
Pro Rege

Volume 10 | Number 4


Article 2

June 1982

Relation Between Faith and Action: An Introduction

John Van Dyk
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Dyk, John (1982) "Relation Between Faith and Action: An Introduction," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 10: No. 4, 2 - 7.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol10/iss4/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

The Relation Between Faith and Action: An Introduction

John Van Dyk
Professor of Philosophy



Dr John Van Dyk received his A.B. degree from Calvin College, M.A. from the University of Michigan in classical studies, and Ph.D. from Cornell University in medieval philosophy. Dr. Van Dyk has been a member of Dordt's faculty since 1966.

In recent years the traditional question about the relationship between faith and reason has received a good deal of attention, particularly in Reformed circles. One need merely think of Dr. H. Evan Runner's invaluable contribution *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, and the more recent—and more technical—discussions inspired by Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*. In wider academic and scientific circles, too, the debate about the influence of non-scientific dimensions of life, such as faith, upon theoretic activity continues to flourish. The response to the work of Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi comes to mind at once.

Less frequently discussed, however, is the

question regarding the relationship between faith and action. While we in the Reformed community commonly speak about the Bible as the "only guide for faith and action" or for "faith and life" or for "faith and practice," we seldom take the time to examine what such expressions mean or imply. Such neglect, in my view, requires attention, for the fact is that we have inherited not only a long tradition of separating faith from reason, but also a continuing and popular tendency to separate faith from action or from conduct. Such separations, rooted in Greek and patristic thought, are not merely of theoretical or historical interest; on the contrary, they seriously inhibit and impair the effectiveness of a genuinely Biblical

Christianity in our contemporary world—a world which itself is rent by separations, polarizations, alienation, and brokenness, a world in desperate need of the healing and integrating power of the Gospel.

The Problem

The question may be asked whether the split between faith and action or between faith and life indeed constitutes as serious a problem as the disjunction between faith and reason. It certainly requires little persuasion to see that the compartmentalization of faith and reason has been and continues to be a most serious threat to Christian education. After all, we merely need to remind ourselves of the dualism that has plagued Christian learning ever since the time of the Middle Ages. For centuries it has been argued that faith is a supernatural gift that has little or nothing to do with the faculty of natural reason. Natural reason, it has been claimed, is autonomous, a distinct, self-sufficient light, in need of neither faith nor divine revelation. Hence, the argument continues, faith has nothing whatever to do with science and mathematics or with learning and scholarship: faith has nothing to do with reason. The result of this line of argumentation has been a devastating and debilitating dualism turning Christian schools into schizophrenic institutions where an essentially and presumably neutral curriculum is covered with a Christian veneer of Bible courses and chapel exercises. We may be thankful indeed that the Lord has opened the eyes of so many Christian educators to the seriousness of this problem.

It may well be, however, that the consequences of separating faith from action are even more serious than those resulting from the disassociation of faith from reason. There is much more at stake than learning or education when we speak about faith and action or about faith and life. While the disjunction between faith and reason has created the dualism between faith and learning, the separation between faith and action leads to

more comprehensive dichotomies, such as those between church and state, Christianity and culture, doctrine and life, and others. In fact, the assumption that faith and action or faith and life are two distinct categories helps explain why for many years preachers have found it difficult to “apply” the “teaching” of the Scripture. The dichotomy between faith and action helps to explain why Bible and catechism teachers frequently see so little of their instruction carry over into the lives of their pupils; why seminary professors wrestle with the connection between *creden-da* (things to be believed) and *agenda* (things to be done), a distinction which is transferred into the equally problematic categories of “dogmatic theology” and “ethics.” The dichotomy between faith and life helps to explain, furthermore, why Christian activists, eager to bring their deeds in line with their faith, almost invariably run into opposition by those who compartmentalize faith and action. Indeed, the separation of faith from conduct leads to an even more pervasive kind of dualism than the separation between faith and reason.

In this brief article I wish to do no more than roughly sketch some of the main lines of the early history of the problem. Such a sketch must also refer to the history of the separation between faith and reason, for the two separations, that is, between faith and action and between faith and reason, are related. It needs to be stated, moreover, that the problem of faith, reason, and conduct, as understood in the patristic church, is extremely complex and requires extensive and painstaking investigation and analysis. What follows, then, must be regarded as no more than a set of preliminary, provisional remarks about the problem. Perhaps it will be possible to examine the question in a more detailed and systematic fashion in future articles.

The Greeks

The Greeks were masters at pulling life apart and keeping it apart. They knew how

to turn distinctions into separations. They detached the soul from the body, the mind from sense perception, knowing from doing, and theory from practice. Particularly their success in sundering theoretic knowing from practical doing forms the background to our current problem of faith and action.

Already in early pre-socratic times the Greeks displayed a fascination with knowledge, with the mind, and with thought. In the fifth century B.C. the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras, for example, asserted that "mind" sets all things in motion. His contemporary, Empedocles, talked about a divine "mind" which darts through the whole universe with its swift thoughts. Parmenides postulated that not the senses, but only thinking will yield truth. Both Plato and Aristotle, the towering giants of Greek philosophy, believed that the human intellect is akin to the divine, and that the exercise of the mind is the noblest of human goals. The highest part of man, in fact, was believed to be his *rational* soul.

This kind of intellectualistic fascination with mind and rationality led the Greeks to isolate thinking from other areas of human experience such as sense perception, the arts, and technical activity. They began to see reason as a controlling, superior element, a ruler over all of our doings. Aristotle formalized the distinction between knowing and doing by dividing the sciences into those that aim at knowledge and those that aim at action. He postulated, furthermore, a distinction between so-called intellectual virtues, associated with the life of the mind, and moral virtues which have to do with conduct in general.

The distinction between knowing and doing came to be enhanced further in the Hellenistic Age, notably by the Stoics. These clever philosophers elaborated the idea that all men are endowed with the same kind of rational mechanism. Some of the earlier Greeks had thought, in somewhat chauvinistic fashion, that only certain Greek males were blessed with rational capacities. But the Stoics insisted that all of us have in

our heads a faculty called *ratio*, reason. This reason, which we all have in common, is a reflection, a spark, a microcosm of the divine *Ratio* which pervades the entire cosmos. And since the whole cosmos is Nature, we may speak, according to the Stoics, of "natural reason."

Given the notion of "natural reason," the Stoics addressed themselves to the question of how such a concept might relate to human actions. While opinions differed at different times and in different places, the consensus came to be this: a truly virtuous life—conduct—is lived in accordance with reason. Note that this conclusion assumes a sharp distinction between knowing and doing, between reason and action. Our actions, according to the Stoics, are to be determined by principles drawn from right reason. Right reason is, in fact, the *law* for human conduct. Human action must obediently conform to the dictates of reason.

The Early Church and the Concept of Reason

The earliest Christians, particularly those who stood in the Hebrew tradition, knew nothing about the subtle distinction between knowing and doing. They were not aware of the Stoic dictum that conduct is to be subjected to principles of reason. In fact, the Greek notion of a natural reason was altogether foreign to the Hebrew mind. In the Old Testament tradition, knowing and doing virtually coincide. If there is to be a distinction at all, then it is not between *knowing* and doing, but between *hearing* and doing. Knowing and doing, according to the Old Testament, are two sides of one coin. True wisdom does not consist in a right relationship between reason and conduct, but in the *fear* of Jehovah! And what does that mean? "A good *understanding*," Psalm 111 tells us, "have all they that *do* his commandments." Or, according to Psalm 119:100, "I understand more than the aged, because I have kept Thy precepts."

Not long after the Apostles disappeared from the early church, however, this

Hebrew tradition came to be successfully replaced by Greek philosophy. The second-century Apologists and the later church fathers effectively introduced the Greek concept of reason into their apologetics. An outstanding example is Justin Martyr, a pagan philosopher turned Christian, who was eventually martyred for his faith. Justin is quick to identify the Logos of the first chapter of the Gospel of John with the Hellenistic notion of reason. Christ, Justin says, is the Light who implants the natural light of reason into every man, Christian or pagan alike. Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus and Socrates, he continues, insofar as they lived and spoke according to reason, were actually Christians. This line of argument, shared by numerous other leading figures of the patristic period, posits a direct continuity between Greek and Christian thinking, thereby erasing the antithesis from the realm of the intellect and uncritically rendering the thought patterns of the pagans perfectly acceptable.

Repercussions for Faith and Action

Once the Greek intellectualistic notion of the "natural light of reason" had become firmly entrenched in the patristic church, a new problem appeared on the scene: how is faith to be related to reason? Several points need to be noted. First, the tendency to regard human analytic ability and knowing activity as a distinct, substantialized faculty led the Apologists and church fathers to look at faith in the same way. Faith, they read in the sacred writings, is a gift of God. It must therefore be a distinct entity, a faculty, some substantial *thing* deposited somewhere in our being. From this follows a second point: once we conceive of faith and reason as two distinct and independent faculties, the possibility of genuinely intrinsic interaction between them is in principle canceled out. Then faith as a self-contained entity can do little more than assist or guide an essentially autonomous reason.

The patristic church accepted the position that faith and reason are two independent faculties only externally related to each other. There was general agreement, furthermore, that faith is more important than reason. The Gnostics of the time, for example, who asserted that *gnosis* (knowledge) is superior to *pistis* (faith), were vigorously faulted for reversing the order. In opposition to such heresy Irenaeus and Hippolytus and the majority of subsequent Christian writers strongly affirmed the indispensability and superiority of faith. And as early a writer as Clement of Alexandria hinges a good deal of his argumentation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah 7:9, "If you will not believe, you shall not understand," a text which later became the hallmark of the medieval Augustinian tradition.

The view that reason—itself midway between faith and conduct—is to support faith has greatly contributed to the intellectualization of faith in Western Christendom. Such intellectualization effectively maintained a sharp dichotomy between faith and action.

The adoption of the Greek distinction between knowing and doing, and the addition of faith gave the early church essentially three categories to work with: faith, reason, and conduct. To the patristics these roughly paralleled the categories of believing, knowing, and doing. This threesome appears already very early in the Christian literature. For instance, Aristides, who wrote one of the first Christian apologies, tells us that faith is superior to reason because faith gives us better rules for conduct. Justin Martyr, whose view of reason we considered a moment ago, asserted that faith is required first of all to enable

us to change our conduct. The antithesis between obedience and disobedience, according to Justin, lies not in the area of thought, where, after all, there is continuity between the pagan and the Christian, but in conduct. Faith, assisted by reason, must guide and change our conduct, that is, help us to turn away from immorality and from the worship of idols.

Faith, Reason, and Conduct

It is extremely important to note that to the early Christians the categories of faith, reason, and conduct are not co-ordinate or parallel. Rather, they exist in hierarchy. Reason, in Greek fashion, is superior to conduct, and faith, in turn, is superior to reason. This situation leads to two results. First, in this hierarchy the distance between faith and conduct is even greater than the distance between reason and conduct. Secondly, the first element of human life with which faith comes into contact is reason, not conduct or action. Hence faith is more important for reason than for action. No wonder, then, that in the Middle Ages a primary theological and philosophical concern was to speculate how faith assists reason and how reason supports faith.

The view that reason—itself midway between faith and conduct—is to support faith has greatly contributed to the intellectualization of faith in Western Christendom. Such intellectualization effectively maintained a sharp dichotomy between faith and action. Consider the idea of doctrine, for example. The Biblical concept of doctrine (New Testament *didaskalia*) finds its roots in the Old Testament conception of teaching. The Hebrews *taught* the law in order that God's people might respond in obedience. Thus teaching, hearing, and responding were united. Hearing, believing, and doing blended together in one continuous act. The earliest New Testament church picked up this Old Testament tradition. Hence, in their practice, teaching and proclamation (*kerygma*) were closely interwoven. To the

New Testament Christian doctrine is the Gospel, consisting of *both* the message of salvation *and* a new way of life. Doctrine is therefore directed beyond knowing to a change of heart and a change in life. Doctrine is "The Way," a single unbroken response to the Word. There is no dichotomy between faith and action in this response.

The Greek idea of teaching, however, was aimed not at obedient response but at the acquisition of abstract knowledge. The contemplation of eternal truths, quite separate from the realities of daily life, was the goal of learning. Unlike the Hebrew tradition of teaching which was directed at the response "What must we do?", the teaching of the Greeks was that knowledge was primarily *logical* in character, that is, one could do little more with it than affirm it as true or deny it as false. Once this Greek view of teaching, itself perfectly compatible with the separation between knowing and doing, began to be operative in the patristic church, the intellectualization of doctrine set in. Doctrine and life became separated, following the divorce of faith and reason from conduct. Thus doctrine degenerated from a rich, life-encompassing reality into an abstract set of theological statements. Doctrine, in fact, degenerated into *reason's* formulation of *faith*.

The intellectualization of doctrine has gone hand in hand with the intellectualization of faith itself. The Biblical concept of faith is very rich indeed, as a mere glance at a good Bible dictionary will reveal. It includes such components as confidence, commitment, an awareness of the demands of the Word of God, and the willingness and ability to respond in obedience and love. The introduction of the Greek concept of reason at once began to whittle away at the richness of the meaning of faith. Faith became intellectualized, that is, it came to be expressed in formal and abstract propositions. The demonstration of faith was no longer one's life, as James would have it, but merely the ability to state the

content of doctrine. In the late patristic period, and throughout the Middle Ages as well, faith came to be reduced to a form of thinking, as is clear from the definition of faith which Augustine bequeathed to Christendom: "To believe is to think with assent." Faith, according to this definition, is the intellectual acceptance of so-called doctrinal truth. Thus the integrated richness of faith was exchanged for an emaciated collection of mere doctrinal and intellectual propositions.

Medieval Developments

The later medieval discussions about faith, reason, and conduct, exhibited two main features. First, these distinctions began to take on a sharper form once the scheme of nature and grace set in. In this scheme faith is regarded as a supernatural gift, while reason is a natural light constitutionally present in human nature. The hierarchical order of faith-reason-conduct became thereby more explicit. Aquinas, for example, argued that conduct either is or is not in accordance with the order of reason.

Secondly, the medieval debates about the relationships between faith, reason, and conduct, increasingly muddied the waters. The scholastics of the High Middle Ages particularly, though generally agreeing on the need to distinguish between faith, reason, and conduct, entangled themselves in endless complexities and ultimate confusion. I mention merely *some* of the complicating factors: the distinction between supernatural and natural virtues, between intellectual and moral virtues, between active and passive intellect, between the intellect and reason, between speculative and practical reason, between reason and will and between intellect and will, between faith and reason as sources for knowledge, and between intellectual and sensitive appetites. Space does not permit an attempt to untangle such complexities. It seems clear, however, that distinctions such as these were required in increasing numbers to solve the

progressively bewildering problems arising out of the original dichotomy between faith and reason, and the divorce of these two from conduct.

Conclusion

I do not mean to argue that we must eliminate the words *faith*, *reason*, and *conduct* from our vocabulary, any more than that I want to do away with the words *believing*, *knowing*, and *doing*. The careful reader will have noticed, in fact, that throughout this article terms such as *faith* and *believing*, *knowing*, *thinking*, and *reason*, and *doing* and *conduct*, though not sharply focused or used with precision, are nevertheless assumed to have legitimate meaning. My point is not that these words are useless or to be avoided. The question is not whether we can employ them, but, rather, what they mean and how they function in our Christian life. If these terms refer to three distinct and separate orders of reality or three separate modes of life, then we entrap ourselves in the difficulties intimated at the beginning of this article. But if we begin with the Biblical premise that there is an intrinsic connection and interaction between our faith, our knowing, and our actions, and if, indeed, we recognize that believing and knowing are but forms of doing—all of them to be an integrated obedient response to hearing!—then we open the door to a revitalized and integral kind of Christian life. Then it will become possible to begin to counteract the long tradition of intellectualization.

It is easy enough, of course, to *say* that there is an integral connection between faith, reason, and conduct. It is quite another matter, however, to *understand*—in the Old Testament sense of *both* knowing *and* doing—just what this means. Tough questions about theory and practice, and about distinctions without separations, remain to be addressed. Serious and sustained communal Christian reflection on these issues, it seems to me, is long overdue.