from the other two. We live in the universe and our practice must accord with its character if life is not to be futile. Rationalism, therefore, reposes on a confidence in the capacity of the human mind, in the exercise of its native powers of knowledge, to supply safe and adequate direction to life. Religious rationalism, as a theory, is that interpretation of the material and spiritual worlds which regards them as expressing in the inner soul or consciousness of man the realities of the religious life; that is to say, the universe discloses to man the essential relations in which he stands to the Supreme Being—whatever these words may mean. Christian rationalism regards this rational interpretation of the universe as the same in content with the essential doctrines of Christianity.

I. Rationalism in Historical Christianity

In tracing the growth of the historical forms of the Christian faith one cannot avoid the recognition of the fact that the rationalistic attitude has always been a powerful factor. Even if many of the historic expressions of the faith have been seemingly without any marks of regard for the common reason of men, in the end they have always been obliged to give an account of themselves at its bar. For example, Christians have always believed that they were in pos-

session of a revelation from God, and in times of spontaneous utterance of the deepest feelings that men can experience multitudes will claim that they have received a personal revelation. It was so in the first century of our era. But at such times there has always been some Paul to come forward bringing along with his acknowledgment that the revelation was real, the demand that it be expressed in an orderly manner: "When ye come together, each one hath a psalm, hath a teaching, hath a revelation, hath a tongue, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. . . . If there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church. . . . The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets; for God is not a God of confusion." "In the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding than ten thousand words in a tongue." Christians usually have felt bound in the end to justify their belief in a revelation by showing that it is in keeping with the nature of all knowledge and to that extent, at least, is rational. Christians have always believed also in miracles, but they have felt compelled to justify the belief in the reality of miracles by showing that there is credible testimony to their occurrence and that they meet a true need. This is just a way of saying that the belief is in accord with rational knowledge. To many this seems equivalent to the substitution of reason for revelation and miracle, or else an acknowledgment that the true revelation and the true miracle is reason. Let us glance rapidly down through the ages in which our present faith was in the making and see if it be so.

Judaism supplied the soil for the original planting of the Christian gospel. How variegated were the forms of Jewish religious life—the prophetic fire, the priestly love for the form of worship, the seer's forecast of terrible judgments! But the rhapsody of the prophet, the ritual of the priest, and the apocalypses of the seer were toned down by the sober sense of the sage. The Wisdom books are monumental of the tardy recognition of the truth that men can arrive at the happiness for which they seek in no other way than by an intelligent acquaintance with the laws of the orderly life and a hearty obedience to them. To be sure, with the Jew, all the laws of life were regarded as the commandments of their God and they never descended to mere moralism. At times their religious rationalism takes on a tone of sublime contemplation, as when the sage turns his gaze upon the wonders of the heavens or, again, upon the equal wonders of the human heart: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. . . . The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." To such men as this psalmist the world without and the world within answer to each other and together they utter the will of their God. Sometimes, as in portions of the Proverbs, this religious rationalism assumes a lower tone. The wise man may be wise only in the sense of having

a shrewd appreciation of the laws of the orderly life because he can make them serve his self-interest. Does this mark an inherent defect in rationalism—a tendency to a narrow moralism?

The traces of rationalism in the New Testament are few and of minor importance. The appeal to the natural human judgment is not wanting. James extols the worth of genuine morality and Paul has a touch of natural theology: "That which is known of God is manifest in men; for God manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made." But the overpowering impression of the personality of Jesus, the tragedy of his death, the triumph of his resurrection, and the new consciousness of power and of enlightenment in the hearts of his followers overshadowed all else. They were too much occupied with the impending cataclysm in human affairs and the universe to give themselves to the problems of the systematic thinker.

It was not long, however, before the attempt was made to construe in a rationalistic manner the Christian revelation itself and the miracles that accompanied it. As the gospel spread among the Greco-Roman peoples, it attracted to it men of sobriety and learning, who hailed the Christian message with joy because it seemed to them to bring back to life and vigor again those fundamental principles of morality that had been obscured or lost amid the social confusion of those times. The old philosophies had failed to give men the saving truth. Here was a new philosophy which was also the most ancient,

for the Scriptures that contained it came from the earliest ages, by which confidence in the eternal distinction of right from wrong and in the eternal consequences of obedience and disobedience might be restored. They accepted Christianity as the revelation of the true morality. It was the affirmation of the true morality because it was the announcement of the knowledge of the true God by him who came from God. Holding to the philosophic principle of the Logos (the principles of reason immanent in God and active in man and the world), they said that the teaching of Jesus was one in substance and purport with the expression of the Logos. In truth, he it is who was originally the Logos of God, who became personal before the creation, who himself framed the world and the rational beings in it, and who at length "took shape, became a man, and was called Jesus Christ." The prophecies that foretold his coming and his acts and the miracles which he and his followers performed attest the truth of his teachings. Christianity, then, is essentially the true teaching, the divine doctrine, the inculcation of "the excellences which reside in him [God], temperance, and justice, and philanthropy, and as many virtues as are peculiar to a God who is called by no proper name"—in a word, moralism. By our concrete rationality we are able to receive a knowledge of his will: "In order that we may follow those things that please him, choosing them by means of the rational faculties he has himself endowed us with, he both persuades us and leads us to faith." And, accordingly, "each man goes to everlasting punishment or salva-

tion according to the value of his actions.”

These apologists were really the founders of formal Christian theology. They tried to show that Christian faith was the belief and practice of those eternal principles of conduct which are identical in character and aim with that rational nature which is found in man and the universe. It may be fairly said, therefore, that the formal traditional theology began with a type of rationalism.

This early rationalism was soon overshadowed by the mystical and metaphysical interpretation of the ancient Catholic theologians—not without a struggle, however. For the growing orthodoxy found itself confronted by powerful opponents, conspicuous among whom were Arius and Pelagius. It is not possible here to exhibit the debate or expound the positions at length. Arianism, in short, stood for a conservative Logos doctrine. Its logic demanded the eternal validity of the distinction between the one true and only God and all else, including the Logos, the only begotten Son. If the Son was begotten, he had a beginning and was a creation of God. In the incarnate Christ the Logos takes the place of the rational human spirit. He mediated the revelation of God to men. Arian rationalism attempted to maintain a logical view of the relation of monotheism to belief in the revelation given to men in Christ.

Pelagianism was a protest against the Augustinian view of sin and grace which was adopted in part by Catholicism. It opposed the doctrine of original sin, bondage of the will, universal human depravity, and absolute dependence

on grace ministered in the sacraments. God is good and so also is man fundamentally. Man is free by nature and remains so. If he sins, it is always by choice and not by necessity. As he is capable of evil, so he is also capable of good. As he chooses evil by free choice, so also he chooses good freely. God's grace assists and does not compel. The revelation of Christ enlightens our minds as truth and aids our will by love. Life is a discipline and its outcome is self-determined and deserved. As Arianism attempted a rational view of the relation of God to men with respect to positive relation, Pelagianism attempted a rational view of the relation of God to men with respect to positive righteousness or goodness.

The darkness that fell upon Europe in the ages between the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of the mediaeval Empire began to pass away with the institution of the schools of Charlemagne and the monks and the awakening of interest in the ancient life of the East through the Crusades. The founding of the great European universities dates back to this time. The rescue of the precious documents of ancient Greek and Christian lore from the hand of the marauding Turk and the translations of them into the vernacular gave to the ecclesiastical scholars of the West a new vision. They became acquainted with the philosophy of Aristotle. The scientific and philosophic interest was aroused. Heretofore the saving dogmas of the Christian faith had been received with the same docile spirit with which men had received the ritual of the church—on authority. Why not strengthen the hold of the dogmas on

men's minds by giving them the support of reason? Why not prove that what is true by the authority of the church is also true by the authority of reason? If the church and reason speak with one voice, who can dispute their dogmas? The circumstances of the time threw out the challenge and there was at least a show of accepting it. Scholasticism, the philosophy of the church schools, was an attempt to rationalize the traditional faith by the aid of Greek philosophy.

In a preceding study reference was made to a powerful religious movement of the Middle Ages that flourished outside the church and threatened its power. Here is a parallel movement that began under ecclesiastical control. But who could be sure that it would remain there? What if human reason and a supposed divine authority could not be made to concur? What if they should turn out to be two steeds that tend to run apart? Then the rider must make his choice. So it was with the scholastic in the end. The enterprise was undertaken with boldness and acclaim. The famous Anselm offered his demonstration of the necessary existence of God and proceeded to justify also the dogma of the incarnation, the central dogma of Catholicism, on the ground of rational necessity. Others followed in his footsteps until the great Thomas Aquinas outlined a whole system of dogmas rationally grounded. But doubt was also stimulated. The keen wit of Abelard exhibited in his *Sic et Non* ("Yes and No") the hopeless contradictions in the Fathers to whose authority the church had deferred. John Duns Scotus showed that reason

could not be made to give its free assent to the dogmas. Gradually the failure became patent. The church had to place its dogmas on a height inaccessible to reason in order to save them. The situation in the Catholic church is virtually the same at this present time. Modernism has been trying in vain to restore to human thinking its right, but without success. Roman Catholic Christianity is the Christianity of authoritative dogmas that defy reason. Rationalism can only be sporadic in Catholicism.

In Protestantism conditions are quite different. For the Reformation owed its birth, in part, to the new learning. It was unable to live without a recognition of the inexpugnable rights of human reason. Its friends were able to defend it successfully by affirming the right of the individual intelligence to interpret the will of God for itself and by virtue of its inherent worth. The right to interpret the will of God embraced the right to determine what is the will of God. The principle of rational criticism in its whole range was thereby secured. No matter if the Reformation theologians sought to limit the trustworthiness of reason in the religious realm by means of the doctrine of original sin, they had spoken the word that could not be withdrawn. The Reformation was a struggle for intellectual freedom as well as for moral purity and religious assurance. Personal faith and personal intelligence were wedded in the soul of the Protestant and could never be divorced without damage to one or both of them.

On its intellectual side the reformation was more than a declaration of the

right to freedom. It also issued a challenge to the human mind to carry its right into execution. The whole world of knowledge was thrown open for exploration. A mighty stimulus was given to investigation in all directions. Many there were who gladly accepted the challenge. All truth was to be man's. But there was little preparation or mental equipment for the great task. It was one thing to declare that we can know and quite another thing to explain the steps by which we get possession of the facts of the universe or to vindicate the trustworthiness of the knowing process by exhibiting its constituent factors. As soon as the vastness of the regions waiting to be explored began to dawn on men's minds it was inevitable that a period of uncertainty and skepticism should supervene upon the glorious feeling of exaltation and relief that came with the Reformation.

The coming of a period of doubt was hastened and its character aggravated by the hastiness of the Protestant theologians in laying down statements of the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Driven by the exigencies of ecclesiastical and political strife, they took a short cut to a settlement of questions of religious controversy. Answers to the profoundest questions that the human soul can ask were prescribed and enforced. Their doctrines were not meant to be provisional hypotheses or temporary aids to conduct, but authoritative declarations of divine truth. To the question, How were these truths communicated to man? the answer was, By revelation. To the question, Where is this revelation to be found? the answer

was, In the Bible. And to the question, How do we know that the professed revelation is real? the answer of the ancient apologists was given, By the evidence of miracles, including prophecy. The last answer directed attention to a rational test, namely, the discovery, sifting, and weighing of evidence, and it prepared the way for the undermining of the whole structure.

It was not possible for Protestants to follow the Catholic example by falling back on institutional authority. That door they had closed to themselves. The problem of knowledge, when once accepted, had to be worked out. The repeated efforts to define and redefine their doctrines so as to remove stumbling-blocks to reason prove that the insistence of the demands of reason was felt. The failure of Protestant persecution to suppress doubt showed that there was no escaping the issues. Reason must be satisfied if faith is to live and triumph. This is a categorical imperative of the Protestant religious mind. Consequently we find, as we might have expected to find, in Protestant history the continual reappearing of rationalistic movements that sought, when faith and reason could not be made to speak in unison or in harmony, to subordinate faith to reason and to limit religion to the domain prescribed for her by the logical understanding. It is not possible to sketch in the present connection the various types of rationalism that have appeared in the history of Protestantism. Our references will be confined to those forms of rationalism that serve best to exhibit its general character.