

L'Abri

INTERNATIONAL



Is it not “out of date” to be talking about the claim that reason is free from and superior to religious commitments? Some Christian thinkers maintain that the internal crisis of (post)modernity has proven we are past this problem. A closer look reveals that we must continue to take this problem seriously and develop a constructive Christian response.

Certainly today we can still see a contest between two extremes. On the one hand there remains a strong drive in the academic world of science which is committed to the “purification” of culture from any religious control (see Richard Dawkins). On the other hand, there has been a growing trend opposed to intellectualism in general, blaming a reliance on reason for our cultural shortcomings.

Reasoning Without Hubris

Guilherme V. R. de Carvalho

The resulting tension is alive and kicking. It becomes clearer if we narrow the discussion a bit to what we call “theoretical thought.” We will consider it in detail in a moment, but in general when human beings want to study the rich tapestry of our reality, we begin by distinguishing the various aspects of that reality: biology, mathematics, aesthetics, ethics, just to name a few.

It is this distinction and consideration which we call theoretical thinking. Here we use the power of reason to “abstract” or set apart one such area to consider it alone. It is an important discipline, since each aspect of reality could be said to carry with it an area of meaning. Actually if, as Prof. Hans Rookmaker used to say, “reality is meaning,” to discern meanings is crucial for our intellectual approach to reality. But in the modern conscious-

ness, the scope and power of theoretical thought has been grossly overestimated in grasping this meaning.

We have in our time inherited the idea that “knowledge” is something which can only be defended conceptually. Not only does that severely narrow the number and quality of beliefs which can count as knowledge. Suddenly it is assumed that understanding the truth about the world is somehow behind, beneath or beyond the regular phenomena of our experience. The resulting temptation is that we can understand everything only through the penetrating gaze of theoretical thought.

In other words, theoretical thinking is seen as in itself possessing all the critical power and principles by which I can understand and judge the entirety of my experience. This temptation is not only

Dear Friends,

In this International Newsletter we are very pleased to bring to your attention a new development in L'Abri: the Brazilian L'Abri Resource Center. For several years Guilherme and Alessandra Carvalho and Rodolfo Souza have been praying and working together for a L'Abri work in their home country. Since last summer the work has officially become a part of the L'Abri international tapestry. Part of their story is told by Andrew Fellows in the Family Letter on page 6 of this issue.

As a way of introducing them we have chosen this article from Guilherme representing a foundational aspect of his studies and approach. L'Abri has always stood for the proper place of reason in the search for truth. In this article we have a good reminder from Guilherme of how and why this stand continues to be important in our current setting. It was originally given as a lecture at the English L'Abri in 2007. The full version can be ordered from the English L'Abri at office@englishlabri.org.

To see what's going on in the Brazilian work at the moment, please visit their link at the L'Abri website or their own webpage at <http://labri-brazil.blogspot.com>.

We hope you like the recently renewed version of our website, www.labri.org. Thanks to Michael Shivers for all his hard work on it! If you have any questions, comments or tips for us concerning the site or this newsletter, feel free to contact us labri@labri.nl. We look forward to hearing from you!

Blessings,
The L'Abri Workers

an illusion, I will argue, but it also brings an attitude of hubris, or tragically overreaching pride. For behind the desire to understand everything hides the desire to control everything, to become master of our reality.

But certainly we are thinking beings! It remains important, therefore, to consider again the legitimate place of reason in the Christian faith. Not only will this provide us with the necessary critical defense for refuting naturalistic ideologies such as Dawkins', but it will also help us rediscover and protect the place of sound rationality in human life.

The 'Dogma'

What I have decided to call the 'Dogma' of the power of autonomous reason can be characterized in terms of three visible trends.

The first is the atheological thesis. We all are familiar with assertions that belief in a personal God has no intellectual meaning, and religion detractors typically take this position as enough to end the conversation. The hidden assumption, however, is that it is really possible to liberate theoretical thinking from any kind of belief in divinity. This assumption alone is what we mean by the "atheological" thesis. According to this thesis, creating a neutral space without any narrative or metaphysical idea of origin, free from any dogmatic authorities, makes it possible to allow rational thought to function free from any and all constraints. The claim is that we are then in this free space able to move toward universal truth, accessible to all.

The second trend is the search for rational control of life and cognitive processes. Despite many disagreements the moderns were unanimous in affirming that only by reason can we exercise the right to determining boundaries which guide human life toward the good, toward tolerance and peace, toward justice, and so on. And they do it by forcefully submitting every side of life to one or another form of logic (economic-capitalistic, technological or evolutionist, for

example), expecting to improve human freedom.

The third trend, related to the second, is the abstract reconstruction of human identity on the basis of scientific and philosophical theories about man. The elevation of this power of reason as the central and primary feature of what it



L'Abri goes tropical! The Brazilian Resource Center

means to be human has been widely influential in western culture. That such an ideal is now widely being criticized is simply evidence of its influence.

These three trends are connected. The atheological thesis is a smokescreen; it hides the religious motivations of every apparently "neutral" theoretical movement. The thirst for freedom and autonomy seeks a rational control of social life on the basis of these movements, and the rational control inevitably ends in a caricatured manipulation of human identity. But it is a trap: in the end one is left with the loss of reason.

Our critique runs parallel with these trends, arguing that they are linked to each other and that, in spite of its good intentions, the failure of the 'Dogma' of



rationality is already manifest. Yet as we do not have space here to present a complete exposition of it, we will limit ourselves to point out our Christian view on rationality as an answer. This view is not original: we are happily and firmly planted on the ground of the Augustinian-Reformational tradition.

What is then the basis for an adequate Christian perspective on reasoning? A Christian view should: 1) rediscover the place of reason in our human reflection of God's image; 2) recognize that the ideal of freedom through rational control is an illusion; 3) respond to God by adoring Him with our minds. Let us consider these three points.

'Mannishness'

To understand reason, we need to comprehend the nature of the being that thinks. But what is the "human being"? Who am I as human? It is a universal question: "know yourself," said the Delphic Oracle, quoted by Socrates. This theme has reverberated throughout the centuries in the Augustinian tradition: John Calvin, Pascal, Dooyeweerd and Schaeffer gave contextualized voices and Christian answers to these concerns.

A particular way to approach it is through reasoning. If we ask the question from the point of view of theoretical thinking we are taken to the central problem of critical self-reflection: what is the "I" who finds in himself a reference point for its rational grasping of our world?

That question is different from questions about the very Origin, Cause or Foundation of reality ("God", "Being-itself", etc.), even though internally connected to it. It is rather an anthropological question about which level, part or aspect of our make-up was so endowed to grasp the structure of reality.

Different philosophies give different answers. The Greek philosopher says that this foundation is found in the rational soul; the Voluntarist claims to locate it in the human will; the Neodarwinist points to the biological make up; the Marxist

describes us as "homo faber", and so on. Each one answers from within its own theory.

Interesting possibilities, but the question still remains: how could abstract reason, or theoretical thought, suppose to answer such a question purely from its own resources? We should be careful not to overlook the complexity of reality here, the many layers in which it has meaning. We have mentioned what could be called the different aspects of reality – biological, chemical, rational, economic, social and so on. Where they are integrated and concentrated together is in the "I" of our rich personal existence.

This view of the "I" is a central principle in the tradition of Christian Reformed philosophy. Indeed, in Biblical language, the heart is spoken of in similar terms. Here the "I" is the integration point of all the different aspects of meaning we can encounter. This complex and coherent starting place, so to speak, is the only reason we are able to contemplate any one of these aspects separately at all. Theoretical thinking depends on such a holistic starting point.

But as soon as one claims that the "core" or essence of the "I" is actually contained

Rationality is one of the functions of the heart, not some pure, independent organ

in any one of those specific aspects, a serious problem arises. How could the "I" to somehow escape that one aspect, "rise above" all the others and from this perspective distinguish and correlate them? If this diversity is not an illusion, there is no hope to get the core of them all by simply standing inside one of them. Yet if the "I" can cross the lines between these aspects and relate them to each other, the "I" necessarily transcends them all. A complete idea of the "I" cannot

therefore be found in the rational aspect of theoretical thought itself alone. In that level of our experience we can attain just different clippings of that which we are. Thereby, we cannot see how any one of these clippings could capture completely who we are. To do so eventually leaves us trapped as we again attempt to take the richness of reality seriously. For example, the effort to get a total scientific control of reality has led to several attempts to describe human nature completely in terms of one or the other special sciences. But the price of this control was a severe reductionism: all of reality was reduced to certain biological or economic principles. To trust in these abstracted principles as the final sources of self-knowledge is to take the road into madness, as Chesterton denounces in the second chapter of his *Orthodoxy*.

What proves this reductionism to be unwise is the clear tension which then developed in the modern conscience. While there was in this approach a strong attempt to affirm the freedom and dignity of the human being, it stood in insoluble tension with the scientific objectification – and determination – of this same human being.

Therefore, it is clear that when we can grasp and correlate the multitude of meanings present in our experience, it is at once rational and more than rational. In this "point" in us, all that we can be, perceive and understand should be concentrated and immediately accessible. In fact, we ourselves would have to be concentrated in such a "place."

Well, as we already said this is nothing but the Heart, in the biblical language. As a sort of "gravity center" of my being, the heart is not an organ, but the nodal point of all that I am. This concentration point, the "I" of our personal experience, is the very seat of the *imago Dei*, the source of what Schaeffer called our "mannishness." It is this heart of the man who

takes decisions, who relates to God, things and other people, and who knows. We may then say that rationality is one of the functions of the heart, but not some pure, independent organ.

The Heart

The suppression of this self-knowledge, this sense of the complex mannishness that we all bear, is the inevitable price of the absolutization of rationality. But it is equally true that the rediscovering of our mannishness implies putting rationality back into proper relationship to the rest of our experience. What does this mean in terms of theoretical thought?

If the total human “I” is the starting point of our theoretical thought, we need to adopt a maximalist interpretation of our experience. Modern thinkers starting from Descartes adopt a minimalist self-reflection. After ascetically purging their consciences from experiences different from the chosen abstract clipping of our common experience, they wonder why it is impossible to reintegrate the pieces of humanity that have fallen apart. The maximalist approach, instead of cutting out one narrow band of experience as the “real” dimension, wants to recognize the legitimacy of all its different aspects: pre-theoretical, “ordinary” real life.

To be very “rational” but poor in terms of relationship, imagination, and a sense of beauty and goodness is actually to be irrational

In other words, we need to start with the wide circle of human reality. In the history of philosophy there have been those who recognized long ago that there is an alternative to either total optimism or total pessimism about the “Dogma” of rationalism. Two important

examples of such an alternative are the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid and the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal.

Thomas Reid argued against David Hume that rational, logical thought cannot operate out of emptiness but must always work from the raw materials of beliefs that are already automatically formed within us. And Pascal, in opposition to Descartes, defended the existence of other distinct ways of knowledge beyond logical, analytical reasoning, which give us access to other levels of meaning and their principles.

To quote Pascal:

“We know the truth not only by means of reason, but also by means of the heart. It is through the heart that we know the first principles, and reason, which has no part in this knowledge vainly tries to contest them ... We know that we are not dreaming, however powerless we are to prove it by reason. This powerlessness proves only the weakness of our reason, not the uncertainty of our entire knowledge as they claim.”

Pascal explains further, “the knowledge of first principles such as space, time, movement, numbers is as certain as any that our reasoning can give us, and it is on this knowledge by means of the heart and in-

stinct that reason has to rely, and must base all its argument. The heart feels that there are three dimensions in space and that there is an infinite series of numbers, and then reason goes on to prove that there are no two square numbers of which one is double the other.”

And Pascal then correctly concludes, “the principles are felt, and the propositions are proved, both conclusively, although by different ways, and it is as useless and stu-

pid for the heart to demand of reason a feeling of all the propositions it proves, before accepting them” (Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées, and other Writings*. Oxford World Classics. Tr. Honor Levi. Oxford: OUP, 1995. 35-36).

In Biblical language, we can affirm with Pascal the need to recognize that man in his mannishness is the temporal image of the atemporal origin of all things. Not just one aspect of man or another (reason, morality, biology, and so on) but the man in his entirety. The mannishness of man, therefore, in its fullness, is the imago Dei, and the heart of man is its seat.

Therefore, only as a human is it possible to be really rational. To be very “rational” but poor in terms of relationship, imagination, and a sense of beauty and goodness is actually to be irrational. Rationality is not merely the ability to “think”, but the ability to think about. Quoting a quite known Augustinian catholic: “The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.” (Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*. G. K. Chesterton Collected Works, vol I. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, p. 222).

“Autonomy”

As the German theologian Helmut Thielicke once observed, the problem of the modern concept of autonomy dwells in the autos, the vision of the “self.” The autonomy intended by a severe rationalism simply does not do justice to the mannishness of man. By privileging a particular side of human nature and trying to give absolute freedom to it, the minimalist path sets a contradiction between human functions and the laws that enable them. The result is a kind of self-induced intellectual schizophrenia we call antinomies.

If, however, we refuse to absolutize any one of the aspects of our experience, adopting the maximalist vision of it, then we are free to reinterpret autos in terms of the integrated “I”. This implies an integrated set of aspects, each with its own principles and even norms: logical, histori-

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Some recent Brazilian L'Abri theme weekends: Art and Christian Faith; Christian Faith and Reason; Society, Individuality and Happiness

cal, social, ethical, aesthetical, faith, linguistical, and so on. As the different aspects of His Creation, God has revealed much to us about the norms which operate in these different areas.

It is in fact still possible to speak of another kind of "autonomy," a creative autonomy which actually follows voluntarily all the norms given by God. Here autonomy is based on the recognition of all creational norms, without lifting up one specific part as an absolutized, artificial criterion. Full human experience is given the priority, and in this sense a fully human being can be free.

It is not rational control but spiritual control which allows such freedom. Only a spiritual renewal can reverse our hate towards God's creational Law, and that hate is the very source of all antinomies.

It is the blowing of the Holy Spirit into the core of our beings which enables reason to operate freely and which prevents any one aspect of experience to be tyrannized or overpowered by another. This free condition is what we call the theonomy of thinking.

Such an "autonomy" is not, therefore, just freedom to think, but freedom to act, to relate, to live, to be ethical, to have faith, to speak, to enjoy beauty, and so on. Here freedom means participating in what is good, true and fruitful, over and against what is evil, false and deadly. And this fullness is what we were intended by God to have! It is the meaning of God's Law. But of course this freedom depends on our acceptance of and submission to the legitimacy of the norms that rule each aspect of our experience.

Paradoxically, then, the true *autonomy* of rational thought can only even begin after recognizing that it is but one aspect of our experience – and that there are given norms for each other of these aspects. In more formal terms, the true autonomy of rational thought emerges where every schizophrenic antinomy in human life ends, and where the radical *heteronomical* character of every norm that rules human functioning is fully recognized. Here the human being becomes free to be himself, to be human as a bird is a bird. And this autonomy, that is also a heteronomy, is called *theonomy*.

Adoration

What should we say then about truth? Where does it dwell? We have seen that the absolutizing of any one aspect of creation leads us astray into contradiction, which is in biblical terms the confusion and curse of idolatry. Truth in the sense of the full, free, life-affirming growth we were intended to experience is therefore best found in the worship of the triune God.

We worship the Father, recalling the radical distinction between the Creator and His creatures but also the loving relationship intended by His creating us in His image. We worship the Son, the

Christ, who restored our manliness by becoming himself the perfect human being and the new spiritual root of creation, the second Adam, and then opening the way for us to follow him. We worship the Spirit, whose guidance leads us in the exploration of knowledge and truth in the fullness of our human experience.

Paul says that here "the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden." The cure for the hubris that besets theoretical thought depends on this humility: the recognition of the complete relativity of reason in relation to God as Creator and Redeemer and the rediscovery of our humanness in a restored personal relationship with Him. That is the context to a renewed, free intellectual life.

We could call it worshipping God with the mind: recognizing the creatureliness of all phenomena, properties and experiences that we know and will come to know, breaking with all conceptually absolutized idols, and approaching each centimeter of reality lovingly, curiously and enthusiastically in its relation with God. This is a kind of discipline, at once a spiritual position and an intellectual virtue. We call it a virtue, because it binds faith and spirituality to the passion for reasoning, firmly planted in the soil of real humanity.

Cor et res coram Deo!



Guilherme and Alessandra Carvalho lead the new Brazilian L'Abri Resource Center. For more information on their work including recent updates and upcoming events, please visit their link on the L'Abri website (<http://www.labri.org/brazil/index.html>) or their own webpage (<http://labri-brazil.blogspot.com>).

Dear Friends of L'Abri and visitors to the L'Abri website,

For years we have prayed that doors would open for L'Abri in the Southern Hemisphere. This grew out of an interest in the remarkable growth of the church in many parts of the region. The Lord's answer is remarkably demonstrated in the story of the latest addition to the various L'Abri works – Brazil. It would not be inappropriate to suggest that one could already write a book about all that has happened here. Such a book would demonstrate all the hallmarks of L'Abri history – principally, the Lord's work done in the Lord's way and as a reflection of His character. Let me give you the briefest of sketches.

Back in the summer of 2002 a Brazilian man named Rodolfo Souza came to visit English L'Abri. There he expressed a strong desire for a L'Abri in Brazil. When I asked him whether he knew any others who shared his vision, he said he was alone. Without wanting to be too discouraging, I told him that nothing could happen until there was a group of people committed to pray together for the Lord to open the way to a L'Abri work. We prayed together for that to happen. Not expecting much to come of it, I was rather surprised when he phoned 18 months later with a tale of how the Lord had miraculously provided an answer. From all over the country different people had been drawn to each other with the same vision. It was obvious that the Lord was at work in laying this foundation, and every L'Abri branch has started with this same foundation – a group committed together to pray for the start of a work.

With this foundation in place, a number of significant events followed, each with their own version of the Lord's provision. One of the group came to Greatham for a term in 2005. This contact gave birth to a conference in Brazil in 2006. There I encountered first hand this very special group of people. What stood out for me was how they combined high level thinking with a commitment to practical service and spiritual integrity. Despite this good foundation, what was not clear was who would actually do L'Abri work in Brazil. The members of the group were all engaged in various wonderful ministries already, and while being committed to supporting the start of a L'Abri, none felt called to do it themselves. But one family among them did catch my eye. This was the Carvalho family. Guilherme reminded me of Francis Schaeffer in many ways – intellectually brilliant, serious, compassionate and deeply concerned for his own culture. Alessandra, his wife, reminded me very much of Edith Schaeffer – bucketloads of energy, a great organizer, hospitality personified and a remarkable confidence in the Lord. There I silently asked the Lord to move their hearts toward L'Abri.

You can imagine my joy when several weeks later, I received a letter from them explaining how against all expectations, the Lord had called them to L'Abri! Around the same time Rodolfo also expressed his own sense of a similar call. He, too, has exceptional giftings for this work. What remained was for each of them to get exposure to a L'Abri branch so this call could be tested. With that Rodolfo and the Carvalho family came to Europe and spent a term both at the English and Dutch branches of L'Abri. They were a great blessing to both branches and at the end of 2007, they returned to Brazil having been appointed by the L'Abri Membership as L'Abri workers, with a real expectation that the Lord would lead them to become a full branch in His own good timing. They returned to Brazil with nothing to lean on but God's goodness, and what has happened since then is simply amazing. They are now functioning as a L'Abri Resource Center with theme weekends, conferences, short study terms, publications and a real sense that God is using this new work already in a great way.

If you want to follow the work in Brazil, please do visit their wing of our website (<http://www.labri.org/brazil/index.html>) or their own site (<http://labri-brazil.blogspot.com>). Do pray for them especially at this early stage. They are vulnerable, as the Schaeffers also were when they started out. But also like the Schaeffers, they are in the hand of a very generous Father. It is one of the greatest privileges of my life to be connected to this story, a story which is of course still in the making and with many new chapters yet to be written!

Warmest greetings,
Andrew Fellows,
English L'Abri



Participants and workers at the 2007 Brazilian L'Abri Conference