Faith and Reason

Teacher Background

The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy provides a sound discussion of faith and reason. It can be located at: www.utm.edu/research/iep/f/faith-re.htm

The following extract has been adapted from the above website. Author information will be found at the end of the extract.

Both faith and reason are sources of authority upon which beliefs can rest. Reason generally is understood through the principles of methodological inquiry, whether intellectual, moral, aesthetic, or religious. Reason is not simply logical inference or the embodied wisdom of a tradition or authority. It generally presupposes scientific or material evidence. Once demonstrated, a proposition or claim is ordinarily understood to be justified as true or authoritative.

Faith, on the other hand, involves a stance toward some claim that is not, at least presently, demonstrable by reason. Thus faith is a kind of attitude of trust or assent. As such, it is ordinarily understood to involve an act of will or a commitment on the part of the believer. Religious faith involves a belief that makes either an implicit or explicit reference to a transcendent source. The basis for a person’s faith usually is understood to come from the authority of revelation. Revelation is either direct, through some kind of direct infusion, or indirect, usually from the testimony of another. The religious beliefs that are the objects of faith can thus be divided into those what are in fact strictly demonstrable (scientia) and those that inform a believer's virtuous practices (sapientia).

Religious faith is of two kinds: evidence-sensitive and evidence-insensitive. The former views faith as closely coordinated with demonstrable truths; the latter more strictly as an act of the will of the religious believer alone. The former includes evidence garnered from the testimony and works of other believers. It is, however, possible to hold a religious belief simply on the basis either of faith alone or of reason alone. Moreover, one can lack faith in God or even deny God’s existence, but still find solace in the practice of religion.

The problem of faith and reason is that most religions interpret revelation through sacred pronouncements, either in an oral tradition or canonical writings, backed by some kind of divine authority. These writings or oral traditions are usually presented in the literary forms of narrative, parable, or discourse. As such, they are in some measure immune from rational critique and evaluation. In fact, attempts to verify religious beliefs rationally are problematic. Yet most religious traditions allow and even encourage some kind of rational examination of their beliefs.

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In the opening address of the Papal encyclical, Fides et Ratio, Pope John Paul II describes faith and reason “like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves” (See http://www.cin.org/jp2/fides.html for a full text version of this encyclical).
The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the relationship between faith and reason in the following ways:

#39 In defending the ability of human reason to know God, the Church is expressing her confidence in the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men, and therefore of dialogue with other religions, with philosophy and science, as well as with unbelievers and atheists.

#159 Faith and science: "Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth." (Dei Filius 4: DS 3017) "Consequently, methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God. The humble and persevering investigator of the secrets of nature is being led, as it were, by the hand of God in spite of himself, for it is God, the conserver of all things, who made them what they are." (GS 36 ' 1)