

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Rationalism.¹

BY THE REV. C. L. DRAWBRIDGE, M.A.,

Honorary Organizing Secretary of the Christian Evidence Society.

IT is not at all easy to decide exactly what is meant by "Rationalist" in the present day. Encyclopædias are apt to give a mere history of the rationalism of past centuries and to identify it with Deism. But Rationalism, with a capital R, is—according to its most able modern exponents both in this country and abroad—indistinguishable from Atheism. Many people, however, would dispute the interpretation put upon Rationalism by those who would monopolize the term, and apply it solely to the atheistic or agnostic positions.

The word "rationalism" is defined in Webster's "New International Dictionary" as follows :

"The doctrine or system of those who deduce their religious opinions from (a) reason or the understanding, as distinct from, or opposed to, (b) revelation."

This supposed antithesis and incompatibility between reason and revelation is unreal and misleading. One might as well suppose that learning and teaching are incompatible. The teacher reveals ideas; the pupil exercises his own mental faculties. Often the teaching is the measure of the learning, and, similarly, the learning is the measure of the teaching—because that only can be said to be taught which the pupil has grasped. Teaching and learning are complementary; they are not exclusive. In other words, each is one side of the dual process of education. Similarly, I can get to know something of a person (whether human or divine) merely by a process of reasoning. But I can also learn something of him as the result of his self-revelation to me. These two processes of getting to

¹ A chapter from "Common Objections to Christianity" (Library of Historic Theology Series), a new volume just published by Robert Scott, 5s. net.

know a person are complementary; they are not exclusive or incompatible. The assumption that reason and revelation are antithetical implies, either that all those spiritual geniuses in the past (or in the present) who are generally supposed to have been (or to be) inspired were (or are) irrational—lacking in reasoning power—or else that their teaching has been estimated irrationally by all those who are not “Rationalists.”

Sometimes a contrast is drawn, not between reason and revelation, but between reason and authority; but the distinction, in this case also, is imaginary rather than real.

A man must use his reason in order to choose to what authority he will bow—whether to the authority of his own amateur opinion, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, to the authority of those leading specialists who are very much better qualified to form opinions in their own department than is the ordinary layman. The man who sets up to be his own Pope, and the only member of his sect, and who bows only to the supposed authority of his own personal opinion in all things, is not more rational, but is less rational, than the man whose reason leads him to consult much better authorities. This principle applies, not only in the sphere of theology, but also to every other department of thought—to astronomy, to medicine, to law, to art, etc. It is *lack* of intelligence which makes a man dispense with the ripe conclusions of specialists.

Further, because authorities are not agreed, the individual layman, in order to decide which of the many conflicting authorities he will regard as the best one, must use his reason.

Therefore, the supposed antithesis between reason and authority is fallacious. It is largely by the exercise of reason that a man, or an organization, becomes an authority. It is also by the exercise of his own reasoning powers that a man concludes that the specialist, when expressing an opinion within his own department, is much more likely to be right than is the amateur, or the mere layman.

Further, it is reason that leads a man to believe that the corporate and united authority of all the greatest specialists of

the day—that is to say, of modern “orthodoxy,”¹ in whatever department of thought—is deserving of considerable respect on the part of the ordinary amateur. When a man who knows next to nothing of physics, or of medicine, or of astronomy, or of theology, holds views in these departments which are the exact opposite of the orthodox opinions in physics, in medicine, in astronomy, or in theology, and when he can put forward no better grounds for being eccentric in his views than to say, “It stands to reason that . . .,” or, “I am certain that my view is correct,” sensible people do not attach much importance to his opinions, nor have they a high appreciation of his intelligence. It is not superstition, but it is reason which convinces the generality of men that the corporate opinion of the best specialists of the day, in any and in every department of thought, is likely to be very much more valuable than is the individual opinion of the ordinary man in the street, who has not devoted much time to the subject under consideration, and who possesses only very ordinary intelligence—not even enough, as a rule, to know how very ignorant he is, and how valueless are his opinions.

As I have said, it is not very easy to discover what exactly modern Rationalism is. But if one is to estimate its nature by estimating organized modern Rationalism and by studying the nature of the Rationalist Press Association, one arrives at certain fairly obvious conclusions. In the first place, if one may judge by the literature which it has carefully selected for publication in the name of Modern Thought, “Modern Thought,” according to the Rationalist Press Association, appears to be the negative theological opinions of past generations of atheists, agnostics, and other sceptics, such as Tom Paine. The new Copyright Act is a very serious blow to the Rationalism of the R.P.A., because, although the masses used

¹ By orthodoxy I mean the best opinions of those who are best qualified to express opinions. In theology, the orthodoxy to which I refer is not so much the official system of dogmas accepted by any particular ecclesiastical body, as the generally accepted opinions of the best theological scholars everywhere.

to accept as Modern Thought, and used to buy quite a large number of books (provided that they were sufficiently cheap), after the copyright had expired, when that meant merely that these books were only forty-two years out of date, they probably will not care to buy, as *up to date*, books which are much older than that. The Act is therefore a great blow to the "Modern Thought" of organized "Rationalism." Another serious drawback for the Rationalist Press Association is that, instead of the Huxleys and Herbert Spencers of the past, we have the Bergsons and Euckens of the present, as leaders of Modern Thought.

The nature and the extent of the bias shown by Rationalism, as displayed by the Rationalist Press Association, may be illustrated by the following fact: It published a grossly unfair attack on Christian missionaries¹ in a book entitled "Christian Missions," by Lin Shao-Yang, and the public was repeatedly informed, by the R.P.A., that the author was a Chinese official. Further, on almost every page of that book the author writes "we Chinese," and words to that effect. The fact leaked out, however, that the author is not a Chinaman at all, but a European; and that fact is now so well known that the R.P.A. can no longer assert that the author is Chinese.

What, then, does Rationalism mean? Lecky, in his "Rationalism in Europe" (Rationalist Press Association Cheap Reprint No. 44), speaking of orthodox theists as well as of Rationalists, says on p. 8:

"Nothing can be more certain to an attentive observer than that the great majority, even of those who reason much about their opinions, have arrived at their conclusions by a process quite distinct from reasoning. They may be perfectly unconscious of the fact, but the ascendancy of old associations is upon them. . . ."

Although a Rationalist himself, however, he goes on to confess that "Rationalists" are indebted to many factors other than to reason for their opinions. He says:

"Nor are those who have diverged from the opinions they have been taught necessarily more independent of illegitimate influences. The love of

¹ Rationalists themselves have no foreign missions.

singularity, the ambition to be thought intellectually superior to others, the bias of taste, the attraction of vice, the influence of friendship, the magnetism of genius—these, and countless other influences into which it is needless to enter, all determine conclusions. The number of persons who have a rational basis for their belief is probably infinitesimal; for illegitimate influences not only determine the convictions of those who do not examine, but usually give a dominating bias to the reasonings of those who do.”

This is an interesting admission, coming as it does from a Rationalist, and from one who is dealing specifically with rationalism in one of the official publications of the Rationalist Press Association.

The Rationalist says that in the sphere of theology the tendency, for generations, has been in the direction of attaching more and more importance to reason, and less and less to faith, and by faith he means the acceptance of statements without criticism, or “the attempt to believe that which one knows to be impossible.”

But faith is not credulity. It is the Christian readers of the book above-mentioned who are sceptical about its statements. Faith is not credulity, but is spiritual insight, vision, first-hand relationship with spiritual reality, personal experience of the Divine. The change in theological thought of recent years has not been the result of less first-hand spiritual insight, but has been caused by (1) the possession of so much spiritual vision that an ever-increasing number of people are learning to see for themselves. Another reason for the change in theological views is (2) the ever-increasing number of available data and of criteria which have been discovered. One of the most important, if not the most important, datum and criterion for arriving at conclusions in this particular department of thought is faith—that is to say, spiritual insight, personal experience of the Divine, first-hand acquaintance with the cause and ground of religion, insight into spiritual reality.

The man who calls himself a Rationalist intends by that designation to imply that he is more *rational* than the rest of mankind. He imagines that other men are, comparatively, irrational. This is the claim of Rationalists, but it would be

irrational indeed on our part if we were to be content merely to take them wholly at their own estimate, and without some kind of credentials. As the vulgar proverb well says: "Self-praise is no recommendation." It is unwise to judge any commodity with sole reference to the label on the box. The rationality of individuals and of societies should not be estimated with sole reference to the magnitude of their claims in that direction.

Consequently two questions arise :

- (1) What *ought* to be meant by the word Rationalism ?
- (2) Is it the "Rationalist," or is it the theist, who can best substantiate his claim to be the more rational of the two ?

The word Rationalism should denote either (*a*) an essentially rational system of thought, or else (*b*) a pre-eminently rational mode of arriving at conclusions. In neither of these respects is modern Rationalism deserving of the name, because it is clearly irrational, on the part of those who possess but finite knowledge and capacity, to arrive at a universal negative (with regard to the existence of God, *e.g.*) ; and, further, it is irrational to estimate spiritual matters without paying due regard to the witness of the spiritual consciousness of man. "Spiritual things are spiritually discerned," or they are not discerned at all. If they be not discerned by any particular individual, his lack of discernment is no evidence that spiritual things are not discerned by others. Blind men discern no light, and deaf men perceive no sound ; but normal men retain their belief in light and sound, irrespective of the incapacity of blind and deaf people. Moreover, blind and deaf people believe in light and sound on the evidence of those who can see and hear.

Let me illustrate the theological position of so-called "Rationalism" by means of an analogy. If the fundamental principles of modern theological Rationalism were transferred to the subject of optics, such principles would repudiate all validity to the witness derived from the activity of the optic nerve and of humanity's normal visual experience, and would

rely wholly upon hostile criticism of man's belief in his faculty of vision, on the ground that, not visual sensation, but reason, is the guide, and the only guide, to truth, and that vision is merely subjective feeling, rather than objective proof of the reality of ether waves.

Or let us transfer the analogy from optics to that department of human thought which is termed acoustics, and to that sphere of human experience which is called hearing. Rationalism (of the kind we are considering) would mean, in acoustics, a biased endeavour to arrive at a disproof of the validity of man's normal experience in that department, and the advocacy of relying upon hostile criticism alone to estimate the reality or otherwise of those "supposed" vibrations in the atmosphere which "superstitious" man has always imagined to be in some sense the objective cause of his subjective perception and conception of sound.

Modern theological Rationalism is, in fact, that method of estimating the validity of religious experience by first assuming that man has not an essential spiritual side to his nature, and then assuming that there is no essentially superhuman side to man's environment, and that, consequently, there cannot possibly be any interaction between the two, and that, therefore, so-called religious experience is mere ignorant superstition.

If there be ether vibrations, or if there be atmospheric waves, or if there be an omnipresent God, we shall inevitably form somewhat negative creeds with regard to the objective reality of each of these, and of their nature, and of their importance, if we rule out of court normal human experience of relationship with them.

The whole man, including his consciousness and experience, should be brought into play in order to discover truth. If we employ our reasoning powers merely in a negative direction—namely, to disprove, if possible, the validity of consciousness—our knowledge of the actual facts with which consciousness deals is not likely to grow greater, but less. But science, not nescience, should be our aim. If it be rational to repu-

diate the witness of consciousness in the religious sphere, it is irrational to accept its witness in other spheres; and if we do not accept the witness of consciousness in any department of investigation, we are condemning ourselves to complete nescience and to intellectual suicide.

The man who best deserves to be regarded as a Rationalist is the man who makes the fullest use of his intellect, who thinks logically, carefully collecting all available data, drawing carefully thought-out inferences from those data, reaching cautious conclusions as the result of a painstaking consideration of all the available data or premises, and comparing and relating ideas, systematically, with a view to arriving at well-considered conclusions. If this be the proper employment of reason, then every open-minded and unbiased form of theology (as contrasted with mere religious sentiment) is a form of religious rationalism. But can it truthfully be said that those who attach no importance to the data—*i.e.*, to the witness of religious experience in the department of theology—are justified in calling themselves rationalists in theology, merely because they arbitrarily advocate negative dogmas with regard to the validity of spiritual experience?

All of us aim at being rational, and all of us suppose ourselves to be reasonable, but some people claim to be abnormally rational, and therefore call themselves Rationalists, with a capital R.

As I have said, the word "rationalist" is used in different senses.

For instance, the Roman Catholic Church may legitimately be called essentially rationalistic. Although that Church believes so much that most other Christian bodies emphatically disbelieve, yet the Roman Communion is distinctly rationalistic in the sense that it claims, and has claimed for many centuries, that all its tenets are founded upon reason, and that all its dogmas can be substantiated adequately by reason. Scholasticism was and is essentially rationalistic. The Roman system of beliefs is a carefully reasoned-out system.

But the man who calls himself a Rationalist, with a capital R, intends by that designation to imply that he is *not a theist* at all. Therefore, in his mind, the term Rationalist is practically synonymous with the term atheist or agnostic. The Rationalist, however, prefers to employ the first of these three designations, because it has a more dignified and cultured sound than either atheist or agnostic, and because those who employ the term Rationalist consider that the designation suggests abnormal intelligence. They also prefer the term because it sounds less aggressive than the term atheist or agnostic, and, further, because it draws the attention of opponents to a supposed *method* of arriving at conclusions, rather than indicating the actual negative conclusions on the subject of theology which have actually been adopted by Rationalists. The supposed method by which the negative conclusions are said to have been arrived at is less vulnerable than are the conclusions.

The leading spirit of the Rationalist Press Association, Mr. Joseph McCabe, in his handbook for inquirers, which is entitled "Modern Rationalism" (revised edition), says, in the introduction :

"Modern Rationalism is a system which rejects both natural and supernatural theology, and is antagonistic to the orthodox churches on *every* point. . . . Modern Rationalism declines all theistic belief."

This is pretty definite and sweeping ; in fact, a definition of modern atheism could not possibly be more so. Those who call themselves atheists agree that the term means merely one who is definitely not a theist ; the modern atheist does not profess to be able to demonstrate the non-existence of God, and, therefore, does not actually deny His existence. Rationalism is regarded, by its leading exponents, as a system of negation, and it is a system which is just as dogmatic as is modern atheism.

By rational is meant in accordance with reason. What, then, is reason? The word "reason" is used in different senses. For instance, Shakespeare writes :

"I have no other than a woman's reason.
I think him so, because I think him so."

This "woman's reason" is the only kind of "reason" which some Rationalists (and also some Christians) display for their stereotyped opinions. But to say: "I think as I do because I think as I do," certainly cannot be called a rational reason for entertaining any specific opinions, whether positive or negative.

The word "reason" is sometimes used to denote the *cause* for an opinion, as when a man says: "The reason that man has always been religious is threefold: (1) Man has a spiritual nature; (2) there is a spiritual universe; and (3) man has always been conscious of relationship with the Divine and super-human." Religion is active and vital correspondence between the human spirit and the Divine. Here the word reason is used as synonymous with cause.

Or, again, a man may say: "The reason that I am a Rationalist is that my parents were Rationalists; I naturally adopted their views. My views were born of heredity and environment."

The Rationalist historian, Lecky, tells us in his "History of Rationalism," published by the Rationalist Press Association, that Rationalism is caused, primarily, by *bias*. But bias is a "reason" only in the sense of being a cause; bias is not rational; it is often very much the reverse of rational.

Sometimes the word "reason" is used to denote the belated attempt at logical justification which is made on behalf of any particular opinion only after it has been adversely criticized. Such efforts at justification of a theory by ratiocination are, as a matter of fact, nearly always postponed, as I have said, until *after* the opinion has been formed, and formed on other than intellectual grounds. The attempt at justification is made in order to defend that particular view when it is challenged.

Or, once more, reason may be regarded as *the sum of all mental powers*, as when one says that a man has lost his "reason." If so regarded, reason must, of course, include those psychic powers which are denominated religious and moral.

It used to be supposed that reason, intuition, instinct, desire, insight, etc., were distinct and separable from each other, so

much so, in fact, that any one of them could display itself without any admixture whatever with any of the others. But the world of culture no longer entertains this extraordinary view. The self, with all its activities, is one. The Rationalist, however, makes imaginary watertight series of partitions in his mind, and, in theory, isolates from the others that activity of the mind which we call ratiocination, and he calls that reason, in contradistinction to the other and inseparable, and no less valid and important, mental activities, such as God-consciousness. What primarily constitutes the difference between the self-styled "Rationalist" and the rest of the world appears to me, as I have said, to be this: the former deliberately and carefully abstracts the critical faculty from the sum of normal human mental powers, and enthrones the destructive faculty at the expense of such constructive faculties as, *e.g.*, God-consciousness. He rules out of court some of the most important mental powers, and he arrives at his negative conclusions by the exercise of a good deal less than the total sum of his faculties. He endeavours to discredit and to eliminate the evidence of some very essential mental powers and their witness, and he arrives at his negative conclusions with sole reference to the remainder of his faculties, which he has artificially and arbitrarily abstracted from the normal sum of man's powers. The self-styled Rationalist arbitrarily rules out of court the witness of all those normal human faculties which, in all ages and everywhere, have been the cause of religion. All knowledge is born of consciousness. The Rationalist's process of ratiocination, his method of sorting and of analyzing the contents of man's consciousness, rigidly excludes from respectful consideration the witness of man's religious consciousness.

It has frequently been said that man differs from the beasts in that the genus *homo* alone is a rational being—although there is, and has always been, a percentage of exceptions, such as very small infants and idiots, who are undoubtedly human beings, but who are not rational. But even a dog acts rationally to some extent—more so than does a small infant, which is more

human than a dog. Even a dog is capable of some measure of thought, and it can reason to a limited extent.

The primary distinction between man and the beasts is rather that man alone, apparently, has the *religious faculty*. Unlike the lower animals, man, as such, possesses what is usually termed God-consciousness; man has the tendency to worship, and he possesses both the desire and also the capacity to control his life in accordance with transcendental ideals. Man alone believes that he has the capacity, actively and vitally, to correspond with the Author of his being. This religious faculty is higher than those faculties which are possessed, in some measure, by the beasts, such, *e.g.*, as the capacity to reason.

Rationalism is that system of negative theology which, if it does not wholly discard, at least discredits, the primary data of all theology—*viz.*, religious experience. Rationalism is the system of thought which forms a theory with regard to the validity of religious experience on the *a priori* assumption, either that the essentially spiritual or divine sphere is non-existent, or else that man preserves no sane and useful relationship with it.

The "Rationalist" attaches far more importance to ratiocination than he does to intuition and instinct. Bergson, however, attributes to *intuition* far greater authority than to ratiocination for the purpose of arriving at the higher realms of truth; and Kant places first in importance what he calls the "practical" reason which, in his opinion, provides irresistible evidence of the existence of the Divine and of the Providence of God.

We sometimes speak of a person "losing his reason"—*i.e.*, becoming mad. Reason may, therefore, be regarded as that which distinguishes the sane man from the man who is insane. Which, then, is the more obviously sane, the theist or the Rationalist? One of the primary characteristics of sanity is that it tends to draw men together socially, whereas insanity, on the other hand, is always accompanied by a love of solitude. Judged by this estimate, which is the more obviously sane, Rationalism (atheism) or theism? Religion is, certainly, always

more social than is hostility to religion. In the practice of his religious exercises, the religious man is far more social and gregarious than is the Rationalist in the exercise of his anti-religious mental exercises. Take, for instance, Sunday, the general weekly holiday. Religion draws innumerable crowds of people together all over the kingdom in a way that nothing else does. Conversely, irreligion most certainly does not draw people together on Sundays, nor on any other day of the week, to anything like the same extent that religion does. On Sundays, religion collects together in this country many millions of people.¹ *Rationalism cannot assemble a single big crowd, even once a year, in any building in the kingdom.* In fact, Rationalists do not even *possess* a large building, nor do they even regularly hire one. In the open air, it is not the negative conclusions of Rationalism, but it is the aggressiveness of atheism which collects crowds. Fierce vituperation collects a crowd, because outrageous attacks upon any individual, or upon any society or cause, attracts attention now that the classical gladiatorial shows no longer provide for the passions of the populace. Nowadays the crowds of holiday makers have to make the most of whatever excitement of a somewhat gladiatorial kind is provided for them.

¹ Since writing the above I have addressed a Sunday afternoon congregation of men which amounts normally to over 2,000. There were about 2,200 present on the Sunday afternoon when I spoke to them.

