

## ***The Reconciliation of Reason and Faith***

**Ron Dudum**

In my spiritual search in earlier years, I studied Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, read the Bhagavad-Gita and the Way of Lao Tzu, and even looked to Transactional Analysis for answers. My search finally brought me back to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the faith of my youth, which I continue to embrace with the fervor of a convert. The wisdom of that decision has only increased with the passage of time. Accepting humility as a virtue completed my understanding of my identity as an Orthodox Christian American citizen of Arab ancestry.

My formative life-events have all led, in one way or another, to the writing of my book *Three Paradigms of Reality*.<sup>1</sup> As a child of my time and tradition, I have both great respect for reason and a living faith in the Triune God. These two fundamental precepts, reason and faith, are not irreconcilable, and we do not have to choose between them, as fundamentalists in both the reason and the faith camps often claim. I have come to appreciate that the competition between reason and faith is actually a human struggle between the head and the heart. The early Christian paradigm navigates this Euclidian duality and finds cooperation through a commitment to humility—the Trinitarian strategy for eternal salvation.

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<sup>1</sup>Ron Dudum, *Three Paradigms of Reality: From Homer to Einstein* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, 2009).

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While humility may be a virtue, it is not an American value. But without humility, champions of reason or faith battle endlessly, while the rest of us wrestle with unanswered questions. After writing *Three Paradigms of Reality*, I read two other books that are representative of the combatants: Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.<sup>2</sup> Those two books and mine cover the same territory and reference many of the same scientific examples and historical events. But what a difference there is among them!

Armstrong employs an air of objectivity and a faith in reason that threads various beliefs about God into a cosmic quilt, but ultimately ends with the observation that since "human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation, they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning."<sup>3</sup> Armstrong is similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson in her attempts to reconcile reason and faith in the modern paradigm. Her explanation of faith is grounded in the Biblical Abraham's trust in God. Faith is not found in a particular creed, but in a "leap in the dark toward a reality that had to be taken on trust."<sup>4</sup>

Dawkins would hardly find this argument compelling. To the contrary, he seethes with disdain for anyone who harbors a belief in the divine. Dawkins repeatedly identifies atheists as intellectually superior and trusts only the evidence

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<sup>2</sup>Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Armstrong, *A History of God*, p. 399.

<sup>4</sup>Armstrong, *A History of God*, p. 278.

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of evolution as the foundation for his reliance on reason. In fact, he would reject having *faith* in reason, because faith, he writes, “is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, his trust in reason can only be described as a form of faith.

Armstrong identifies herself as a “freelance monotheist..., draw[ing] sustenance from all three of the faiths of Abraham.”<sup>6</sup> She is a contemporary example of the ancient Greek paradigm’s acceptance of a transcendent law and of faith in reason. Dawkins’s intellectual hubris is consistent with that of Laplace and Hume. The *faith* of both Dawkins and Armstrong provides reason a purpose that justifies both the ancient Greek paradigm, on the one hand, and the modern paradigm of self, on the other. Reasoned attempts to convince our head, our intellectual capacity, of the respective wisdom in these competing versions of reality will ultimately fail, as my book demonstrates.

Faith springs from the realm of mystery beyond Euclidean certainty. Faith is not an intellectual concept, but an innate characteristic of our heart-centered *nous*.<sup>7</sup> Like typical philosophers, Armstrong and Dawkins speculate about faith but never experience *theoria*—participation with the divine. Faith comes from the

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<sup>5</sup>Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 308.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted here from Brian Lamb, “Islam: A Short History by Karen Armstrong,” *Booknotes* transcript, September 22, 2000, available at <http://www.booknotes.org/Transcript/?ProgramID=1636>, ¶ 7.

<sup>7</sup>*Nous* is the Greek word for “mind.” Early theologians refer to the *nous* as the “spiritual nature” of man (St. Isaac the Syrian) and the *heart* or “the essence of the soul.” (*Philokalia*, vol. II, p. 109, 73).

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experience of being and living. *Three Paradigms of Reality* provides a window into the hope of faith. Accepting faith, embracing humility, and employing reason will not win arguments, but this trinity provides a steadfast foundation for cooperation.

My religious ardor is not fanatically blind to empirical evidence or reasoned logic. But my life experience convinces me that there is something greater. The 2,000-year-old Orthodox Christian narrative, perfected by the cosmology of Maximus the Confessor (580–662 A.D.), represents the perfect collaboration of reason, faith, and humility. For me, the scientific concepts of entropy, quanta, and gravity are not only compatible with Maximus’s cosmology but are evidence of its truth. My faith threatens no one because I strive not to judge others, nor do I impose my beliefs on others. Reason and faith cooperate through humility. As Maximus wrote, reason does not bend to self-determination, nor is reason at variance with naturally free will, but willingly submits to humility as the only reliable path to salvation.

My struggle is to emulate the unconditional love of my Creator, without judgment, knowing that I fail miserably every day and hoping that my feeble efforts earn His perfect mercy. The hope of eternal well-being, despite my constant failings, has kept me grounded throughout the turbulence of the past fifty years.