Understanding Religion: Role of Faith and Reason.
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Many a time we tend to be skeptical about religious claims and beliefs. Quite often the doubts regarding the truth or even the plausibility of such beliefs germinate from our seemingly rational appraisal of such religious notions. Thus we are repeatedly told not to subject religion to the test of reason, rather we must, they exhort, surrender ourselves completely to faith. Sometimes the disbelief originates not so much from an initial rational deliberation. We may expect a particular outcome from a particular deed of us but when it does not happen the way we desire it to be, we begin to lose our faith. Here our expectations in the first place may be quite irrational. There is no necessity that what we expect from our deeds ought to be materialized instantly. The ideal of niskama karma captures this aspect when it says that we have right only to action and not to its fruits. Notwithstanding such rational exhortations, once again we are asked to inculcate an unflinching faith so as to keep our beliefs intact.

Understanding the nature of religious beliefs in the manner described above institutes a sharp boundary between the realms of faith and reason. If Rudyard Kipling sang about the incommensurability of cultures of the East and West, we seem to sing about faith and reason that the twain shall never meet. Thus we banish reason while assigning faith to religious beliefs and seem to think that rationality is the sole privilege of our scientific beliefs where faith has no role to play. However, if we spare a little thought to the writings of recent philosophers of science we may see that faith and reason do not belong to two distinct and unrelated spheres. What we reason out to a great extent depends on what we believe as a matter of faith. A good example from science itself illustrates this point. Though Christian Huygens and Robert Hook both held that light traveled in waves, just like sound, Isaac Newton propounded the Corpuscular theory of light that conceives the phenomenon of light as a stream of particles. Of course Newton had certain rational to believe so. For instance, sound that travels in a waveform can be heard around corners, light cannot normally be seen around a corner unless it is reflected from a surface. Nevertheless, Newton's theory did not have all the evidence. More than a century later another scientist, Thomas Young, using more or less the same experiment as Newton did, once again came up with wave theory of light defending Huygen's as well as Hooke's position. In fact Young suggested that light traveled in transverse waves, like waves of water in the sea, and not in longitudinal waves as sound does. Of course current theory on light holds that light sometimes acts like particles and sometimes like waves, which amply explains why scientists could not succeed conclusively in defining the nature of light for so long. But the point that needs our attention is why did Newton who performed much earlier the same experiment as Young did, hold on to particle theory even when his contemporaries argued in favour of wave theory? Philosophers of science point out that it is because of Newton's metaphysical faith in "atomism" that prompted him to adhere to particle theory rather than the wave theory. Of course the faith in atomism later made remarkable progress in Chemistry with John Dalton's atomic model of Chemical substances. Nevertheless, there were scientists who questioned the theory of atomism. Ernst Mach, a great physicist of early twentieth century opposed atomism all through his career. In other words, it was an article of metaphysical faith that made Newton to Corpuscular theory of light.

Arguing thus for the role of faith in practicing science, an activity that is deemed to be the epitome of rationality, let me now turn to religion. Those who conceive faith and reason as antithetical to each other and mutually contradicting seem to think that unless these two are kept at a distance from each other it is impossible to defend religious beliefs in the cultural milieu of science and technology. Apparently it becomes imperative for them to argue for faith alone.
as constituting the domain of religion. The self styled champions of science who loudly proclaim the demise of religion do it precisely on this count, that religion is merely a matter of faith and label it as unhealthy dogmatism. Of course faith without proper rationality degenerates into dogmatism and to unacceptable religious fundamentalism. Perhaps, it is worth paraphrasing Immanuel Kant in this context: faith without reason is blind and reason without faith is lame. Thus we need to incorporate rationality to religious beliefs. This does not mean that we have to subject religious beliefs to the scrutiny of science. What I am trying to articulate can be better illustrated by taking recourse to the thoughts of Ludwig Wittgenstein, arguably one of the most significant philosophers we ever had and certainly the most fertile mind of twentieth century analytic philosophy. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of ‘Language-Game’ to clarify the nature of meaning of various belief statements. Just like any game, our statements are constituted by a set of rules. Each game has its own set of rules and we play the game according to the specific rules of that game. For instance, though both soccer and basketball are games we play with ball, the rules of the former are not applicable to the latter. Similarly, what counts as an evidence of scientific rationality need not be the evidence for rationally holding a religious belief. Nor can we contradict a religious belief adducing reason from science, as religion and science are two different languages games. Religious beliefs can stand on their own without the support of science and it is a wasteful exercise to look for scientific compatibility as far as religious beliefs are concerned. Following rules, whether we play soccer or practice religion is a matter of rationality. Only rational beings can consistently follow rules. A soccer player who suddenly changes rules in the middle of the game and start playing according to different rules is seen as an irrational player.

The necessity of rationality along with faith in religious beliefs is all the more felt in our contemporary cultural matrix. One who exercises reason in his religious faith will naturally see that different religions are not different language-games but belongs to the same language-game of worship, devotion, humility, righteousness and other attenuated values. Rituals may vary but the spirit behind it remains the same. Here I wish to quote the late lamented bishop His Grace Paulos Mar Gregorios. Thirumeni was interviewed by Dr. Francis Clark, Professor of Religious Studies at The Open University, England and the Executive Director of the Council for the World’s Religions in October 1986 on the day of Prayer for World Peace. Mar Gregorios speaks to Dr. Clark about the Nairobi Assembly of W.C.C in 1975:

...We finally got one of the six sections to devote itself to the question of other religions. Representatives of other religions such as Kirpal Singh, Seshagiri Rao, and others were invited. There were perhaps three or four hundred people present. It was a very difficult debate. At one point a Scandinavian bishop stood up and said, "Mr. Chairman, I would like to know what you are up to. Are you trying to tell us that there is something lacking in Jesus Christ, that we must find in other religions?" Since I was the chairman and I could not debate someone asking a question like that, I said, "My own experience is that I don’t know everything about Jesus Christ. And I think that through other religions I can find out more about Jesus Christ." The reply was: "We do not feel that we have anything lacking. And so we do opposed to dialogue unless it is for the sake of testifying to Jesus Christ." The Lutheran and Calvinist traditions insist that Christians alone have the truth, and that there is no other name through which human beings can be saved except that of Jesus Christ. They therefore believe that all other religions have nothing to say to us, although we have something to say to them. That is the point of view that has triumphed in the World Council. Some of us are still trying to change that point of view, but it is difficult. (Dialogue & Alliance, Vol.1, No.2, Summer 1987, p.96)

Why this difficulty? In this context Gregorios Thirumeni himself says, there is “a fear of opening oneself”. Now, I would like to point out that this kind of fear results from dogmatic faith devoid of reason.