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Faith Integration Essay

Victor I. Ezigbo

Introduction

The term ‘faith’ is notoriously slippery. Theologians as well as Christians who do not have any formal theological education use the term ‘faith’ sometimes in competing ways. For example, some use ‘faith’ as a shield for protecting themselves from people who ask questions about God’s existence and actions in the world. For such people, faith opposes reason. They see ‘faith’ as “an antithesis of reason” and also construe “reason as an intellectual virus that destroys the knowledge of God gained through faith in God’s self-revelation.”¹ Others such as Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, and Karl Barth, however, have construed ‘faith’ as an act that inspires Christians to seek a deeper understanding of God.² For many of these theologians, ‘faith’ launches Christians into a rigorous inquiry about the mystery of God. ‘Faith’ does not “obstruct or hinder theological inquiry. Faith welcomes theological tensions and paradoxes.”³

In soteriology (discourse about salvation), the necessity of ‘faith’ for benefiting from the Triune God’s salvific work has caused great controversies among many ecclesial communities, especially when faith is used in connection with terms such as ‘works’ and ‘justification’. Some theologians contend that God justifies only people who trust (or put their faith) in Jesus Christ as the Savior. Some argue that God justifies people on the basis of Jesus Christ’s *faithfulness*. For them, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ is *primary* and people’s faith (which flows from Jesus

¹ Victor I. Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 8.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961); Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, translated by John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988); Anselm, “Proslogion,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, edited by Eugene R. Fairweather, 69–93 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956); Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964), 36.

³ Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 7.

Christ's faithfulness) is *secondary*. Others argue that God justifies infants on the account of the church's faith.

In the broader context of theological discourse, I define faith as *the quest grounded in a commitment to the being (God) that human beings do not know exhaustively*. My goal in this essay is not to assess the possibility of producing a rational argument for Christianity's theological truth claims. Some theologians have had great successes in this area.⁴ Also, I do not intend to rehearse the old arguments on the relationship between faith and reason. Some theologians and philosophers like Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Blaise Pascal, and Pope John Paul II have made significant contributions to the discourse on faith and reason.⁵

I steer away from the conversation that compares faith and reason for two reasons. First, comparing faith and reason as if they are two distinct *ways of knowing* is misleading. While 'reason' may function as a way of attaining knowledge, 'faith' is an *act of trusting* in a source of knowledge and/ or in the knowledge already attained. To "have faith" in this sense is to put complete trust in one's sources of knowledge or one's knowledge of something or someone—the knowledge that is already gained through one or a combination of the following ways: experience (including revealed knowledge), scientific inquiry, and contemplation (intuition and reasoning).⁶ Second, 'reason' can also function somewhat as a 'processor' since it may be used

⁴ See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Beliefs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961); Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, translated by John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988); Anselm, "Proslogion," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, edited by Eugene R. Fairweather, 69–93 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956); Thomas Aquinas, "Theology, Faith and Reason: On Boethius *On The Trinity*," in *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, 109–141, edited and translated by Ralph McInerny (London: Penguin, 1998); Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966); John Paul II, "Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*," (1998).

⁶ For more discussion on the 'ways of knowing,' see Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 34–35.

to assess and assemble one's knowledge. Therefore, 'reason' is compatible with any of the ways of knowing stated above.

Faith, Theology, and Guiding Principles for Theological Reflection

Theology, like all fields of study, is finite in nature and scope. There are limitations to what theologians can know and say about the world and also about God's modes of being. The following general principles inform my understanding of the relationship between faith and theology.

Faith 'Welcomes' Internal Tensions and Ambiguities

Anyone who comes into my theology class with the sole expectation to learn how to prove or disprove God's existence in a manner that resolves all theological tensions or ambiguities will be disappointed. I am not suggesting that I do not introduce my students to sophisticated arguments for and against the existence of God. I am equally not suggesting that it is theologically irresponsible to desire a final solution to all theological ambiguities and tensions. Rather, I invite my students to discover through theological reflections that whatever human beings say about God's existence and actions will always remain an 'approximation,' which is prone to errors and distortions. Like all people who reflect on God, theologians write theologies that are prone to (a) say more about what they *expect* God to be and (b) reduce God's actions to a manageable system or order, which betray the mystery of God's modes of being and operation. Having knowledge of the Bible and also inquiring theological education do not guarantee that human beings will always avoid these theological flaws.

Theological tensions and ambiguities are necessary reminders to theologians (and to all believers in God) that they ought to be 'seekers': people who continue to thirst for knowledge of God and also seek a relationship with God even though they may never fully, as finite beings,

know God exhaustively. As Daniel Migliore has noted, “Authentic faith is no sedative for world-weary souls, no satchel full of ready answers to the deepest questions of life. Instead, faith in God revealed in Christ sets an inquiry in motion, fights the inclination to accept things as they are, and continue to call into question unexamined assumptions about God, our world, and ourselves.”⁷

Theology as an Exercise in Faith

The question about the relationship between ‘faith’ and (Christian) theology—my academic discipline—is somewhat redundant. This is because theology is largely an *exercise in faith*. If theology is the discourse about God—the being whose modes of existing and operating in the world are to a great degree a mystery, it follows that human beings can truly do theology only as an *act of faith*. In this context, the term ‘faith’ is construed, to quote the words of the author of Hebrews, as the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1) But what is the author of Hebrews saying about the relationship between “faith” (*pistis* in Greek) and *hypostasis*, which can be translated as “substance,” “title-deed” or “of things” and also the relationship between faith and the invisible world? Is the author saying that faith is itself ‘proof’ of the existence of “things not seen” (*ou blepomenon* in Greek)? Or is the author saying that “faith gives one certainty and an argument for believing in the existence” of an invisible world?⁸

Faith does not mean in the book of Hebrews an act of ‘believing blinding’ or continuing to believe when it is plainly seen that *what is believed in* does not exist in reality. For the author of Hebrews, faith is what *assures* Christians of *what they hope for*, which they do not yet see

⁷ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 3.

⁸ C. R. Hume, *Reading Through Hebrews* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 95.

fully or understand completely. He writes, “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

(Heb 1:2)

Faith propels me, as a Christian theologian, to allow my belief in *the mystery of God to guide my theological reflections* on God’s existence, God’s action in the world, and God’s relationship with God’s creation. But what does it mean to allow one’s belief in the mystery of God to guide one’s theological reflections? It means, in my judgment, to engage in a theological exercise or inquiry with an *asymptotic mindset*: continuing in the pursuit of knowledge of God and God’s relation to the world even when it is clear that we can only “know in part” as the Apostle Paul reminded Christians at Corinth (1 Cor 13:9). As such, I do not see the discipline of theology as where all questions about God can be answered without ambiguities or where people can be taught to remove the mystery surrounding God’s mode of being and acting in the world.

Faith as Action or Activity

‘Faith’ is an *act* (more precisely an activity). Faith is not merely an exercise of believing. Faith is rather an exercise that requires action—a way of believing, behaving, and knowing that confirms to the Triune God’s summons to human beings. Therefore, a dichotomous understanding of ‘faith’ and ‘work’ as two disparate properties is a theological mistake. James is right to argue that true faith entails action. He writes, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” He goes on to conclude: “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:15, 17)

To buttress my claim about *faith as an act*, it can be argued the Christian belief in future bodily resurrection implies that God values human life. Also, the belief in bodily resurrection

ought inspire Christians to care and preserve human life in *this* world. As I have written elsewhere, human life should be understood as:

‘Fruitfulness and abundance, longevity, communal flourishing, and individual well-being.’ But infectious diseases (such as Ebola) make human life meaningless, not worth living. Such diseases remind us of the risk of dissolution of the *being* and *meaning* of human beings. The Christian principle of existing ‘in the world but not of the world’ does not entail renouncing all involvements in the affairs of the world but rather renouncing the agencies of the world that make human life unworthy of living. The principle invokes a dialectic social ethic that requires social actions in *this* world. Such social actions should be governed by *self-giving*, which includes devoting one’s intellectual resources, donating money and materials, and risking one’s comfort in order to preserve and make human life worth living. The issue is not merely providing help to the victims of Ebola but rather a deeper task of making our societies uninhabitable for poverty, social inequality, and other agencies that make human life unworthy of living.⁹

If Christians are to care for and also preserve human life in *this* world, theologians have the responsibility to show how Christianity’s gospel is relevant in the public sphere, especially its relevance to the discussion on how to tackle ideas, beliefs, and actions that make human life not worth living.

Christian Gospel and the Public Sphere

What is the relationship between the words ‘Christian’ and ‘gospel’ in the expression “Christian gospel”? In answering this question, I will limit my discussion to two observations.

First, the relationship between the words ‘Christian’ and ‘gospel’ in the expression “Christian gospel” is not *genitival*. In other words, Christians are neither the originators of the gospel nor the owners of the gospel. Since Jesus Christ embodies God’s gospel and is, as many Christians believe, the God incarnate, it follows that the gospel originates from God and is

⁹ Victor I. Ezigbo, “Theology after Ebola? Human Life and Social Responsibility,” *Syndicate* 2, Issue 1 (2015), 10.

owned by God. Therefore, Christians must recognize that Jesus Christ (the embodiment of the ‘Christian gospel’) is neither bound to their interpretations of him nor their proclamation of his work and significance.

Second, the word ‘Christian’ relates to the word ‘gospel’ in the expression “Christian gospel” in an *ambassadorial* sense. Although Christians are not the owners of the gospel, they are commissioned by the Triune God to proclaim God’s Son as God’s good news to the world. To borrow the words of Matthew, they are to “make disciples of all nations” and also to teach those who have become disciples of Jesus Christ the ways of Christ (Matt 28:18–20). Christians, therefore, are not the prime originators of the content of the gospel. Their main task is proclamation—that is, the task of giving Jesus Christ the liberty to have an “effect on people and on cultures.”¹⁰ The greatest threat to the Christian gospel today is not the denial of Christians the freedom to proclaim the gospel. Rather, it is Christians’ reluctance to give the *gospel the freedom to become God’s good news to all cultures and to all people*. Christians are the bearers of the good news (gospel) that they do not own, but which they can make their own. Yet, while they can make the gospel their own, they must not seek to replace the gospel with their own understandings of the gospel. Our domestication of the gospel does not obliterate the otherness of the gospel.

But why describe the gospel’s mode of existence in terms of ‘otherness’? The primary reason is because God, the owner of the Christian gospel, is *ontologically* different from human beings. Although human beings are made in God’s image, they remain humans and not divine beings. Even in the God incarnate—God’s act of partnering with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ—God remains partly the *other*. Although God has become one of us in the fullest sense of the term “becoming,” human beings have not become God in the fullest sense of the word

¹⁰ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 18.

“becoming.” The theology of *theosis*—becoming like God or participating in the divine life, which is prominent in the Orthodox Churches, is an eschatological reality that has begun in this present life and moving to its future fullness when God will restore all things (Acts 3:21).

The expression “proclaiming the gospel across cultures” invokes the issue of *utility*. If the gospel has nothing useful to say about the temporal and eternal concerns of human beings, then, there is no need to bother proclaiming it in our cultures or in other cultures. The focal concern is whether Christianity has something relevant to offer in dealing with social, cultural, political, and religious problems of a society (such as poverty, terrorism, racism, and casteism). I see the issue of Christianity’s utility or usefulness as perhaps the greatest challenge that the majority of Christian communities face in the twenty first century.

Of course, the issue of utility is largely conditioned by the contexts and agendas of individuals, communities, and countries. On the one hand, in countries that can be described as “secular” societies— that is, societies where the belief in God is rigorously challenged and “understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace,”¹¹ Christians face the challenge of showing how Christianity’s teaching and practices are useful in addressing the issue of the place of God in the affairs of a secular society. Some theologians in North America and in Europe in recent times have devoted enormous efforts to tackle “new atheism”— the atheistic movement that sees religion as irrational, prone to violence, abhors scientific progress, and “destructive of social harmony.”¹² On the other hand, in a “religious” society—that is, society “where the belief in God is unchallenged,” Christians may face the challenge of showing how Christian values and teaching are not implicated in evil structures in

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

¹² David Fergusson, *Faith and Its Critics: A Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

their societies. Also, they must show how Christianity can help tackle evil structures in their societies.

The expression “proclaiming the gospel across cultures” also raises the issue of a *mode of engagement*. The primary concern of Christians in this case will be how best to bring the gospel into the public square. Bringing the gospel into the public square requires *embodying* the gospel.

Embodying the Gospel and Culture in the Public Square

The task of “proclaiming the gospel across cultures” has some Christological undertones. It implies showing that the life, teaching, experience, and work of Jesus Christ have both temporal and eternal relevance for people of all cultures. This is a particularly difficult task to accomplish for the following three reasons. First, many people now accept the multifariousness of religious experiences. More than ever, people in our era are aware of the presence of competing religious traditions. Many now see Christianity as one among many possible valid religions from which they can choose. Second, many people consider some traditional Christian values as outdated and out of touch with contemporary reality and state of human experiences. For example, many non-Christians as well as some Christians see the Bible as a collection of texts written from and for different contexts that ought not to be taken seriously in addressing contemporary issues such as homosexuality, interreligious dialogues, subjugation of women, and many other social problems. Third, some see Christianity as an intolerant and discriminatory religion. For example, the claim “there is no salvation outside of Jesus,” to such people, rules out the possibility of salvation for people of other religions who knowingly reject Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. People of other religions and some Christians frown at this claim, seeing it sometimes as the seed of religious discrimination and the chief motivation for religious violence.

Christians must navigate through these three challenges in their attempt to bring the gospel into the public squares of their communities and in the public squares of people of other cultures. Proclaiming the gospel entails making Jesus' person and work *present* in our societies through our words, actions, and attitudes. According to Kevin Vanhoozer, the church's mission is to respond to God's commission: to "actually and actively" participate "in the missions of the Son and Spirit."¹³ For Rowan Williams the former Archbishop of Canterbury, "to say that the Church is where Jesus is visibly active in the world is to say both that it shows to the world the face of Jesus that in its own internal life embodies the life of Jesus, flowing between believers." Also Williams writes that each members of the church "becomes fully himself or herself in being the channel of Christ's action to the community—the believing community in the first place, but the whole community of creation as well."¹⁴

Christians readily make the claim that the "gospel is for the whole world." This is an ambitious claim. Christians who make this claim have the responsibility of showing that the gospel is relevant to all people, in all cultures, and in all times. Such claim also reminds us of the question that haunts Christians who seek to make Jesus relevant in the public square, namely, in what way does Jesus exert his effect on people and cultures through his church? How we answer this question will largely determine how we go about proclaiming the gospel across culture. Here, I am not interested in reviewing H. Richard Niebuhr's five typologies of how Christ relates to culture.¹⁵ But in any serious conversation about the gospel's role in the public square, Christians must show how the church should *engage* and *transform* the public square from Jesus'

¹³ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 72.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 135.

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

perspective.¹⁶ Therefore, any conception of the gospel's relation to culture, which requires the church's total withdrawal from the public square, is not really helpful and useful to church's mission of being the "light" and "salt" of the world (Matt 5:13–16).

¹⁶ Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 19.