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“THE LIMITS OF LOGIC: GOING BEYOND REASON IN THEOLOGY, FAITH, AND
ART”

INTRODUCTION

There is a problem with the way we think. A certain idea has infiltrated our minds, affecting our outlook on the universe. This idea is one of the most destructive of all ideas, for it has affected our conception of many things, including beauty, God, and his relationship with humankind.

For the several centuries since the advent of the Modern era, Western civilization has had a problem with logic and human reason. The problem extends from philosophy to theology, art, and science; it affects the daily lives of us all, for the problem is with the way we think; we think that thinking is everything. The problem is that Western civilization has for a long time considered his own human reason to be the ultimate guide to finding truth. The results have been disastrous: at different times and in different places and among people of various different opinions and creeds, the Christian faith has been subsumed under reason, beauty has been thought to be something that a human being can fully understand, and God himself has been held subservient to the human mind. When some people began to realize that reason could not fully grasp all the mysteries of the universe, they did not successfully surrender the false doctrine that had elevated reason so high, and they began to say that it is acceptable for something contrary to the rules of logic to be good.

Yet it has not always been this way, and indeed it should not be this way. Surely the human mind cannot contain the universe! Surely there are mysteries that cannot be comprehended. Surely there are truths that human reason can support, yet cannot rule over. Surely they do not break the rules of logic but are bigger and better than those rules. Surely there are things that transcend logic. It is the intention of this paper to investigate these things, which I take to include the nature of God, the incomprehensible statements of the Christian faith, and beauty.

THE CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDING LOGIC: ILLOGIC, LOGIC, AND BEYOND LOGIC

There are illogical things, logical¹ things, and things that are beyond logic.² A superb paradigm for thinking about this is found in a literary classic, Dante's masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*, in which is portrayed the supreme allegorical example of logic's role and limits. Virgil guides Dante to a certain distance but no farther, and Virgil's specific role allegorically illustrates for just how much Dante believes logic to be necessary and of just how much it is capable. In an introduction to *The Divine Comedy*, C. H. Grandgent introduces the character Virgil thus: "Virgil, the guide through the first two stages, is human reason, which reveals the true nature of sin, in all its hideousness and folly and hatefulness, and shows the real meaning of

¹It is important to note that I am dealing with *human logic*, which may be flawed as well as finite. The reader should be aware that in this paper I use the terms *reason* and *logic* interchangeably.

²These things could also be called *trans-rational* or *trans-logical*.

reformation.”³ In *Purgatorio* XXIX, however, human reason reaches its limit. Dante as a character in his own story asks help again from Virgil as he has been accustomed to doing throughout his journey, but human reason can no longer help him: “Full of wonderment I turned me to the good Virgil, and he answered me with a face not less charged with amazement. Then I turned my countenance back to the sublime things”⁴ Virgil is no less mystified by the wonders of these upper reaches of religion than Dante himself is, and cannot explain these things to him. Human reason has reached its limit, and the things that it cannot comprehend are called “sublime.”

By no means does this make the sublime things illogical. For if they were illogical, then Virgil, the personification of human reason, would have opposed them. So they are neither logical nor illogical, and they are not something for which logic shows no regard: Virgil, like Dante, is in awe of them. One possibility remains: the sublime things transcend logic. In Dante’s allegory, the role of human reason is to lead us to a certain point and then tell us to go on without it.

It is a vital distinction which is made between illogic and those things that transcend logic. Illogic is actually *less* than logic. By observing the way we think of the term *illogic* we can see that there is no correlation between something like God, who must be *bigger* than logic,

³C. H. Grandgent, Introduction to *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri, trans. John Aitken Carlyle, Thomas Okey, and Philip H. Wicksteed (New York: Vintage Books, 1950, vii-xv), xiv.

⁴Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Aitken Carlyle, Thomas Okey, and Philip H. Wicksteed (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 2.29.55-58 (365).

and something *illogical*, is *smaller* than logic. *Illogic is that which fails to meet the test of logic; clearly therefore illogic falls within the bounds of logic and is subservient to it.*⁵ Illogic is within the jurisdiction of logic, as a breaker of logic's rules.

If there is something, however, which can be identified as not being logical yet cannot be identified as being illogical, then it likely transcends logic. If it is illogical, then it falls within the bounds of logic; so too if it is logical. If it is neither, then it is in some realm outside of logic.

Therefore, if a thing can be determined to be neither illogical nor logical, it is outside of the bounds of logic. Anything meeting these criteria must be considered to be outside of the jurisdiction of human reason and, while not unknowable, ultimately not fully comprehensible.⁶

Of course, this is not in itself any reason to assume that just *anything* outside of logic transcends it; that which is outside logic may merely be something to which logic is completely irrelevant, whereas the word *transcend* indicates going beyond something, not something irrelevant to it. It is vital to note that if it *transcends* logic, then logic *is* relevant to it. Therefore the criteria for something merely outside of logic's bounds is its being neither logical nor illogical, *and the criteria for something transcending logic is its being neither fully logical nor*

⁵I contend that this is generally how we think of the term "illogic," though the (unabridged) dictionary does not explicitly make this distinction: basically the word means "non-logical"; the definition in the dictionary leaves room for calling things breaking the rules of logic "illogical" but does not actually forbid us from calling things transcendent of logic "illogical." In fact the synonym "irrational" can be used—for instance in math—of numbers which certainly do not seem to be contrary to reason. Nevertheless I will continue to work with these terms defined as such because I think that we usually mean this when we think of the word "illogical." The distinction in any case must be made between what I am calling "illogical" and those things that are certainly trans-logical; for that which is contrary to logic "illogical" may be the best word we have.

*fully illogical, but logic still having relevance to it.*⁷

The final criterion, therefore, for saying that something transcends logic is *if logic itself compels us to move on towards this thing which is outside of its realm*. This is certainly the case with Dante: it is as if human reason says, “I have led you this far. Now you must go on without me.” Reason’s final command is to go where it cannot; the sublime things beyond its limits are without its bounds, yet logic is still *relevant* to them because it compels Dante (or us) to go there. A college student is outside the limits of his or her parent’s governance, but he or she is likely to be there precisely because they sent him or her there; they are relevant because they compelled the college student to go somewhere without them, beyond their sphere of influence.⁸

THINGS THAT TRANSCEND LOGIC

Just what sorts of things transcend logic? What things are not capable of being grasped by human reason yet are not in opposition to it? What sublime things are applauded by human

⁶ I am making a distinction between *logical as propositional statement* (which sublime statements about God we have) and *logical comprehensible*.

⁷ Yet one more category may be possible. What if it is not contrary to the rules of logic, it is not logical, logic is relevant to it, and the nature of the thing itself tells us that it is probably no better than logic, though it is in a separate realm? The same “nature of the thing itself,” I contend, can tell us whether it transcends logic or is simply in a realm outside of logic and equal to logic in value. Of the things discussed in this paper, God and faith at least are certainly better than logic.

⁸It would be problematic to call the things that transcend logic “a-logical” because, although they are not within the realm of logic, logic is still relevant to them. To call them “a-logical” might imply that logic has no relevance. Some, such as Blaise Pascal, have stated that there are things *deeper than logic*. With this I would agree; calling the sublime things transcendent of logic or deeper than logic may be just two different ways of looking at the same reality. However, even if the designation “deeper than logic” held more metaphysical accuracy, I would contend that the designation “transcendent of logic” is still necessary as an epistemological method. Even if things are deeper than logic, in order to get to them we need to go beyond logic’s explanatory power.

reason though it does not understand them? I suggest that at least these three things transcend logic: God, faith, and beauty.

God

There are many reasons for making the claim that God transcends logic. For one, there is the argument which we can make from His perfection. God is perfect in every way. Naturally this includes moral perfection, omnipotence (perfection of power), and omniscience (perfection of knowledge). Now we humans have a standard which we apply regularly to each other and to our own endeavors: the test of reason. We humans consider the test of logic to be a test for a genuinely true and needed virtue, and anything failing the test of reason is considered to be less than perfect. Surely, if logic and reason are legitimate tests and God is perfect in every way, then He is logically perfect as well: that is to say, He must pass every applicable test of logic and therefore *not* be *illogical* because He does not break logic's rules. So He passes the first test. At the same time logic as we know it is basically *human* reason, which is finite and very likely flawed. God, being above and beyond humanity, perfect and infinite, is not understandable by this tool, so He is not limited to logic. So He passes the second test. Regarding the final test, is logic relevant to God in any way? By all means it is, if the historic Christian faith is correct, and if the assertion of God's existence passes just a few reasonable logical tests. Therefore, God transcends human reason. No doubt God does not transcend his own higher level of logic, but He does transcend human reason.⁹

A different argument can also be made from creation. Logic, as a thing in the universe, must be something that God created.¹⁰ Therefore He is bigger than it in the sense of being the one who created it; He is its master. God transcends logic.

Let us move on to examples of God's transcending of logic (the provision of these examples amounts to a further defense of the assertion that He does transcend logic). For one example of how God transcends logic, consider the Trinity. While a *contradiction* is decidedly illogical, a *paradox* has the potential to transcend logic. Such a paradox is the Trinity (another helpful way to say it is that the Trinity is an *antimony*). While the intention of this paper is not to prove that the Trinity is not illogical, it can be safely said that any orthodox Christian believes in the Trinity, and can probably be safely assumed that he or she does not consider the Trinity to be contrary to logic. The Trinity, then, is not illogical; nor is it logical, for logic cannot comprehend it; the only remaining criterion for calling the Trinity a thing that transcends logic is whether logic itself compels us to believe in it. This it does, for logical hermeneutics quickly find the Trinity as a legitimate Scriptural doctrine.

If someone says something along the lines of "God is bigger than logic, so He can be illogical if He wants to," they are only making God smaller, for illogic, being something failing the test of logic, is *smaller* than logic. The statement may be true in the sense that God can do

⁹ Logic has to meet the standard of God, but God does not have to meet the standard of logic.

¹⁰There is another possibility; if logic is, like morality, an outflow of God's character, then He is not so much its creator as He is logic itself. While this is an interesting theoretical possibility, for all practical purposes it is not worth consideration. For we are speaking of *human reason*, *human* logic in this paper, and if God is a "Platonic form" of reason it does not change the fact that He transcends the only logic with which we are familiar, which is

anything He wants to, but God would probably not want to be illogical, for He is perfect in every way, and as we have already established, logic is a legitimate test; if God failed it, He would not be perfect. I am not saying by any means that God falls within the jurisdiction of logic; I am saying that He does not. If He were illogical, however, He would be within the jurisdiction of logic's rules: as a rulebreaker. This would only lessen God.

What this person is probably trying to say by pointing out that "God is bigger than logic" is that God will not fit within the bounds of logic. This is true, but a better way to say it would be to say that God *transcends* logic because He is bigger than it, not that He is ever *illogical* (smaller than logic). So a person who says this seems to be well-intentioned, but he or she only add to the problem by saying God can be illogical.¹¹ Furthermore, if a person aims to *separate* faith and logic into separate realms, not only is this not the historic Christian view, but he or she cannot do so by calling faith illogical: that makes it *sub-logical*, not separate from logic.

Faith

The Christian Faith (Orthodoxy)

Certainly Dante's allegorical experience, being a metaphor of the Christian journey, implies that Dante at least believed that faith transcends human reason, but what else will support this thesis? Our criteria for something transcending logic rather than being simply irrelevant to logic was when it is neither illogical nor logical yet is not irrelevant to logic:

human reason and mankind's grasp of logic.

¹¹The sort of thing I am addressing here will be discussed in much more detail in the section on Modernism

specifically, something transcends logic if it is neither illogical nor logical yet is supported by reason or in some way by logic.

Certainly the Christian faith, or Christian orthodoxy, is supported by logic; this is seen to be a fact when we consider the legitimate role of apologetics. Few Christians truly believe that their faith is actually contrary to the rules of logic, or else they really would proudly call themselves morons for believing it.

Furthermore, the Bible opens itself up to rigorous logical testing. One example is the discussion of the resurrection in I Cor. 15 where the empirical evidence for the resurrection is mentioned (15:3-8) and where it is pointed out that without this empirically supported event, the faith is worthless (15:13-19). Surely I Thess. 5:21 (“Test everything. Hold on to the good”) commands the Christian to be rational. The same can be said of Jesus’ command to “be as shrewd as snakes” (Matt. 10:16). In context, this command also seems to speak of testing things: the command is given because we are being sent out “like sheep among wolves” and we must beware of them. We must also consider the charge of I Cor. 14:20 and the reference to “being sure” of what we believe in.¹²

So the Christian faith is not illogical, and is indeed supported by logic. All that remains is the criterion of whether logic itself can fully grasp it (that is, does logic fully grasp it?). This is certainly not the case, as is evidenced in part by the above discussion of God. When the time

and Postmodernism.

¹² Consider also Job 11:6-8, 36:26; Ps. 131:1; Is. 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33-36; I Cor. 13:9; II Cor. 10:5; Phil.

has come for Dante to go into paradise, he has to take a “leap of faith” and leave Virgil behind him. Logic cannot bring one to God, as Dante evidently knew; nor is it the heart and soul of the Christian faith.

Francis Schaeffer has much to say about logic’s role in the Christian’s faith and life. There are similarities to Dante’s use of Virgil in Schaeffer’s words when he says: “The Christian is not rationalistic; he does not try to begin from himself autonomously and work out a system from there on. But he *is* rational: he thinks and acts on the basis that A is A and A is not non-A. However, he does not end with only rationality, for in his response to what God has said his whole personality is involved.”¹³ Although Dante’s allegory speaks of faith, both it and Schaeffer’s words speak of human reason *going so far and no further*. Specifically, Schaeffer seems to be saying that, though we do not “end with rationality,” we do use our minds. But it is the entirety of our being that responds in faith: our “whole personality,” including the mind, the heart, the will, the emotions, etc. Again, Schaeffer says that “the involvement of the whole man at every level of his being” “flows on from the first.”¹⁴ “The first” is “the truly rational” and there is a “balance” between this “truly rational” and the ensuing “involvement of the whole man.”¹⁵ The realm of reason does not subsume everything else; neither is reason abandoned by

1:7,16; I Pet. 3:15; and II Pet. 1:16.

¹³ Francis Schaeffer, *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1968; reprint, Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 124.

¹⁴Ibid., 125.

¹⁵Ibid.

the Christian. For “Much can be added to the rational, but if we give up the rational everything is lost.”¹⁶ So we have reason itself telling us to go on without it. Indeed, it would be unreasonable not to; though reason is necessary in the earlier stages of philosophical/theological endeavor, this reason is not everything. *I submit that reason itself admits that it can only know so much.*

To try and subsume everything under reason¹⁷ is unreasonable, since reason itself admits that it cannot know everything. The things we know about God that transcend logic generally seem to be the knowledge gained by special revelation. James W. Sire in *The Universe Next Door* writes that human beings can know many things about the world and about God through the quality of reason which God gave to us.¹⁸ However, “God himself is so forever beyond us that we cannot have anything approaching total comprehension of him.”¹⁹ Revelation is necessary for us to have sufficient knowledge of God²⁰; “As Aquinas said, we can know that

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷ As the Moderns did; see section IV A.

¹⁸James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3d ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 30.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰ The doctrine of Thomas Aquinas is that grace completes nature and that revelation completes reason. To say “revelation transcends reason” would not be much different. Aquinas held nature and reason to be necessary as a starting point but insufficient for getting us all the way to God. Thus I think that Aquinas is in general agreement with me on this matter, though I do not know if he ever used quite the same terms. So, I would contend, is the Augustinian/Reformed tradition, for it too has a place for human reason but finds human reason insufficient to get us to God. The Thomistic/Natural Theology tradition emphasizes only the finitude of human reason, whereas the Augustinian/Reformed tradition claims also that human reason is *corrupt*. (I wonder whether or not the two traditions might almost be reconciled if it were suggested that human reason becomes corrupt when it forgets that it

God exists through general revelation, but we could never know that God is triune except for special revelation.”²¹ Reason works with the truths revealed by general revelation, and special revelation completes the process.

While speaking of the Incarnation, Packer quotes a few words from the Athanasian Creed about God-made-man in the person of Jesus Christ (the hypostatic union), then admits that “Our minds cannot get beyond this Incomprehensibly. We shall be wise to remember this, to shun speculation and contentedly to adore.”²² Packer affirms that our minds can get to the Incarnation but not beyond it; now we must adore; now we must be in wonder.

Certainly there are many things about God that are not comprehensible by logic but are nevertheless true, and the historic Baptist faith is in agreement. L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, writing in *Baptists and the Bible*, mention many Baptists who thought this way. To begin, as Bush and Nettles say, in the 1700's the early Baptist John Gill believed that “Things naturally unknowable to man (that is, creation and prophecy of the future) and things above reason (that is, the Trinity of persons in the Godhead) all are part of the contents of the Bible and

is finite.)

²¹Ibid., 31; Sire’s actual thinking runs thus: human beings have reason that can know things; human reason is insufficient; therefore revelation from God is necessary; this revelation takes the form of both natural and special revelation. It is almost as if Sire draws a distinction between reason and natural revelation; I assume no such distinction is actually intended, but if it was it would seem to me to be flawed: no aspect of natural revelation (the moral law, the beauty of the cosmos, the order of the cosmos, etc.) makes any sort of argument for the existence of God without the aid of reason.

²² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 58.

profound evidence that it is from God.”²³ Clearly Gill believed in things not contrary to reason which rather transcend it: “things above reason.” Because of the insufficiency of reason special revelation is necessary.²⁴ The truth about God is not unreasonable, but it is not explained by reason; it goes beyond reason. Special revelation tells us the things that transcend reason.

In the same century Joseph Fuller’s opinion was that “in matters that are beyond human reason, revelation is essential.”²⁵ Once again there are things that are “beyond human reason.” Once again the doctrine is that special revelation provides us with the things about God which transcend logic and yet are not illogical.

Adoniram Judson, in the mid-1800's, had this to say about the Bible: “It may not be reducible to the rules of human philosophy or logic, for it transcends them all.”²⁶ According to Judson, the Bible transcends logic.²⁷

Finally, A. T. Robertson’s methodology is the same. In the late 1800's, writing on Scripture, Robertson propounded the view that “Scripture speaks in a realm where reason never

²³L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 89; these words are Bush’s and Nettles’.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 98; again the words belong to Bush and Nettles.

²⁶Ibid., 125.

²⁷Note that Fuller and Judson seem to be addressing the Modernist idea that exalts reason above everything. I suspect that is why they do not specifically mention that faith is not illogical as well as that faith transcends logic. In addition to this Modernist heresy, I am also addressing a sort of Postmodern Christianity that holds that faith is illogical, so I have been sure to mention both problems throughout the paper.

could. It transcends reason and for that reason is not unreasonable.”²⁸ Reason must submit to revelation “in spheres where human reason can never penetrate.”²⁹ Although reason may be useful or even necessary as a starting point, revelation is necessary to take us all the way to God’s truth.

Of course Christian theology is the study of the mystery of God, who transcends logic and yet is not contrary to logic; so in that sense the earlier discussion of the nature of God is included in this section as an evidence that orthodoxy transcends reason. Other things that cannot be fully grasped by logic are the interaction of divine sovereignty and human free will,³⁰ the substitutionary atonement, the interaction of the human person and the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of Scripture, possibly the nature of the Eucharist, and the nature of Heaven. Therefore it must be concluded that the Christian faith transcends logic. So much for the Christian faith; what, then, of a “leap of faith?”

A Life of Faith

...

The dialogue cannot simply end here, for even if the *act of faith* is illogical, it cannot be severed from the *life of faith*; the part cannot be separated from the whole. Abraham’s single act was based on a knowledge of the One who had commanded the act: God, whose power is

²⁸Ibid., 273; these words are Bush’s and Nettles’s.

²⁹Ibid.; these words are Bush’s and Nettles’s.

infinite, whose commands are good, and whose promises are fulfilled. It is actually quite logical to do what God says. A life of faith in a good and powerful and promise-keeping God is quite logical; to live in obedience to that God's every command is certainly logical. More logic is preserved by the leap of faith (because Abraham is doing what God says) than would be preserved by not taking the leap and disobeying God.

Therefore, Abraham's *leap* of faith can well be called absurd, but his *life* of faith is not illogical; it is logical to have such faithful obedience to such a God; and the leap of faith cannot be separated from the life of faith. There is only illogic on a small scale; when we take into account the entire picture, the illogic disappears. We find an illogical leap and a logical argument for taking the leap.

...

We have established that the leap of faith is not absurd when kept in its proper context. So it is not illogical. However, can we really say that it transcends logic? What we seem to have is a case where logic tells us not to go on without it, but to break its own rules. Is this the transcending of logic? Let us look at the possibilities and see which ones we can rule out, and which ones remain. Faith is not something to which logic is irrelevant, for logic tells us to do what God says. Faith is not logical, for the leap of faith seems absurd. Faith is not illogical, for even the leap of faith is not illogical when not separated from its context. The only possible relation of logic to faith is that faith transcends it. *So our first reason to say that faith transcends*

³⁰ See, for instance, Acts 29:29.

logic is that no other relation to logic fits.

But this seems a poor description of a situation in which logic tells us to break its own rules. Illogic, we have said, is *sub*-logical, not *trans*-logical. There is a difficulty in saying that something compelling us to go to the *sub*-logical transcends the logical. There may be an answer to this difficulty, however: we must remember that *God's logic is higher than ours*. Something that breaks the laws of human reason does not necessarily break the laws of *God's reason*. Something that goes beyond our understanding certainly does not go beyond God's understanding. *So our second reason to say that faith transcends logic is that to break the laws of finite, human logic is not necessarily to break the laws of God's logic.*³¹

...

Beauty

Our three criteria for identifying things that transcend logic were the following: they are not illogical; they are not logical; and logic itself compels us to go on without it. One thing that seems to meet these criteria is beauty. Logic can certainly prove some things about beauty, but it cannot explain it or fully grasp it.

For instance, using an approach similar to C. S. Lewis' defense of the existence of a Moral Law in the opening pages of *Mere Christianity*, we can observe that all men seem to believe in beauty, and to believe that certain things are beautiful. For instance, you will be hard

³¹Not only do we have no other category but the trans-logical in which to place faith, but to leave it without a category would itself be an admission of faith's mystery which amounts to the same claim to trans-rationality.

pressed to find a sane man who does not find women beautiful, no matter how hard you search the world. The universal agreement of different cultures on a proposition indicates that the proposition is written in natural law, or is innate, or for some such reason is true. Here, however, we must stop, for logic cannot be used to explain *why* a woman is beautiful. Logic can identify that there is beauty, but cannot explain it completely. Beauty is bound up closely with the mysterious; thus logic cannot explain it totally. Beauty fails no test of logic that makes it illogical. Nor can it be explained by logic. Logic, however, can identify it as being existent and being something good, so logic is still *relevant* in a way to beauty: specifically logic, though not understanding it, compels us to adore it. All that is left for logic to do is to pay homage to this thing, beauty, that transcends it.

Although Alfred, Lord Tennyson is a Romantic, he flawlessly manifests certain ideals of the Enlightenment. His poetry has flawless rhyme schemes, for instance, exhibiting the Enlightenment ideal of order. There is no separation of logic and beauty with Tennyson. Rather, the genius of the poet is used to shape and honor beauty. Surely this is the proper relation of the two, of logic and beauty: logic supports beauty, and glorifies it; beauty transcends logic, as if it were the purpose of logic's endeavors.

The only thing remaining to be said about beauty as transcending logic is that God, too, is beautiful.³² God may very well be beauty itself, the one infinite beautiful entity.³³

³²See Ps. 27:4, for example.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SEPARATION OF FAITH AND LOGIC IN THE WEST

There seems to have been a time when faith was correctly thought by the general consensus of Western philosophy to contain a mystery element that went beyond rationality.³⁴ The change seems to have come about with the advent of Modernism, which hailed human reason as the ultimate locator and determiner of truth. This made reason everything, and there was no faith except that “faith” which was within the realm of reason. After this (with the advent of Postmodernism) it seems that when some people wanted more than just reason, they did not do away with the Modernist presuppositions, and thus had to adhere to faith which they took to be illogical. Sadly, many Christians still seem to think in these terms today. Many Christians who call faith “illogical” may be reacting to the overrating of logic by Modernism and might do better to say that it “transcends logic.”

Modernism

Modernism separated faith from reason by rejecting faith’s transcendence over reason, and in effect rejecting faith. This development can be understood largely as a rejection of the primacy of special revelation. When faith was thought to transcend logic, human reason and

³³It seems to be a Christian doctrine that the things about God which transcend logic are generally those revealed to us by special revelation; this is not the case, however, for faith and beauty. Why is there this difference between God, on the one hand, and faith and beauty, on the other? I suspect that the reason is that the things we know about God are in the form of propositional statements which came to us by special revelation. We have very few such propositional statements about a life of faith or about beauty, save that “Faith is good and leaps of faith must be taken,” and “Beauty exists and is good.” For Roman Catholic speculations on God and beauty, see Navone, John. *Toward a Theology of Beauty*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

³⁴ This is looking at faith in relation to reason. In this sense, faith transcends it. If we were to look at

natural revelation were thought to work together to reveal some things about God, and special revelation revealed things that reason could not reach. With the development of Modernism came the priority of natural revelation, working in concordance with reason, over special revelation, which was more or less rejected as a means of discovering truth. Speaking of the modernist Deistic movement, Sire says, “But deism denies that God can be known by revelation, by special acts of God’s self-expression in, for example, Scripture or the Incarnation. ...deism now casts out Scripture as an authority in theology and allows only the application of ‘human’ reason. As Peter Medawar says, ‘The 17th-century doctrine of the *necessity* of reason was slowly giving way to a belief in the *sufficiency* of reason’.”³⁵

Francis Schaeffer’s words on this development are crucial for Christians to read. Most important for understanding his critique of Western philosophy since Modernism began is the so-called “Francis Schaeffer trilogy:” *The God Who is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He is There and He is not Silent*. As Todd Kappelman says in his summary of Schaeffer’s *Escape from Reason*, “As the emphasis on man increased, the importance of God decreased. This movement was further facilitated by discoveries in the sciences which allowed man to understand the universe on purely naturalistic principles. The result of man’s success in explaining some aspects of the universe through reason alone was that he began to try to explain

reason in relation to faith, reason would be its humble servant.

³⁵ Sire, 43; this development is an abuse of Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine.

every aspect of the universe through reason alone.”³⁶ Although Schaeffer never distinguishes between Modernism and Postmodernism in the trilogy, I take this to be a description of Modern epistemology. It elevated reason above everything else. The resultant destruction of faith inevitably causes the loss of meaning.

A Sample of “Postmodernist” Religion

Whereas Modernism separated faith from reason by *rejecting* faith’s transcendence for the sake of reason, postmodern religion, which I take Neo-orthodoxy to be, separates faith from reason by *restoring* faith without first putting reason back in its place as subservient to faith. It retains the Modernist conception of reason as all-sufficient, but in an attempt to find meaning, embraces faith; this it does (by the standards it accepts) *against* reason.³⁷

After faith was lost meaning was lost. In Kappelman’s succinct description, “Men found that they were able to explain much through reason, but the larger philosophical questions proved to be too great. In addition, they discovered that there were many questions that could not be answered by reason alone. ... These questions are traditionally answered by theology, and the answers usually included an appeal to a divine being called God.”³⁸ But the traditional God was

³⁶ Todd Kappelman, “The Need to Read: Francis Schaeffer,” *Probe.org* [thoughts on Christianity and culture]; available from < <http://probe.org/docs/schaeffer.html>>; Internet; accessed 12-6-03.

³⁷ The New Age movement also seems to be like this in some ways; correspondences could also be observed between the position that faith must be subsumed under reason and the strong rationalist position; between the position that faith is illogical and the fideist position; and between my position and the critical rationalist position. For more on these positions see, for example, the second chapter of Peterson, Michael, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger. *Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

now dead. The result was that “Modern man, thus, was faced with two possibilities. Either he could return to the answers found in the Scriptures, or he could live as though life had meaning even though he did not believe that it really did. Schaeffer argued that men in the Western philosophical tradition largely opted for irrational existence, escaping the requirements of reason, hence the title *Escape from Reason*.”³⁹ Man simply cannot live without faith. *The vital thing to note about this reaction to the Modernist rejection of faith is that it did not restore transcendent faith, but rather retained the Modernist notion that rational faith does not exist.* Under these circumstances, in order to restore faith, faith had to be redefined as irrational. Speaking of Hegel, whom he took to have influenced Kierkegaard (who influenced Karl Barth, the ultimate theistic existentialist), Schaeffer said “Man will keep his rationalism ... even if it means he must give up his rationality”⁴⁰ when he needs faith.

It is, once again, important to note that Schaeffer never distinguishes between Modernism and Postmodernism. However, I do think that this sort of development has much in common with Postmodernism. At the very least it seems to be the story of how the times led up to Kierkegaard’s thought and the highly influential theistic existentialist interpretation of it. It must also be noted that this is at most only a sample of Postmodernism,⁴¹ if I am indeed correct in

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Schaeffer, 233.

⁴¹ Assuming only that Postmodernism is not in favor of *illogic*, then my paper is a Postmodern critique of Modernism when it says that faith is not logical, and a Postmodern critique of *the abuse of Postmodernism* when it

making that designation. Etymologically, and perhaps in other ways, this paper is itself postmodern. It is also important to note that Francis Schaeffer has been known to overstate his case. Still, where Schaeffer is concerned, as flawed and incomplete as he may be, let us not abandon him until we have read and dealt with his message.

CONCLUSION

Having established that there are things that transcend logic, at least two lessons need to be learned from this fact. Each of the two lessons stems each from the basic mistakes that can be made with this legitimate doctrine. The first mistake is thinking that orthodoxy, faith, beauty, and perhaps other sublime things are illogical (the mistake made by some Postmoderns). The sublime things are not illogical. Orthodoxy is not illogical. Faith is not illogical. Beauty is not illogical. They *transcend logic*. They are not within the realm of logic, and it is logic itself that tells us to go on without it into the realms of these finer things.

This must be done with a sense of awe: awe at the mystery of the sublime things God has given us. For He has given us Himself, both in doctrine and in life, and He has given us beauty. There must be humility when we approach the marvelous mysteries of God, the mysterious and wild life of faith – and the indescribable, sublime, praiseworthy, beautiful things God has given us. This is how to avoid the second mistake, to assume that since these things are not illogical that they must therefore be logical. This is just as blasphemous. The Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection—these things are mysteries of incomparable grandeur. To call them logical, and

says that faith is not illogical.

to approach God without humility and reverence for His incomprehensible nature, would be a heresy. Similarly, it would be blasphemy if our Christian lives were not lived out with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), if our faith was not one of wild abandonment (following cautious discernment of God's will), and tremendous joy, and passion. Finally, if our attitude towards beauty were not one of reverence, that too would be a tragedy. There may be work the human mind can do to explain things about beauty, but ultimately there will be no grasping of it by human reason. Whether it be a man looking at his wife or any person looking at the stars above or contemplating a waterfall or a single rose or flame lily, understanding beauty will always remain somewhere beyond our grasp.

If we could see with God's eyes perhaps these things would all make sense. Perhaps when we speak of "logic" we speak of "human logic" and when we say things "transcend reason" we mean that they transcend finite, flawed human reason. But for human comprehension the only words we have are human "reason" and human "logic." For the sublime things we have *awe*. With wonder let us approach their majesty.

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Further Recommended Reading

- Robert Weber, *The Younger Evangelicals*.
 John Stott, *Your Mind Matters*.
 Nicholas Wolderstoff, *Reason within the Limits of Religion Alone*.
 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.
 Plato, *Ion*.