

FAITH AND REASON: CAN THEY GET ALONG?

By Michael A. Schuler

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GLEANINGS FROM CONTEMPORARY WISDOM

Thich Nhat Hahn, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*

In Buddhism we take refuge in the Three Jewels - Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. These refuges are a very deep practice. They are the Buddhist trinity...

Many years ago I encountered some children on a beach in Sri Lanka. It had been a long time since I had seen children like that, barefoot children on a very green island with no sign of industrial pollution. These were not children of the slums; they were of the countryside. I saw them, and to me they formed a beautiful part of nature.

As I stood on the beach alone, the children just ran toward me. We didn't know each other's language, so I put my arms around their shoulders - all six of them, and we stood like that for a long time. Suddenly I realized that if I chanted a prayer in the ancient Buddhist language of Pali, they might recognize it, so I began to chant.

Buddham saranam gacchami - "I take refuge in the Buddha."

The children not only recognized it, they continued to chant. Four of them joined their palms and chanted while the other two stood respectfully. This chant is a common prayer, like the Our Father...

I motioned to the two children who were not chanting to join us. They smiled, placed their palms together and chanted in Pali, "I take refuge in Mother Mary." The music of their prayer did not differ much from the Buddhist one. Then I embraced each child. They were a little surprised, but I felt very much at one with each of them. They had given me a feeling of deep serenity and peace. We all need a place that is safe and wholesome enough for us to return for refuge.

Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*

On a bright Sunday morning in February, shivering in a T-shirt and running shorts, I stepped into the vaulted stone vestibule of the Church of Heavenly Rest in New York to catch my breath and warm up. Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress - the soaring harmonies of the

choir and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death...

The previous night I had been sleepless with fear and worry. Two days before, a team of doctors had performed a routine checkup on our son, Mark, a year and six months after his successful open-heart surgery. The physicians were shocked to find evidence of a rare and potentially fatal lung disease...

"How much time," I asked. "We don't know; a few months, a few years..."

Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there... Here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine...

I returned often to that church, not looking for faith but because...in that church I gathered new energy, and resolved, over and over, to face whatever awaited us as constructively as possible for Mark and for the rest of us.

When people would say to me, "Your faith must be of a great help to you," I would wonder, "What do they mean? What is faith? Simple assent to a set of beliefs that worshipers in that church recited every week - 'we believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth?'" Such traditional statements sounded strange to me, like barely intelligible signals from the surface, heard at the bottom of the sea...

I am a historian of religion, and I know that...since the 4th century, most churches have required those who would join to profess a complex set of beliefs about God and Jesus... But how do such demands for belief look today, in light of what we now know? From my own encounters with believers, agnostics and seekers - as well as people who don't belong to any church - I have learned that what matters in religious experience involves much more than what we believe or what we do not believe...

** REFLECTIONS **

The late **Walter Kaufmann** taught philosophy at Princeton University and was recognized during his lifetime as a leading expert on the works of Frederick Nietzsche and Georg Hegel. He described himself as a "critical rationalist" who was deeply troubled by the claims of dogmatic religion. A heretic, he wrote, is an independent

spirit whose ideas often stand "at variance with established or generally received principles." **Kaufmann** claimed that label proudly because, he said, all originality and innovation spring from heresy.

The Princeton philosopher expounded upon his own convictions in a noteworthy book with an unlikely title: ***The Faith of a Heretic***. Why, one is tempted to ask, would a hard-nosed rationalist juxtapose those two words: "faith" and "heretic?" That might strike more than a few people as an oxymoron. At the very least, it gets our attention and makes one wonder what this word "faith" really means. **Kaufmann** seems to suggest that it stands for something rather different that we might have supposed.

Neither Latin, from which our word "faith" derives, nor modern Western languages have a verb that complements it. In other words, we do not say that a person who practices their faith is "faithing." Therefore, the common perception is that a "faithful" person doesn't do something; rather, he or she has something. What, then, do they have? Most would say a firmly held belief or set of beliefs. If we are willing to sincerely embrace and consistently defend certain propositions, we are being "faithful."

Ireneaus, one of early Christianity's most influential theologians, equated faith with undeviating obedience to certain teachings that he deemed to be authentic and essential to salvation. He considered it illegitimate to reject or even to challenge any of those dictums; to do so was evidence of "bad faith." Other early Christians -- notably the Gnostics -- disagreed with **Ireneaus** on this point, arguing that spiritual growth was more likely to occur in an atmosphere of intellectual openness and receptivity to fresh ideas.

Eventually, however, **Ireneaus** position prevailed. The great creedal statements were composed and then imposed on all Christians. At that point "faith" became virtually synonymous with "belief." As Stanford University religion scholar **Robert McAfee Brown** put it, "'having faith' means believing the content, or giving assent to the statements that describe the contents, of one's religious tradition." For much of Christianity's first thousand years, this is how faith was understood, and still is understood in many quarters today. On numerous occasions I have heard it said that one cannot claim to be a true Christian unless they "believe" in the Holy Trinity.

By extension, a faith tradition is a movement defined by a clearly articulated, normative body of religious

beliefs. Unity is achieved through common assent to a given tradition's doctrines and dogmas. This is how **Chet Raymo**, a physicist and astronomer, construes faith in his book *Skeptics and True Believers*. Conventionally religious people he says, are comforted by dogma, respectful of authority, convinced of the righteousness of their cause." They hunger for "simple and certain truths provided by a source that is more reliable than the human mind."

Now, if this is what "faith" really connotes, it should be obvious that accommodating itself to the requirements of reason could prove difficult, for the latter will resist the imposition of any restriction on its operations.

As religious people who historically have placed a high premium on reason, Unitarian Universalists have been more aware of this tension than most. Almost two hundred years ago the leading spokesman for Unitarianism, **William Ellery Channing** threw down the gauntlet, arguing for the necessity of reason in religion. The free mind, he declared, "does not content itself with passive or hereditary faith" but receives "new truth as an angel from heaven." Religion at its best, **Channing** continued, "approves itself to our intelligence" and "unites us to God by rational homage and enlightened love."

In a recent essay, a colleague and former classmate of mine observed that this issue still concerns us. Her young niece, **Jane Rzepka** wrote, lives in a neighborhood in which most of her playmates are conventionally religious. Apparently some of their "faith" had rubbed off on her because one day after it had rained the girl was outdoors with her father. A beautiful rainbow arced across the sky and she exclaimed, "Oh, how pretty! God put it up there for us to see."

Now her father, **Jane** tells us, is a research scientist as well as a Unitarian Universalist. Responding to his daughter's comment he said gently, "Well, maybe there is a God who put that rainbow up there, or there could be a natural explanation." He then reminded her of a prism they had recently looked through together and how it created a rainbow effect. Perhaps the same principle applied in the atmosphere, he suggested. "Now my niece is going to have to think it through and reach her own conclusion," **Jane** observes, and then adds:

Using your brain in the realm of religion is going to cost you. You're not going to be able to be "spiritual" in the way that some of your friends and relatives are. Faith alone will not make the cut, nor

will beliefs that are wholly free of evidence, personal or empirical. (As Unitarian Universalists) most of us will probably choose the empirical explanation...and whether this will cause us to mourn our loss of faith is not for me to say, but it's who we really are.

The forgoing might well suggest that faith plays no, or perhaps a very limited role in a reason-centered religion like ours. But in fact, that is not the case. It is only the case if we equate faith with a firm commitment to certain beliefs that serve to fetter the free mind. But what if faith means something else? What if it is a wholly different disposition of the human soul, a sentiment unrelated to the use, or abuse, of reason?

Faith, the celebrated Catholic theologian **Hans Kung** declares, is not "irrational...a blind, daring leap. Rather, it must "be responsible to the eyes of reason and grounded in reality itself." In this respect, a better synonym for faith than "belief" is "trust" - an insight the Protestant Reformers came up with almost 500 years ago when they daringly challenged Papal authority.

The faithful individual isn't required to suspend his critical thinking **Robert McAfee Brown** writes, he simply "commits himself to someone or something in confidence." That's not to say that it's unnecessary to harbor religious beliefs. It is merely to say that belief is an expression of faith rather than its essence. When **Walter Kaufmann** entitled his book *The Faith of a Heretic*, this is what he had in mind. His work as a philosopher had its basis in faith. He "committed himself with confidence" to a principle that informed all his efforts: the principle of honesty. My work is based, he wrote, "not on the all-too-widespread will to believe, but on the will to be honest."

In saying this, **Kaufmann** was quite serious. "Nobody entirely lacks the will to be honest," he observed, "but most people settle for rather a small share of it." In a world where conformity is often preferred to honesty, **Kaufmann** had thrown his lot in with the latter - even if that meant being branded a heretic.

A similar conception of faith is found in Buddhism. In one of the readings that preceded these reflections, **Thich Nhat Hahn** spoke of "taking refuge" in the Three Jewels. Taking refuge is analogous to placing one's trust in the principles or precepts of their religion. Buddhism has always admonished the practitioner to retain a healthy skepticism about all received teachings and truths, and to

be willing to exercise independent judgment. Traditional teachings, **Thanissaro Bhikkhu**, informs us, should be treated as "working hypotheses and they are tested by following the Buddha's path of practice."

Buddhism posits a healthy tension between faith and skepticism. In order to muster the necessary energy and resolve to stay on the spiritual path, a person needs faith - a deep, abiding trust in the precepts and personalities that one has chosen to work with. But then, one must also possess the clarity - **Walter Kaufmann** would say the honesty - to recognize where faith must bow before acquired knowledge. The two work together - faith motivating and intelligence testing.

It should also be noted that while certain schools of Christianity have also identified faith with trust, they have insisted that the only entity truly worthy of our trust is God - that infinitely wise, overwhelmingly powerful Supreme Being who holds the key to our redemption. Faithfulness is always God-directed, God-centered. Thus, the Old Testament book of **Proverbs** contains the lines, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight...Acknowledge him, and he alone will make straight your paths."

Contrast that piece of advice with the **Buddha's** famous instruction to "Be a lamp unto yourself, be your own confidence; hold to the truth within yourself, as to the only lamp." Buddhists venerate the **Buddha** not because he was singular and utterly unique; not because he had developed supernormal powers or acquired supernatural status. "To have faith in the Buddha **Thanissaro** writes, "means having faith in your own potential for awakening" because he simply developed mental qualities that we all have the capacity to develop. In his book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* **Stephan Batchelor** speaks of "confidence" in a way that suggests trust or faith in oneself:

Resolve (in our spiritual practice) is activated by self-confidence... If we see ourselves as insignificant...then the slightest hardship will seem daunting. We will be drawn to those who insist that awakening is a distant goal, accessible only to a privileged few... Self-confidence...is both the courage to face whatever life throws at us without losing equanimity, and the humility to treat every situation we encounter as one from which we can learn.

Trust in oneself, one's values and the path one has chosen does not, however, guarantee that our aspirations will be fulfilled. At some point, in fact, we may be tempted to ask whether our faith has been misplaced. Does it make sense and is it consistent with reason, to continue with what appears to be an unproductive program? Wouldn't it be wiser to set new goals and move in a different direction? It's definitely a good question to ask, but it may not lead to the most obvious conclusion.

Take the community activist that his friend **Parker Palmer** describes - a man whose commitment to peace and nonviolence was unequivocal. He had worked not only to change society but to "unearth the seeds of violence in his personal life." This man chose voluntary poverty in order to avoid paying taxes to support the federal war machine. What he "should" have paid in taxes over the years he donated to peace and justice causes.

One day **Palmer** asked him to explain his behavior. Does it rankle that you have so little to show for your efforts; that having committed yourself whole-heartedly to the cause of peace the world has remained so bellicose? What keeps you going? **Palmer** asked.

His friend replied softly, "I have never asked myself if I was being effective, but only if I was being faithful."

Faith always involves an element of uncertainty and is by definition something of a risk. If it was about betting on a sure thing, it wouldn't be faith. But even if the external rewards seem paltry, an investment in faith may still seem worth it. By trusting his moral compass, being true to his calling and identity, that stubborn activist may enjoy a greater sense of inner peace and equanimity than you and I will ever know.

In conclusion, I'd like to offer a few thoughts about "faith" as it relates to "community." What does it mean to be a "faith community?" That every member professes the same beliefs? That would certainly be true for many traditional churches where, as **Spencer Burke** puts it, "a clear line is drawn between the insiders and everybody else." In so-called "confessional" churches, subscribing to a particular doctrine is "required in order to receive grace." In other words, a "faith community is also a "believing" community.

But then, what about **Elaine Pagels'** experience in that church she started attending after her son's grim medical diagnosis? "Here," she writes,

...was a heterogeneous community that had gathered...to acknowledge common needs and to deal with what any of us, as individuals, cannot control or imagine... I returned often to that church because...there I gathered new energy and the resolve to face the future as constructively as possible.

This, too, is faith - an investment of trust in a collection of individuals to whom we look for strength, hope, healing and mutual support. More than their shared beliefs, this is what distinguished the earliest Christian communities. "What marks us in the eyes of our enemies," **Tertullian** said in the 3rd century, "is our practice of loving-kindness. 'Look,' they say, 'look how they love one another.'"

Watching the Canadian geese flying in formation, returning as they do each Spring to their northern nesting grounds, **Gunilla Norris** found in those birds a proper analogy for a faith community. "They depend on one another," she notes.

The lead goose does most of the work, but when it is tired, it falls back and another takes its place. To be able to rely on others is a deep trust that does not come easily. The geese fly in the wake of each other's wings. They literally get a lift from one another. I, too, want to be with others this way.

So can faith and reason get along? Of course they can, but only if we are willing to give up some of our more facile notions about faith. In the end, it is not about "believing in things we know ain't so" as **Mark Twain** once put it. Again, faith is about learning to trust in a way that is "responsible to the eyes of reason and grounded in reality itself."