

A Reasoned Faith

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kevin kvalvik

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We see things, and come to terms with them. I

like the idiom, “come to terms” a great deal.

Because it isn't a “figure of speech,” it is a “literal of speech.” What we, as a species, do is assign these odd things called words, which are all ideas to every single noun we see out there. I imagine that this is not news to you. But I am going to talk about my understanding of things that I have seen thus far, and want to make certain that we all start out on the same page. I have seen stuff, made mental notes along the way, assuming that there is some big final exam at the end of the class.

This is by definition how I define reality: stuff that I see. (Now I will extend this to the second person, and I know that is a cognitive leap, but bear with me.) We see it, we put it somewhere in our heads and assign a word or feeling to it. Infants (preverbal) have a conception of mom's face mere hours after birth. They may well understand the key concept about nipples earlier than that. This is reality to them. This is followed closely by cause-and-effect lessons. If the baby rolls one way he gets the nipple. If he rolls the other he gets the floor.

It seems that this is the basis for all understanding, as we assign words to concepts. We have layers of the accepted and expected. OK, so really I am discussing reason and epistemology. Many philosophers use this same reductionism to arrive at syllogisms on which they base their later claims. Descartes and a lot of these guys all “existing by thinking,” and of course if they are right, so do we. The Latin for that is *Cogito ergo sum*, and I feel that it should be followed by the Latin for, “well at least I think so.” The point I am wandering towards with this is that we define reality by thinking about that which we sense. While I am not at all worried about whether unobserved trees make sounds, or if Schrödinger's cat is getting hungry by now. But I do think that we have all of this stuff that we consider reality.

If one agrees that there are no absolutes but only probabilities it is unlikely that he or she will step in front of a bus on the possibility that it will not have mass and force. No, they will stick to “rolling toward the nipple.” Regardless of belief, they lack conviction. Really, why should they? They have a mental collection of data that they collected since infancy that tells them that there are laws, not likelihoods. The science of probabilities makes a poor faith.

Conversely, what of people who lean toward mysticism? Those who believe things that the senses may well suggest, but defy reason. Before continuing, maybe I should define what I mean by the term, “reason.” The idea is that you employ a logic based on the seen and observable to arrive at conclusions about how reality functions. As for logic it merely implies that you use sets of information that is not self contradictory; or by way of illustration: you have all these generations of babies rolling toward nipples instead of toward floors because, well that is the rational thing to do. I mean the milk is that way, the tile smart. Every time a baby rolls toward Mom the outcome is positive, so we assume it is a rule. That is our reasoning. But a mystic baby might feel that although it seems that way to his senses, really there is this nipple in heaven that vastly exceeds the quality and quantity of the nipple here and he holds a belief, or even a conviction that the floor is not real. So rather than availing himself of the historical likelihoods he heads his own way.

Now much of mysticism is pre-enlightenment, or at least non-western. The whole scientific method and so on was based on reason, and rules of logic. So the choice about believing in what we see and can prove, vs. believing in that which we just, er uh, believe sits upon this exact fence. Where, I might add, most of us tend to sit as well. Yet we have Francis Bacon and Darwin and their evangels on one side, and Billy Graham and Osama and bunch of folks with crystals around their necks on the other side coaxing us down like ignorant kittens from trees. Each of these teams giving us information or “terms” to persuade us to get off our fence-of-not-knowing, our tree-of-indecision, to hop

into the net-of-certainty. While a few folks, like Buddha, Jesus, and say Mohamed got their beliefs straight off the lap—no outside info for them—most of the rest of us have had to come to accept or reject non-causality-based conclusions after hearing it from somebody else. We had to come to terms with it that way.

Since we swim in words and meaning and concepts that are vastly more complex than tile floors and warm milk, our choices are also more complex. The adage that states you can't ask a fish to describe water, is true to a point. I bet that water is all fish ever talk about. Like us and weather, or like us and words. The fact that we are disqualified from objective understanding of words and understanding does not prevent us and Noam Chomsky from devoting our lives to the discussion. This is how we come to terms with anything, or everything. We are all like Helen Keller shouting "water, water" as we discover meaning after meaning; idea after idea; belief after belief.

As babies we were gathering our own primary data about cuisine and gravity. But the moment we bumped into vocabulary we had somebody else explaining it all to us. Turns out that traffic is bad for us, and broccoli is good for us; candy is bad, and obeying is good. While we may have agreed with these homilies because we were primitive and oddly (if not innately) trusting, we also had our doubts. Traffic may be something to avoid but candy, on the other hand... Raised in our culture and in this timeframe, under the watchful gaze of empiricism, and Francis Bacon we were handed lists of beliefs, and would-be convictions. So while we have this collection of observables that we have experienced, we also tend to believe much that we harvested from someone else's brain. We were told to watch out for big, fast-moving busses and we listened. Good thing what with traffic being what it is. (Improbabilities and mass-less busses notwithstanding.)

In a non-western culture, lacking the influence of all those scientists, it "stands to reason" that individuals often fall off the fence on the side of the fantastic, mystic or evidence-less. The words and

the logic used varying perhaps from mine/ours. Entire countries use a word-of-mouth system of understanding. What they believe is what they believe as a culture, and it is not subject to individual verification. Education may or may not teach logical imperative. Education is not about learning to reason, it is just about learning. In a mosque or a sweat lodge, or a coven or in a church "education" takes place. They may use the same rhetorical flourishes and call upon similar syllogisms, but the words teaching and learning never have to imply truth, or shall we say "scientific truth." So is this saying that all spiritual (or non-factual) decisions are primitive? Is that the choice then: reason vs. spirituality: belief in the seen vs. belief in the unseen?

I am not at all happy with that bilateral division of choice? Ironically, there seems to be an ontogeny-recapitulates-phylogeny thing here. (That is the scientific idiom to say that the development of the species mirrors the development of the individual's biology) Here it means that a culture's spiritual evolution (if that is not oxymoronic) mirrors the individual's: a child goes from belief in what he or she is told, then on to doubt, and then, for many, back to belief. Although unlikely, Francis Bacon himself is attributed having said that "small amounts of philosophy lead to atheism, but larger amounts bring us back to God." (*note the inference of the capital letters*) This seems a more probable and less primitive model than the Hegelian belief that we are evolving away from being able to believe in anything except the Scientific Method (*Also in caps*) as some kind of ultimate direction.

The famed physicist, Richard Feynman, spent his days addressing the science only and in his waning years devoted his lectures to science and morality, as one without the other seemed fruitless. He had helped on the Manhattan project and wrote of an exceeding sense of hopelessness after returning to civilian life thinking like Solomon that all is vanity; or Einstein (fellow, troubled, bomb-maker) who was unwilling to accept Chaos Theory and the unpredictable nature of the universe, stating in reference to this that God did "not play dice;" He seemed to feel that science, which offers creativity

and destruction on those very dice, must be offset by something. When we become so clever that all we have remaining is a Kubrician/Machiavellian universe full of words but devoid of meaning we end our days like Hemmingway, Van Gogh, and Hitler. Words alone offer small comfort. As Camus put it, “Ah mon cher, for anyone who is alone, without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful.”

The choice is not between a belief on/in scientific claims or scientific method opposed to some fantastic or strictly mystic perception. But, at some point when one has doubted and questioned and examined and induced and deduced and prayed and searched there must come a point of deciding individually what we must see to believe and what else there is beyond this. The fence on which most thinking people sit is a fence that exists by necessity because there is a lack of certainty. However, our inability to be certain does not rule out that there are things greater than we in which we can believe and to which we must cling.

A more Platonic view would lead us to consider that what we see is all well and good but clearly not perfect insofar as we can believe that the conception of perfect is more than just a myth. Plato felt that what we see is just a shadow of the real thing, or “forms” of a potential perfect edition, one that we might be able to conceive, but have not yet seen. For me, this is like skiing in North Carolina and while desiring a mountain in Montana. I may not have skied there, but I know that ice, and slush and tiny hills in NC are not what skiing is truly about. I know this in my heart. There must be more. These little, icy, irritating, crowded hills are just a shadow of what real skiing must be like.

This is more like hope than faith. I think that hope is wanting something better, and I do. Faith, meanwhile, is that other step of believing in it. Now this brings me back to where we get all of our information. Primary data like tile floors and breakfast, and secondary data, like what others tell us. But who’s to say that it is one or the other. I am quite convinced of the abstractions of good and evil. Further, just because I neither saw it nor thought it

up, should I be prevented in wishing for it, wanting it, and maybe believing in it. I am glad that we have those off the fence calling us down on both sides. St. Thomas Aquinas said that it is better to “deliver to others contemplated truths rather than merely to contemplate.” I believe this. Of course so did those folks in the black tennis shoes with the Heaven’s Gate group. It is not just the faithless who finish up life early.

The cartoon “shoulder angel” is a dandy metaphor that goes back to the early church in the “Hell Mouth” rituals showing the peasants how God called them one way and the devil called them another. These are also the folks on the two sides of the fence calling us down. So imagine for a minute that all of the sudden you really could be wholly on the side of the unseen, or the mystic. Imagine that you could, as matter of choice and will totally believe something that was counter to the evidence-gathering you. You could jump in with both feet. Now what?

You are now *without doubt* in your conception of god, or crystals, or channeling Queen Elizabeth, or whatever. Great. But you still got to get information from somewhere or you are believing in your ability to believe. Hmmm? Well if you are one of the few who got their info straight from the source then you are rather obliged to become some kind of conduit for others who lack your insight, godliness, wisdom, whatever. But that is a pretty scary kind of belief no matter who you are. (*note heaven’s gate reference above.*) If you get all your data straight from the source you are a prophet and that can be a thankless job. Hmmm?

So let us say you get information, or theology, or belief structure from somewhere else. You can believe fully, with no doubts whatsoever remember, so now you put your hands on the book, or DVD, or CD of your choosing. Once again A.) You chose right, B.) You have complete and unwavering belief. You now have to read, listen to, watch, or what have you, this resource. Does it cover every single option (even for a person as faithful as you)? What of how often Queen Elizabeth wants to talk. Can you raise just anyone from the dead? Does god

indicate if some folks should stay dead? What of Tammy Fay Bakker's makeup? Is that a sin or just implied. I mean you are complete believer. Do you, as a regular person, have the ability to read between the lines? Is part of your great faith good reading skills? What if you really hate to read and your religion has not been released in the theaters yet?

So now you are going to study under someone who is bookier than you are. Whew. No reading, but you still have great faith. You are still wholly on the side of belief and conviction (and it's easy for you). Great. But under whom do you study? Will they do a good enough job getting the text figured out? Are there some big umbrella concepts that you hold up over all the stuff you can't remember, like "god is good, god is great," or he/she is next to cleanliness, etc. Hey maybe it's not about that stupid schoolbook, teacher's-pet stuff, and you can rely on your spirit to fill in the blanks when you are missing the point or you're in a bind. Well you do have complete faith so just "letting go and letting god" should be a piece of cake. But there are tricky things like when life begins and this is in a book that seemed to endorse stoning children who caused problems. What about how often you go to mosque or synagogue or whatever? Believing strongly in the answer you find or are told is easy if you could just hear the answer. Should good taste alone dictate how much make up is too much? Can one have faith in cultural standards, or are these write in candidates for faith?

So you go to your elder, priestess, rabbi, or whatever and they say to go jump off a building. Hmmm? Now while you are very good at believing without reservation what you believe in, this does not sound like it is in keeping with your Book of Whosit, and really you have awesome faith in what you believe, not in what she/he said. So this great ability to believe is tangent on your agreeing with it in the first place. The other option is shutting the brain down, completely hoping that your Imam has his ducks in a row, because while Allah may be one smart guy there are plenty of places in the Koran, Bible, Torah, etc, where the elders, Pharisees, stewards got it wrong.

While this may sound patently cynical it is two fold: that faith is always connected to reason, and that while we claim to have faith in an "other" it is very, very hard to parse that from *faith in my ability to have faith*. So in the illustration the person with faith to spare is no better off than the doubter, because both need to know where to put that container of stuff. Jesus said, "oh ye of little faith." and we knew he had it right.

Reason, meanwhile, is not quite as tricky initially because—we see it, we believe it—but its slippery slope leads to God and dice. By this I mean that if we go back to believing only those things that can be proven objectively we get ourselves in a bind of only believing that which we can understand. Science presently implies that there is much we cannot understand, and even more that we cannot predict. Einstein had issues with things being truly random. He always worked under the assumption at the end of the formula, it would all make sense. That is not how it worked.

Is this to say faith offers no solution and neither does reason? Well, for me, no. For instance, I have faith that there is good and evil. Values exist in the big picture and I feel that reason (while it is neither my god nor my faith) allows that this is so. Another quote from St. Thomas Aquinas states, "Good can exist without evil, but evil cannot exist without good." I believe both exist. I see evil and then I believe it is a negative of some good. Oddly, I see good I do not then expect evil. There is some kind of lesson in that, but I do not have measure for good and evil, but believe in them as surely as I believe that Osama is a bad guy; John Wayne played a good guy; and they miscast the young-Darth-Vader role.

So while I have a mustard seed of faith (that's how it is measured). I cannot believe firmly in things that seem outrageous, and happily, do not feel called to. If it would assist me in forcing reality to bend to my will I would at least practice it, but instead I will leave that to people who have more time on their hands. A bizarre quote that I love from Steinbeck that speaks to me of my attitude in a life that goes its own way is,

“So in our pride we ordered for breakfast an omelet, toast and coffee and what has just arrived is a tomato salad with onions, a dish of pickles, a big slice of watermelon and two bottles of cream soda.

Yet, I can and must believe in something beyond the measurable because I do not worship my ability to figure it all out either. I do not have that much faith.

As a baby on the lap of reality I have bumped into both of the choices; milk or floor? I also have been here long enough to have noticed stuff that is outside my reach, but it is still there. There things that we see peripherally—out of the corner of our eyes like dim stars in the night sky—that we feel more than see. But there is an overriding sense that these stars are real, even though when we look directly toward them we can no longer make them out. There is more than chilly data fed into our biological computers. There is more than cold information. We feel things we do not yet know, and we pleasure in things we have not yet felt. There is also more than the wholly sensed, or sensual. There is a quality and a flavor to life that exceeds our wants. As Sir Thomas More said to his one-time friend, the Duke of Norfolk “Is there no single sinew in the midst of this that serves no appetite of Norfolk's but is just Norfolk?” We are more than knowledge and consumption. We are more than our brains and our stomachs.

Although skeptical I am no skeptic. Like most, I believe there is an element that is that Platonic form, beyond my reach but alluded to in art. There is some element that transcends. There is a beauty that exceeds my ability to create or perhaps even appreciate. It is in the human condition to note that somehow we are indeed greater than the sum of our parts. I have seen paintings and have heard music that moved me; moved me beyond reason. My own children are connected to me in a fashion that exceeds my ability to understand. While I understand evolutionary forces, I feel that this too is transcendent. This is the aroma that precedes the meal, the breeze that precedes the storm, the sound of the band before the parade turns the corner.

So if one is tied to reason, and recognizes more than an abstraction of good and evil, how may this thinking person reconcile these with some/any spiritual absolutes? For many there is a marriage to the first person who brings you to the dance. If you're raised Jewish, well that settles it. If you are won over by some youth pastor at a Baptist retreat, you'll be busy every Sunday morning and Wednesday afternoon the rest of your life. If you're Muslim or Mormon, or Seventh Day Adventist as a kid then this you shall remain. As for the pesky aberrations from normal/secular that your religion calls for, well you can let others in your group see this, but hopefully this can be kept from making you look like some fanatic in front of your bowling team. (*From the Latin, fanaticus: meaning what you would think, crazy.*)

While we want to believe things that are, er, uh, not necessarily objectively provable, we still don't want to look nuts. So every single religion has the continuum of social participant (*hypocrite, from the Greek, hypokrysis: to act out on stage*) on one side, all the way to serious (*nut, from the English: likely to step out in front of a bus*) on the other. Here are just a few of the things that reasonable, thinking adults are supposed to buy into if they are serious (translated here as “literal”) about their religion.

In the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price there is discussion of a select few getting their own planets and lots of repopulating and lots of wives and so on. Joseph Smith, its founder, was a guy who got his big revelation by translating Egyptian stones in North America that said all the God stuff, but of course no one else could translate these hieroglyphics. And remember that this was in the early 1800's and he married 30 some gals and wrote a lot about how delightful this is, while Brigham Young called women bovine. I mean if you are a serious Mormon (man) you wear special embroidered white undies that cover your thigh. Really.

As far as Islam goes the Koran gets lots of bad press. Well, of course, Mohamed was a warrior who also did none of his own writing and the writing that was done years later endorses taking over countries as a good thing, because that way the unconverted can see the one god. If you fall away, or change your mind about the whole Islam thing then you are apostate and need to be killed. Really, this is what it says, and this is not a figurative killing. This is the kind where you bleed a lot and then your heart stops. As far as flying planes into buildings goes, well

there is some disagreement about that, and whether the hijackers get the famed grand prize of martyr's heaven replete with the virgins and all or not. But understand, if taken literally, the Koran is about dominating, actually not figuratively, the whole world so that Allah will get his way. Youch.

In the Old Testament Abraham was going to kill his son Isaac. This is not good. While this can be seen as an allusion to God sacrificing his son, still this is bad parenting advice. Job, in the book of the same name, loses all his family to terrible acts allowed by God so the devil would see something or other. But, happy day, at the end Job gets a whole new family to replace the dead ones. Was this OK with Mrs. Job?

Then there is the wacky stuff about the New Age, and the Christian Scientists, and the Seventh Day Adventists, and so on. But if one wants to prescribe to any major religion, they have beliefs "on the literal side" that run: from a-bit-questionable; to as odd as covering your head with tinfoil and looking for the aliens. I think that the most questionable views and beliefs that are literally believed by each faith should be tacked to the door—Martin Luther-like—so it's not just after you have gone to your third social that you discover they are all secretly Amway sales people.

Just the same, the folks who see God in the flowers and feel that his "vibe" is enough are not exactly paying much of a price for religion either. This is the mindless, oh-let's-think-about-something-pretty religion that is so effeminate and toothless that it disappears from lack of definition. I am not terribly enamored of acknowledging that something spiritual exists but it is up to government to establish what morality is, or worse, let science decide that. We certainly can't let the academics decide it as there is more denominationalism within higher ed than in all of Protestantism combined. It is the most faddish of faiths as this year's politically-correct opinion drives the whole gang, and they are still entrenched in the 60's.

Most folks seem to get along just fine by refusing to acknowledge the question. Whatever answer they were told in their home, region, culture, civilization they are willing to accept it and take it, as they say, with a grain of salt, *cum grano salis*. So they accept that there is a religion, and that they are part of one

that has some wackos on the far side, but as for the ir family they will watch NASCAR. Distraction and consumerism become enough. As for that legendary "empty feeling inside," another Budweiser oughta fix that just fine. Families and friends remain families and friends by not bringing up politics or religion, unless they all know (because of the cars in front of the building) that they are all part of the same team. There, we got religion. Some argue that all roads lead to heaven; one might logically extend this to saying that killing Jews and blowing up people is OK then? No, there are qualitative differences.

I think that collectivism, the combining into nation states that followed mysticism has not worked very well. I think that Judaism was a nice start, but got a bit side tracked with the whole mid-east thing. Both Christianity and Islam were spin offs of that show. The New Testament (while not all Christians) welcomes Jews, and as Francis Schaeffer wrote in her book, Christianity is Jewish. Islam is based on the Koran of course, which are a selection of writings that were amassed as a point of political necessity, and then to prevent any later disagreement they burned up all of the found supporting documents. They also want to take over the world. Mormonism makes Catholicism look inclusive as it is honestly sexist and racist but if allowed to describe any of their bizarre beliefs religions will all tend to play the martyr card instead of just saying, "Hey, we believe some weird stuff and we are OK with that." There are plenty of others but these are adequate to my point.

While there are other faiths and lack of faiths I only know considering them all I still feel that:

- A. they celebrate something that is not wholly observable but is wholly important.
- B. these religions, if taken seriously, each have some contradictions, and some objectively strange points of view.
- C. they each acknowledge a collective and specific view of God that allows one to decide if the primary features are in accord with that unseen and ethereal part of

individual awareness and with the rational and reasoned part of their intellect.

- D. these faiths enjoy descriptors from brutal to kind, from open and loving to discriminating and cruel.
- E. they each have oversight that denies their less attractive aspects.
- F. finding specific merit and involving oneself in them is the only fashion that I know of avoiding the other extreme of worshipping oneself as the arbiter god's will and god's boundaries.
- G. Christianity and its peculiar belief set is the only faith that allows my belief in kindness and care and sacrifice to be combined with my reasoned, and often all too cynical self.

A guy named Tony Compolo wrote a book called "A Reasonable Faith." It sort of apologized for all of the wacky things Christianity stood for and claimed that it is not as odd as it seems. Maybe it is. There is a belief in the fantastic, and the supernatural. Liberal Christians (and I think that I am one now) see much of the Noah-and-animals and the six-days-of-work-to-make-a-universe stuff as poetic license. But even with that said, I find that something is missing without an accountable God. I have lost people I have loved and do not want to shake my fist at an empty sky. I have held my new born in my hands and cried thank you to more than Mother Nature. In devastation and in brilliance I see the hand prints of a creative god. As I tire of seeing cable TV but never tire of the fractal beauty of clouds, mountains, and waves I sense and admire the artistry of the maker of heavens and earths.

Now common, we know the cliché of what a rain dance was: Primitive Americans calling out for water from a water god. But I see this as a certain kind of eloquence. It is the need to create, the need to act when no actions will do. These Indians depended wholly on the weather for their life. When there was no action that they could take, when the land was dying from want of water, they acted and

created and danced before God as the only thing left to do. Art is indeed an act of desperation. I see writing and swimming through the words as the same kind of desperation. Trying to line up a series of words that will express my need for a God: a God of kindnesses and of patience; a God who sees and acts and has gifted us with reason and intuition and creativity. All we can do is acknowledge and accept that which we can and wonder about the rest. But for me, that is enough.

Beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time.
Albert Camus

kevin kvalvik

kvalvik@post.harvard.edu