

FAITH

Its nature and structure, and its significance for science

By

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Your invitation to contribute to this Congress I gladly respond to. Not only because of the pleasant memories of my study-days at Utrecht in 1946, but also and especially to strengthen our contact. For, if I see correctly, Roman Catholics and Calvinists in Holland are becoming strangers to each other – to the detriment of our country. If this situation is to change, a clear mutual understanding is necessary first. Few occasions are more conducive to promoting it than congresses such as these.

I. The Nature of Faith

Taking “faith” in the sense of religious faith and primarily in the active sense of “believing” – then what is the nature of “faith”?

I would describe faith in the sense of believing as the highest function in the life of the individual man. Whether a man is a Christian or – to mention the extremes – a pagan is, of course, terribly important, but incidental for our definition; everyone possesses faith. This is so because believing belongs to the structure of human life which, in spite of important differences in realization, is the same for all.

Within this structure (of human life) we can in addition distinguish the “inner” and the “outer”, or, if you prefer, the center and the periphery, heart and functions (‘*functiemantel*’).

When I thus consider faith the highest function in human existence, two things are implied: on the one hand that believing is only a function, and on the other hand that believing is the most important in the scala of functions.

First: believing is only functional. That is to say: faith is not identical with heart, but is determined by the heart in its direction towards good or evil, i.e. in obedience to the law of love or not. In other words: the whole man is religious, and his life is a walk before the face of God in obedience or disobedience.

But also: in the framework of functional existence faith occupies the most important place. This function is the highest, which implies that all the others are lower, and thus together form the substrate of faith. Hence it is that faith refers to all those other functions and that these, in turn, point forward to (anticipate) faith. Faith, then, is part of the functional “cloak” and, with that, of the structure of man; and not something that was ever lost and that can later return as donum superadditum, a super-added gift (of grace).

Up until now I only considered faith in individual existence. But a man never lives that way: he is born out of community and into many communities. There are many such social relationships. Think, for instance, of association, economic enterprise, the state and the family. These societal relationships all have in common that they have historical formation as their basis, addition that they all imply the life of language, observation of social forms and intercourse, while their highest function delimits their destination.

The community of faith also is a social structure. This too is inherent in human life. Not only in Christianity, but also among pagans a community of faith is known. In the Christian milieu this community is called “church”.

The church therefore has, just as the societal relationships we just noted, a functional character. One should distinguish “church” from “corpus christianum”, the people of the Lord, which is the pre-functional community rooted in Christ.

Hence the church-offices are also functional and should be distinguished from the pre-functional office in which the representative of man acts in matters that are to be done by humanity before God.

With this, we reach the genetic. Human life is not something just present: it also has a past. This past plays its part in the nurture that prepares a young individual to stand in society, within the societal relationships, when he has “come of age”. But the past is also important for the communities – they too have their history. Here too the direction is determined by the heart, thus by religion; that is, by the relation to God. That is why Adam’s fall was determinative for the history of religion. Adam did not lose faith – redirected it: he no longer believed in God, but in Satan. But he did lose his pre-functional office, which thereafter was entrusted to Christ as the second Adam.

Thus it can be understood that faith, although always a function of an individual human existence, is embedded not only in the totality of that existence, but also in the life of humanity, whether in Christ or not – no matter how often actual life shows a mixed striving in both directions at once.

II. The Structure of Faith

Being functional, faith is subjected to a functional law; in this respect it is similar to all other functions. Now, law and functions never coalesce – not in the pre-analytical either. But in the case of the analytical function (also called the logical) we meet with something peculiar. Its nature is: to analyze, to distinguish. Distinguishing is simply noting diversity existing independently with respect to this distinguishing activity. Therefore the analytical is also able to note the distinctness of law and function. Not only in other law-spheres, but also in the case of the analytical itself. Hence the analytical function can distinguish itself from the law that holds for it. Where this is possible we call the law “norm”. So law and norm should not be placed in opposition to each other, but one should distinguish among laws which are norms and laws which are not norms.

By reason of the mutual relations among functions there is no post-analytical function without self-distinguishing; the laws for all these functions accordingly are norms. That is why we speak of norms for the analytical, for the historical-technical, for the lingual, for the life of intercourse, for the economic, etc.

So also the life of faith is subject to a law that is a norm. This norm is the word of God in its faith-aspect, or – in paganism – that which takes its place. And this norm requires recognition.

Further, the faith-function is not only the norm by the law that is correlated with the function: subjected to this law it also stands in relation to everything else that is subjected to this law. Part of that are subjects, part are objects.

Objects in the sphere of faith are all things that lack faith as a subject-function; they also play a part in the life of faith; as a Christian I believe of all other creatures, on the basis of revelation, that they are creatures of God. The sacraments occupy a special place: they remain what they are, but at the same time they serve the proclamation as sign and seal, that is, to clarify and to confirm.

Faith is also related to its substrate (i.e. the other functions). Not only does faith rest on it, but it forms one whole with it. That is why faith refers to this substrate by means of characteristics that are inherent to faith; the joy and sorrow of faith refer to the psychical; its thought and knowledge to the analytical; its sacrifice to the economic; its trust to the ethical. These retrocipations are not elements in the sense that one could say: faith consists of joy plus sacrifice plus trust. Faith is something unique, sui generis; one cannot define it other than by saying that it is the highest function. But these characteristics are implicit in faith without qualifying faith; the debate over whether faith is emotional, cognitive or volitional is therefore meaningless.

So, knowledge is not more important in faith than for instance trust is. But with regard to our topic this characteristic merits a moment of our special attention. And then we note in the first place that this thinking and knowing is of non-scientific character: it may certainly not be confused with the science concerned with faith, which belongs with theology. Taken scripturally, faith is knowing God through Jesus Christ.

III. The Significance of Faith for Science

Theoretical thinking and knowing is quite different from non-theoretical thinking and knowing. The latter is always concerned with things in their totality, as for instance, when I note things around me.

But theoretical (scientific) thinking is done methodically: special sciences each investigate one aspect of the whole. The method determines not only our thinking, but also the field of investigation and this contains next to objects also, and even primarily, subjects.

Non-theoretical and theoretical thinking cannot be reduced to each other. The former is not less important than the latter, but different. The man and woman of practical life are as such not inferior to the man and woman in science: often their insight is even far more acute. Whoever imposes the criteria of science upon non-theoretical thinking and knowing violates practical life; violates his own life, because also in the life of the scientist non-theoretical knowledge retains an important place.

But although non-theoretical and theoretical knowledge cannot be mutually reduced, that does not mean that they are antagonists. They are even positively related to each other. For knowledge begins with non-theoretical knowing and then, sometimes, proceeds to differentiated knowledge in the

special sciences; in this detour it is deepened and enriched so that in philosophy it re-unites to knowledge of the whole.

In all this the non-theoretical knowledge of faith occupies a special place. For, whole faith as function remains a function of man, nevertheless, when one hears and listens to the revelation of the Word (which is reliable in itself – and thus needs no witness to collaborate it), he not only learns something about the cosmos, but also about God and His relation to the cosmos. If one but believes Genesis 1:1, he already knows something about God, namely, that He created the world, and something about the cosmos, viz. that all the world is God's creation. And this knowledge concerns the main points – if you want: the conceptual framework. For, if once I have this knowledge it leaves no room for idolizing anything created, and positively, it leads me to recognize the universal characteristic of all creation: it is placed under the law of God and thereby subject to God Himself.

The same holds for the knowledge of faith concerning history. Those who confess the fall into sin understand that by the fall man, although his structure did not alter, radically changed his direction: as long as no new turn-about (conversion) occurs, he no longer lives rightly directed. Non-theoretical knowledge includes that which we know concerning the wrath and grace of God. Both are revelations of the disposition of God towards sin and the sinner. Grace never, in no conceivable way, stands in opposition to nature, but always over against wrath. As far as the relation of grace to (fallen) nature is concerned: it can best be seen as calling to life and as healing. For grace brings forth gifts of grace, and the greatest of these is the turn-about of the heart, the regeneration. So this too, is no extra dimension received as donum superadditum, but the influence of grace through which we again begin to live in obedience out of love, not only in a “religious sphere”, but as men and women in integral wholeness.

The concepts of non-theoretical knowledge of faith are, accordingly, total concepts. They cannot replace the concepts of scientific investigation, but they frame them: whatever I find by way of scientific investigation sooner or later fits in that framework.

Faith, whether Christian or pagan, may not be considered “beyond” investigation. But such theoretical work is always a special science about faith which, as field of investigation, is there before the investigation can begin, and therefore is not constructed or founded by science.

Conclusion:

If we see the relationships in these way two things are understood:

- A. A theoretical basis for Christian faith is impossible.
- B. But, on the contrary, a Christian foundation of science is certainly possible. It is even a first requirement. For, a science not so founded is without the frame work in which also scientific knowledge ought to be placed.

These things are of great importance for the investigator at work. It embeds his efforts in the great struggle for truth. It nurtures responsibility: science is part of our life – a life that is in service of God. Thus science is part of our walk before His face. Further, it sharpens our insight, not only for that

which lies in what we investigate, but also into that which is lacking by reason of sin. For instance, a historian will not only describe what he finds in a pagan author such as Plato, but he shall also see what Plato could not.

In other words:

Being a Christian is infinitely more than being a student.

Being a student is being allowed to study; thus it is more than not being a student.

And being a Christian student is infinitely more than to study as a non-Christian. For the Christian-student all of life, therefore also its theoretical side including activity and results, is hid with God in Christ.
