



YOU ARE THE BRANCHES

Ramblings on the
Concept of Justification

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Cover: Oak trees, Tarrytown, New York

How often do we spend time justifying our personal decisions and opinions on a wide range of subjects and reject contrary convictions that others may reach on the same subject? We often construct rigorous mental arguments based solely on our own experience and intellectual capacity. We may truly believe our personal conclusions to be right and true, or secretly admit to ourselves that they may be insubstantial, or perhaps our positions have been taken from the obtuse thoughts of others, or we hold right from wrong only on the basis of emotions, without personal conscientiousness.

I believe in this “post modern” age, we can justify almost anything simply because we believe we have the absolute right and freedom to do so regardless of any rules, laws or traditional conformity, the very instruments upon which our culture has been formed. That doesn't mean that things do not nor should not change; they do! The very nature of human progress is change, though not always for the better. Even the great paradigm shifts of history have had a relationship to previous occurrences and have led up to those "epochal" changes. There certainly is newness in a continuous chain of moments, but each new moment is connected to the one before it, we often learn, too late, that what “has been” may have been better than novelty.

In this time-compressed age, justification can be given for doing things faster, more efficiently than the time consuming methods of the past. Yet novelty, in so many ways, may be disappointing rather than satisfying. Generally the "stop and smell the roses" metaphor has little relevance in today's fast forward environment. Greetings start with the word “hey”!, departures with “later”!. Conversations are speeded up, eating is, much of the time, "on the run". Children are being raised on extreme schedules, and accelerated lifestyles are totally

justified as progressive and productive. Explicit violence and sexuality as entertainment is justified with first amendment rights.

Often judges justify short sentences for sex offenders against children, even though recidivism is almost a certainty. Many dangerous drugs are often justified and called recreational. Terrorism is justified for religious and political ends, euthanasia is justified, embryonic stem cell research (the possibility for saving future life by destroying present life) is justified, as is abortion at any stage of the development of the fetus, all justified. Almost every monstrosity or atrocity has its justification. What is obviously a wrong, on second thought is turned into a right with some sort of justification. The reason is plain; all guilt is to be eliminated under any circumstances. What is bad, by justification can become good. Guilt brings pain and pain is out of the question. The ultimate outcome must be self exoneration and faultlessness. Whether deliberate or inadvertent, personal blame is unacceptable.

Each person can live in his or her enclosed world of self-righteousness. An excellent practical example of this phenomenon is the former president Bill Clinton's remark, "It all depends on what the meaning of is, is." Within the context of that remark, there is total and perfect justification for his own actions (self righteousness). There was positively no breathing room in his understanding of "wrong", demonstrating the triumph of relativism over a President of the United States presumably a moral icon. No normative meaning or contrary opinion could be declared to be right, but simply different. The use of language becomes so ambiguous, that one can never know what another truly means. As a result, lying to a grand jury was not construed a crime, though there were victims of this legerdemain. For a chastised Clinton, there was no plain-

truth and presumably no guilt, because there was no fault admitted. Evidently many people agreed with him, though impeached, he was not convicted by the U. S. Senate; but that's ancient history.

Now, to lead a normal life, if there is such a thing, justifying our thoughts and actions is a necessity. We need to feel comfortable and right about what we freely choose to do. Conscience generally tells us when we are doing wrong as long as our consciences were well formed with a proper sense of ethics and morals. Conscience suggests a right course of action which can be counter to the determination made by the human will. St. Augustine's famous remark about doing the things he wills not, and willing the things he does not, is common to most of us. To be justified in our actions we need a strong set of justifiers. Justifiers, worked up by reason, are proofs or evidences of trustworthiness known and understood to be right for making proper decisions. In the vernacular it may be known as: "doing the right thing". Being justified by making appropriate choices is a great anxiety eliminator, especially when it is accompanied by honest humility, that is, always taking care to include the rights and feelings of others. Ideally, righteousness results from charity because it sincerely expresses the well-being of others bringing the reward of satisfaction to itself. Ultimate righteousness issues from love, of which there are many varieties, most rewarding when returned in kind by another, the foundation, by the way, of a happy marriage or any relationship.

When justice is demanded, it is not being charitable to withhold it for emotional reasons. Charity or Love, the queen of all virtues, encompasses the cardinal virtue of Justice. As the book of Wisdom, 8: 7 says: "If anyone loves righteousness, wisdoms labors are virtues; for she teaches temperance and prudence,

justice and courage." The word righteousness has gotten a bum rap in modern times. It sounds awfully Victorian, most likely by being overused in early 20th century preaching. Today a truly humble person does not consider herself or himself righteous. One of the great American skeptics, H. L. Menken helped kill the word. It became a synonym for pompous or pious, and many righteous people were wrongly considered hypocrites. More recently, the entire Catholic Church was scandalized due to hypocrites and criminals in their ranks. High ranking ordinaries justified moving perverted priests into different venues, protecting them in the name of mercy, knowing full well that mercy flows from justice, not sympathy. Fear of the truth prevailed. Confusion about the ultimate source of mercy was be blinded by ego, self-righteousness, at the expense of the most innocent among us.

The way judges and juries function is by rationalizing the justifiers or evidence and deciding on innocence or guilt based on codified law. A sad phenomenon in modern communication circles is how news organizations, for commercial purposes, venture into the guilt or innocence of individuals or groups purely by the use of speculation as entertainment. With a constitutional guarantee under the right of free speech, the population (without full details) may wrongly conclude the guilt or innocence of a person or group in the "court of popular opinion" based solely on "news" accounts. It seems that "celebrities" with exceptional persuasiveness, hold the key to the public's mind. This is nothing more than dramatic conjecture for sale. Certainly, law makers have a stake in this phenomenon too, with an inordinate amount of conflicting media research and weighted public polling adding to the confusion. The news media justifies itself as an instrument of change, rather than a source of impartial information. The educative function of the "news" has succumbed to

editorializing, roughly based on marketing goals and the personal opinion of a few media moguls. Historically, yellow journalism has been known to stage events rather than simply report on them honestly. The “fourth estate” has always been deemed above the fray since it was constitutionally given the responsibility of justly informing the populace as a free press, similar to the freedom accorded "religious" practitioners to be above the control of government. I am convinced that that responsibility does not include the overt exploitation of large segments of the population for political ends or personal gain. I suppose we shouldn't be surprised, in many ways “news gathering” and “religion” have become businesses. We certainly should include sports as well. Reality turns on vicariousness and the perception of truth from entertainment, not on participation. In a “free” country you don't need to join in, you can just watch it all go by and make your very own private judgements. Even religion is separated from “real” life and has generally become only a mental commitment; a totally private matter.

Many justify and demonstrate their freedom by simply opting out. Their righteousness is “who cares!” Public interest and the greater good has little or no meaning beyond a withdrawn and totally private self. Within the last forty years anywhere from a third to half of our population did not see fit to vote. In the last ten years only a quarter of our people attended a church once a week, yet this year, the super bowl event was watched by over 150,000,000 people, about half of our population. There was even a contest on which commercial entertains you most – while selling you burgers, beer and Buicks, all good for the economy, no doubt. It all seems so eminently justifiable, so perfectly normal. Liberal democracy may be as close to utopia one can get.

There are “righteous” people who claim that it is totally justifiable for religious fanatics to have nuclear weapons; their justifier is the fact that "we have them, so?" I find it more than slightly disturbing that relativism has reached such extraordinary contingencies.

If we look at righteousness as Karl Barth looked at it in his commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, "Righteousness belongs exclusively to God", the uncreated power which mere men and women cannot even conceive of, except through Jesus Christ. Though there are those who "do good" there is no way they can attribute any personal good to their acts were it not for the action of the Good itself, the Creator. With this kind of humility and justification God's saving grace through Jesus Christ is a possibility, but we'll never know it until our journey ends, hopefully, in the promised place prepared for us according to scripture. (Matt. 25. 34).

How did we get to the point where the personal opinion of the individual appears to be unquestionable, where religion has become strictly a private matter, and numerous rights outweigh responsibilities by far, where ... "hearts are closed and insensitive to the novelty of God"? (Benedict XVI). Self appears to be the only trustworthy entity, and materialism the only praiseworthy goal.

Luigi Guissani, in *Communio* 25, 1998 put it squarely:

Freedom in the modern age comes to be understood as separation from something. As the absence of any connection, as the absence of all ties. We might put this conception in ordinary terms by saying that freedom is the abandonment of ones self to nothing but the force of ones reactions, instincts, fancies and opinions.

Perhaps it has always been thus; in 360 BCE (Before the Christian Era), Socrates, in Plato's Cratylus says, "The present generation cares for euphony more than truth". The argument always seems to be, the present against the past to secure a better future. We are all capable idea persons, but it's the philosophers and theologians who continuously juggle concepts of ethics and morality, of what is right and wrong, with a pretty sure understanding of the human animal here- to-fore. If for a moment we turn our backs on the "future" and look at the past, history is laid out in such a way that we are able to get a reasonably good view of what has transpired since man appeared. Except for a very few stretches along the way it has not been a pretty sight. The great achievements of science, with it's multiple triumphs have, ultimately, not given us the rewards and satisfactions of its promises. Extending human life is now beginning to show a downside. Cracking the atom was both a blessing and a curse. It is obvious to most of us that there is no utopia on this earth. It's more like living in a rented house which we take care of for the next tenant. Since the utilities are finite we cannot expect them to work flawlessly, they must be monitored and maintained since they were not included in our "rental agreement" irrespective of the fact that the Landlord lives with us in Spirit and truth. Not one human being escapes responsibility; except for sickness and disease or invincible ignorance, no one can justify not pitching in to help maintain our home here on this planet.

An old corporate slogan was: "Progress is our most important product". Progress is advancement, forward motion. We know what the copy writer meant, he or she meant the positive unfolding of scientific achievement for the good of mankind. That's fine if the goal is a great new refrigerator, but, is progress a "product"? Progress is not produced, it goes on no

matter what we do, nothing can stop it. On its course it can be laden with ill will, hatred or envy. We can progress to personal destruction if we so wish. Progress can also be accompanied by good will, peace and charity, the goal of progress is to reach a finality. The question becomes, where does progress stop, or is progress forever? Will progress which had a beginning be perpetual or will it end at some point in space/time? Believers and unbelievers alike have a similar understanding. They both think that since time had a beginning time will have an end, unless there is a (new) or several new beginnings. Everything that is, or ever was, diminishes. Nothing escapes degradation unless it has a renewal, for example, life on earth is renewed by the degradation of organic matter. Change is the constant, all is novelty.

All the suns of the cosmos are timed to fail, replaced by new ones being born before our eyes light years ago. Forever is only a possibility in renewal or revival. Only with a restart are the defaults reset with different parameters. Change, as the engine of renewal is axiomatic in our understanding. Let's have a quick look at the nature of change Itself.

We first need to ask, is change wholly an action (including all created things) an absolute necessity? The answer would have to be yes. Since it is yes, then change can be called a universal activity which will exist on a continuous basis as long as physical things exist. If the energy that was caused at the big bang subsequently became all that is, one would have to say that change began at creation, but change from what? Can change take place where there was nothing subject to change? We cannot even ask where the "there" was as a place before creation. We need to hold that change had a beginning like everything else. So "itself" can then be used reflexively as a direct object of the verb "change," i.e. change itself. It appears

that time and space were created at once, and change was involved in the expansion that followed. When space/time began, change became the procedure. Change then, is the identity of space/time. In other words, space/time can only be known by change so there is no possibility then, for things not to change.

We neither invented space/time nor change. The behavior of time and space (is) change. We did invent ways to measure both time and space and we take notice of change, and can even affect rates of change, but can not void time or space, nor cancel change. Even at so called absolute zero, there is no absolute. That is, the the total ceasing of the oscillations of the atoms and molecules of water. Absolute zero puts the freezing temperature of water at - 273 degrees Celsius, but the tiny billiard game goes on. Kinetic energy becomes minimal at “absolute zero” so though the system would not have the transference factor to other systems, still, change goes on.

Venerable U. Dhammasami of the International Buddhist Center in London says:

The word Anicca is a household word in every Buddhist country, it means impermanence. Another word often jointly used by Lord Buddha is viparinamadhammo, meaning “the nature of change”... by understanding Anicca (impermanence) we come to understand that there is no permanent entity underlying our life (Anatta).

He says further:

The Buddha did not create change or impermanence , it was there in his time, it is there now, and will (always) be there.

Recognizing a certain finality in that statement, one may ask, is there a certain permanence in impermanence?

John Bowker, in the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions says:

Analytically “impermanence” is to be observed in the fact that all things exist in dependence on something else, arise out of and become something else. It is precisely in this respect that nibbana (nirvana) is to be understood as the antithesis of anicca, that is of comprising duration, stability, and permanence, and why it is regarded worthy of the doctrine of “dependent organization”, which states that “all things have a beginning and that all things that have a beginning must have an end”; The doctrine of anicca draws attention to the fact of their demise. The paramount importance of anicca in Buddhist teaching is spotlighted in Buddha’s last words, “decay is inherent in all things”.

So, we can say that inherency is permanency. Is there an end to all things?

The Buddha, unlike the Greeks didn’t bother his head too much about primal cause or origination. His interest was dealing with what is – as far as he knew. When we shed ourselves of “self” successfully we come to what he called a perfect state of “nirvana”, or absolute bliss. “A state of “extinction” or being “blown out” like a flame; this state totally transcends the conditions of this world; hence nothing positive can be said about it. However, Buddhists are clear in stating that it is not simply a matter of annihilation even though it means the end of the phenomenal self and of the round of rebirths” (Massa and Viladesau, World Religions, Paulist Press, 1994, p 65) So here then, for the Buddhist is a finality. Arresting change with a

permanent loss of self. The demise of impermanence in a permanent happy state forever (nirvana) is what one could call the goal; the result of right living being justified following Buddhas understanding. If there is reason to reject the self having been born into impermanence, reaching Nirvana is it. Renewal for the Buddha was the process of self denial to the point of perfection. (*"You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."*) (Matt. 5. 48) Wanting and needing nothing, Buddhists believe they gain everything, which, as it turns out, is perfectly, happily and permanently nothing.

These days it seems that we have become the "masters of the universe." Man, per se, needs to eclipse God's presence, and in many ways, as Thomas Hobbs put it: "There is no power on earth like his." (Man, that is). The Buddhists justify themselves by rejecting their negativity. In a similar way modern men and women justify themselves by celebrating their negativity, their non- dependence, their "freedom"; concluding that there is nothing greater or higher than the self. Yet man has never been able to answer the age old question of causality except by faith, faith in a prime mover, or some other concept in another reality beyond the self, in order to grasp, at least partially, the fact of ultimacy and the infinite.

From the earliest times, Homo Sapiens was enabled to perceive of an Intelligence superior to his own, and the issue of being justified to stand before that power has always been a vexing problem. A certain awe encompasses him wherever he looks, and as time goes on, with further understanding, he continually became more cognizant of the indescribable complexity and beauty of his own nature as well as his surroundings. Man must feel that he deserves being who he is as a person in this "divine" milieu. No one can deny the existence of time and space and the relative nature of it, nor can anyone predict how

long it will last or the extent in which it takes place. What we seemed to have succumbed to, is the sophistry that “man is the measure of all things”, an idea that even Socrates didn’t buy from Protagoras, i.e. the truth being only as any individual sees it. This is the relativism of today’s world. This malaise can be summed up in Pilate’s remark: “What is truth”? Reality is so evasive that we make our own truth, then swear by it.

It doesn’t take much imagination to figure out where this sophistry has gotten us so far. What a dichotomy this “presumption of freedom” has given us! Many of us have come to the conclusion that we know what “life” is really all about. If we’re insecure, we can call an expert to help us out for a nominal fee. If we don’t want to be interrupted while involved in some entertaining schemata or are too busy engaged in our money making responsibilities, we can always let the “government” take care of the details regarding peace, security, and the pursuit of happiness, “they’re there to handle those matters”. A huge percentage of us have decided to finally dispense with this “man made” concept of serving God and are quite content that serving ourselves is really very much the same. The spirit of “church” is within each of us, and is completely a private matter. Religion as it existed, at least up until the sixteenth century, regardless of so called revelation, is just so much hocus-pocus. Religion is not the answer, religion is the problem. This is the argument.

When we ask the essential human questions, Who am I?; What am I doing here? An answer may be given with reference to a power beyond the self, God, or a god of some description within whose ambit we are justified. The Creator of all things visible and invisible. If the same questions were asked in a scientific sense, the answer would also be given, necessarily, from a power beyond the self, i.e. a linear chain of events back

to a beginning of here-to-fore unknown origin, where our existence was strictly by chance. My God, what a depressing thought. Has meaning no relevance? Has meaning become strictly personal too? The answer in both cases takes us beyond our “ken”. When justifying personal acts of pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy or sloth, do we say, “after all we’re only human”, especially knowing that there are no other living beings on earth more closely connected to the Good beyond other than the human family? We surely can believe that humanity is an anomaly, even of chance, a chemical synthesis in the natural order of forward progress over time, and the highest development of evolution still unfolding toward a completely unknowable future. At some time in our lives, as reasoning organisms, we come face to face with these ultimacy issues. Why do so many avoid them?

Today, secularists have a need to try to suppress any public display of religion. The reason given, at least in the U.S., is a total misunderstanding of the Jeffersonian idea of the “separation” concept imputed to the U.S. Constitution, although I happen to believe there may be some very “private” reasons as well. The first amendment says: *Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; ...* It’s pretty clear in these words that the government is prohibited from forming a national church of any kind, and that it is also prohibited from infringing on the practices of any religious establishment provided its purpose is not to over-throw of the system which the people have put in place by free elections. The way the secular “elite” justify their “separation of church and state” position is by purposefully overlooking the founders original intent. Generally this is done to support their honestly arrived at scientific perspective on human origins. The words “wall of separation” by Jefferson surly did not mean the elimination of

religion in the “public square”. Jefferson was no atheist, as many of our secularists believe. Science seems to be progressing in such a way that even the most adamant of our current atheist crop are beginning to understand the satisfactions that “faith” and “grace” can bring. The English philosopher Antony Flew is one among them. Sadly, many Christian institutions of higher learning justify taking Christ out of their curriculum to keep government grants flowing which the public pays for. In terms of our Catholic institutions, someone should ask Benedict XVI if this kind of justification falls under the heading of “remote material cooperation in the presence of proportionate reasons”?, I strongly doubt it does.

Let’s have a look at the mundane meanings underlying “Justification” and “Righteousness”. As we have shown, we can surely justify ourselves; we can be perfectly satisfied with our own actions, whether they’re right, wrong or indifferent, because we may say “we’re only human” and act as nature demands letting our conscience, regardless of how its been formed, be our guide. Our righteousness then would be self-righteousness since it is self proclaimed. Immediately the question arises, if everyone is “self-righteous” how would one control the chaos that must certainly follow, since we’re all different and do not think alike?

We can also be justified under the law of a political system. Here we have the opportunity, living together in a community, to cooperate by understanding what is to be expected from each of us in terms of right and wrong; to keep the peace and promote the “general welfare” in the interest of happiness and order. We can be righteous under the communal laws that we ourselves have made through our elected legislators. Righteousness comes by voluntarily living within the limits of

those laws prescribed for all of us with no exceptions. Again, a complex self righteousness.

Justification has somewhat the same ambiguous meaning as the word goodness. A person can be good at what he or she does but not necessarily a good person. A woman can be justified making a great salary because of her contribution to corporate profits, but not justified because of the disdainful way she treats her co-workers. Tiger Woods, for instance, is a great golfer and justifiably deserves all of his awards, but he cannot be justified for his moral choices. So there is a vast difference between the qualities of how a person does what he does, to what a person is. The whole question of justification for righteousness depends on a value related to being. Are we more than just alright, or are we all-right? I think we could agree that our being is a good thing. We're here, we exist, we live and have a mind and hopefully meaning matters. We have emotions and a memory. We live as members of one another, and as one human family. The ultimate question eventually comes up: where did we come from, why, and does it really matter; and above all, why does it matter if it does? Obviously, there are many who will not think it important to ask such questions, but we are rational creatures and questions of origin have been natural to us from pre-historic times. It is curious that modern man, as opposed to early man, has all but accepted the insignificance of life, i.e. "a culture of death". Questions of life's value have become irrelevant. "We just all go to black when we die". Many religionists, of course, have a very different point of view. Religionists are convinced that a Supreme Being or Goodness itself, has been, and still is revealing Himself, or Herself if you like, to us in many different ways. The "signs of the times" are becoming more clear. In Antony Flew's new book, *There is a God*, he quotes Richard Swinburne: "It's very unlikely that a universe would exist uncaused, but rather more

likely that God would exist uncaused. Hence the argument from the existence of the universe to the existence of God is a good C-inductive argument. Flew, a noted philosopher and former atheist says, “ Swinburne’s cosmological argument provides a very promising explanation, probably the finally right one.”(p 144-145, *There Is A God*, Harper Collins, paperback, 2008).

It is understandable that we require justification for our actions. We really ought to want to be more right than wrong in our human activity. There’s something very wrong with people who want or need to be “wrong” based on the standards most of us know and cherish. There are those who are contrarians, who seem to need to be opposed to whatever is good. Many are simply immature and others are people of “ill will”. “*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased,*” (*Luke, 3: 14*) i.e. men and women of good will. The “good will” people see joy, peace, patience and conciliation as an assignation; an influx of positive goodness, through a powerful force called grace. It is this so called grace that directs the individual toward a fuller understanding of the meaning of love in the life one gratuitously leads. Grace, indeed, is participation in the persistence of the Good itself, totally recognizable, with a well formed conscience, as essentially the effect of the reality of Love who is Our Father, God! Who will deny the presence of Love in the world, the permeating positiveness over against the forces of ill will and confusion generated in the “hearts” of individual human beings? Have we gotten to the point where we can recognize that goodness is coming from a different place and that humans didn’t create it, but have always had the option to cooperate with it or reject it? We are truly free only with some understanding of the presence of the Good. It isn’t sagacity or reasoning on our part that created the Good, but recognition

that the Good exists beyond our own existence and requires us to want it for itself. It is “I AM WHO AM” whose open invitation to join his grand plan has been known by every generation, in one way or another, since man appeared on earth. The objective is to love the Good, and to love all those who have been created out of the Good, again, without exception. If on the other hand, we turn in on ourselves and goodness is what ever we want it to be, and we’re satisfied that it is whatever we will call it, that becomes the self righteousness we’ve been speaking about. Justification then, of the independent “goodness” of our own being is a self reward, regardless of the obvious fact that we had absolutely nothing to do with our own existence. Have we thus then eaten the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as Genesis poetically put it? Had we not named goodness ourselves?

The Good, which has always been a threesome, continuously provides for us. It is our Cause, our Renewal and our Guide. Believe it or not, we have been created, regardless of the perpetual argument about our chance appearance on earth. Not only Antony Flew, but many other men and women of science and philosophy have taken a long and hard empirical look at what has come about here-to-fore and cannot reconcile a deterministic viewpoint about a beginning. “If determinism has no necessary cause, there is no physical beginning.” We started to fully understand the “Great Good Beyond” from about the time of Abraham through the history of Israel. For many of us, it appears that as a result of the ape to man, brain to mind transition there was, necessarily, a first set of humans from whom we are all derived. When God saw what he had made, indeed, it was very good. You might say, he was being most gracious since we were just beginning to share in his goodness. The laws of nature were in motion, the phenomenon of life originated not from non-life, but from the “Logos”, the Giver

of Life. A renewal by the Good was prophesied and intimated all through human history everywhere in the world. An expectation of deliverance was known by humanity.

Deliverance and renewal came. It was called the Incarnation. It was not, necessarily, the political stabilization of Israel, or the Messiah as an era to come, or a unique frame of time, but the Good Itself inserted into humanity as a child. Emmanuel, “God with us”; Jesus Christ, both God and Man. In 2002 Gerald O’Collins SJ wrote a book titled *Incarnation*. Aside from being precisely what the back cover says: “A challenging and beautifully written new book on a fundamental topic in theology ... it will engage the modern secular reader.” Being a student of religion, I enjoyed it immensely. On p.2, Chapter one, O’ Collins introduces us to his subject:

“The earliest Christian writer, St, Paul, turned to hymnic language and wrote of One who was ‘in the form of God but did not think his equality with God a thing to be exploited’ for his own advantage. Rather he emptied himself by assuming ‘the form of a slave’ and would end his human life on a cross. The anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews, writing perhaps ten years later, presented the Incarnation as the decisive climax of a divine preparation that had taken centuries of Jewish history:”

In many and varied ways God spoke long ago to our forefathers through the prophets. But in these last days he has spoken to us through a Son, whom he has appointed the heir of all things; and through him he created the world. He is the reflection of God's glory and the stamp of God's very being and he supports all things by his word of power. After he had made purification for sins, he took his place at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1. 1-3)

“This stately opening to Hebrews, more than the Letter to the Philippians, describes what the Son is like – as ‘the reflection of God's glory and the stamp of God's very being’ it proclaims the Son's role in creation, and puts his Incarnation in context by evoking Jewish history through a series of contrasts.”... “The incarnation forms the once-and-for-all, supremely decisive moment in God’s saving and revealing dealings (of ‘life’ and ‘light’, respectively) with the Jewish people, with all people (John 1.9, 12-13), and with the whole cosmos. God is now personally disclosed in one, and only one individual, born at a specific time (around 5 BC) to grow up in a particular place, Nazareth (John1. 45-6)”. (Incarnation, p. 3). What would a sophisticated skeptic with no particular ill will ask? May I suggest: How is Jesus of Nazareth “The Good”; why was it around 4 or 5 BC that he became man born of a virgin called Mary; and why should I trust the “scripture” if that’s the only source of belief? To begin to unravel some of the confusion these belief points bring about, since most of us are “seeing-is-believing” people, we don’t look much beyond the here and the now. Once again, from Antony Flew’s book *There Is A God*, he quotes a wonderful passage from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, chapter V. In chapter 2 of his book titled: *Where the Evidence Leads*, Flew says:

“When Alice journeyed through the looking glass ... she met a queen who claimed to be ‘one hundred and one, five months and a day’”:

“I cant believe that!” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone.

“Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.” Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for a half-an-hour a day.

Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Flew continues:

“I daresay I must sympathize with Alice. Had I tried to imagine the path my life and study has taken—even after I commenced studies in philosophy under the supervision of Gilbert Ryle—I must certainly have dismissed it all as improbable, if not impossible.”

It seems that Alice could not believe what appeared impossible for Alice. The question becomes: Did what seemed impossible in Alice’s comprehension of possibilities, make the Queens age impossible, even in the fantasy world she had penetrated? Alice carried with her into Carroll’s fantasy environment, all she knew about her reality, from the only “real world” she knew. Similarly, Flew as an agent of empiricism could not believe in the existence of another reality, aside from the scientific one he knew. This is the condition with most physicists, as it was with Flew, that is, before he started studying philosophy. Eventually, philosophy got him to metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that deals with the unknown, first causes, ontology, cosmology etc. The interesting thing about this phenomenon is that physicists confront wild possibilities all the time, and that takes into account much more than just “raw data”. An open minded physicist surely doesn’t lack imagination, but immediately tends to turn that imagination into the determinate workings of a physical system. That would include emotions, memory, meanings et al, even though, as far as I can tell, these phenomena are indeterminate, even today. Until we have a

scientific “theory of everything,” metaphysics plays a healthy and important part in everyones life. Dismiss it, dismiss art.

Many scientists believe religionists are in a world of make-believe, as Alice was, rather than a world of faith and reason, where belief, for them, is “true reality”. A culture of righteousness in the Spirit rather than the self righteousness of modern secular ethics. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.” Faith in the Tripartite Good has more than proven to be a most powerful and rewarding lifestyle for billions of human beings over the years. As for “all the saints and sages,” from Khayyam, their mouths have not been “stopped with dust.” They have handed down this precious faith to those who have “ears to hear.” They speak of the eternally Great Good, of Blessed Renewal, and of Constant Advocacy, primarily with words Jesus is reported to have spoken – while we continually seek a fuller understanding of them. Faith looks forward to the finality promised to the faithful by the resurrection of Christ after he had been crucified, died and entombed; Easter! A glorious something rather than a happy “nothing”; reality beyond the mundane, and of course, with our understanding of full freedom in the Good, it is entirely our choice to follow him. *Ora pro nobis, sancta Dei Genetrix – Ut digni efficiamur promissionibus Christi.* Most of those, who reject the existence of God, do not disbelieve the existence of Jesus and his deeds. Even for rigid empiricists there’s enough history to tacitly convince them that Jesus was born of Mary, lived and taught in Palestine with the same conviction that he or she is convinced that Caesar crossed the Rubicon about 50 years earlier. Holocaust deniers, as well, grant Jesus at least the status of prophet. The greatest gift to man aside from the Great Good in Jesus Christ, is absolute freedom, with the ability to do with one’s self exactly what one wishes. A “wish” is a projection, a hope, so to speak; a desire or a want; there’s a lot of wisdom in

the adage “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.” With this in mind, and since we have become reasoning human beings, I have always liked Meister Eckhart’s thought:

“Just as it would be presumptuous and reckless not to believe unless you have understood, so too it would be slothful and lazy not to investigate by natural arguments and examples what you believe by faith.”

It seems pretty obvious that to place your full trust in something, that something, or someone, for that matter, ought to be understood to the limit of one’s human capabilities. In order to get our finite minds to a point of decision on the truth of a matter, whatever knowledge is available ought to be known in order to place full faith. To say, “I believe”, requires a certain effort. In the natural order there are signs. When the buds come out on the trees, summer is near. When the leaves turn gold and red, winter is on its way. The moon influences the tides, and gravity holds everything together. It’s when we begin to think further away from the comforts of home, things become a little more difficult to understand. How do black holes work, what is dark matter exactly, is there life somewhere else in the universe? Here we begin dealing only with possibilities and probabilities, hypotheses and theory, all generated in the minds of men and women. It is well known that the simplest minds often come up with answers to most complex questions, while complex minds seek simple solutions. In the more complex worlds of biophysics and cosmology, as the unknown is being probed, a certain degree of understanding is needed that the laws of nature which we have catalogued by observation and repeated experiments will hold, so that the quest for further knowledge can continue on the basis of what is already known. But it is also well known, that over the centuries, many of the most comfortable theories have

proven to be false, and skeptics, in their negative way, have been proven right.

The absolute, both in physics as well as in metaphysics is, in the final analysis, uncertain, both agree there will be a finality. Should that stop us from thinking beyond? Even if we wanted to, can we stop thinking beyond? Probably not! Dr. Francis Ayala, a noted scientist, who has been down the road of metaphysics, and author of *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* says: "Humankind is made up of selves, and only selves can transcend themselves." Where does this transcendence take us; does it take us with Alice to Wonderland, where she couldn't believe the Queen's age because of her limited understanding of where she was? Or does it take us to a hermeneutical understanding, after thousands of years of prophesy and comprehensive analysis with the use of our "analogical-imagination" to secure the probability that the promises of Christ are attainable in good faith, or I should say faith in the Good? That is to say nothing of the truth of Jesus' ability to override the forces of nature attested to by eye witnesses. "Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God is governed by the Jewish understanding of God. God is the unconditional will for the good. Jesus spreads the certainty that this will is soon going to establish itself in the world." (*The Historical Jesus, Theissen and Merz, Fortress Press, 1998, p 275*).

If we could agree that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for" and "Theology is faith seeking understanding," I think it is fair to say that that no scholarly work can ever take us to the degree of certainty that would satisfy any serious empiricist. As Hobbs put it: "A science is certain when a man can demonstrate the truth of it to others". We can fully understand the truth of some things, but to understand the Whole Truth of all things is

well beyond human capacity. Jesus did clearly demonstrate what he thought faith was in many of the gospel stories, but the one that stirs me every time I read it is from Matthew 8:5, because Jesus “marveled” at a “barbarian”, a gentile, an officer of an occupying force who had compassion for his servant and humility before the supernatural power of the Good – in person.

And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented." Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. "For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. "I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed that very moment.

When Blaise Pascal said, “The heart has reasons which reason does not know”, he took a step through the mirror into the beyond. He went to the place inside of himself where the Spirit of the Good is at work, where the power of Love flows from a human being. This is the mysterious place which really cannot be described in scientific terms, except to say that it may be considered the emotional and intellectual core of a person.

Perhaps this is the place where faith and reason meet. And where self righteousness can be called reasonable and snuff out faith. Since ancient times the heart has been used as a metaphor for the emotions. “Grace”, as a gift of God, is said to settle in one’s heart with descriptions such as Understanding, Knowledge, Wisdom, Piety, Fortitude, Counsel, and a healthy Fear of the Lord. These gifts of the Spirit are reasonable assumptions and primary sources for confirming Faith, that’s why we can’t separate faith from reason. The remark, “Have a heart” suggests a melting of personal hardness, rigidity, and a leaning toward reasonableness and empathy, sympathy and caring; all signs of what is good. Still, wisdom teaches justice; and what is good is what is just, and from what is just – mercy flows abundantly; all within the freedom of reason encompassed by the will of God. The creature innately recognizes that God, who is goodness itself, is also Love itself. When John the Evangelist says: “God is Love”, and “whoever does not love does not know God”, he means, perhaps, that those are they who desire to turn love on it’s head, and in doing so are also aware of turning known Goodness on it’s head.

The closing paragraphs of Benedict XVI homily on the Epiphany, Jan. 6, 2010 is well worth repeating here:

...What is the reason why some men see and find, while others do not? What opens the eyes and the heart? What is lacking in those who remain indifferent, in those who point out the road but do not move? We can answer: too much self-assurance, the claim to knowing reality, the presumption of having formulated a definitive judgment on everything closes them and makes their hearts insensitive to the newness of God. They are certain of the idea that they have formed of the world and no longer let themselves be involved in the intimacy of an adventure with a God who wants to meet them. They place their confidence in

themselves rather than in him, and they do not think it possible that God could be so great as to make himself small so as to come really close to us.

Lastly, what they lack is authentic humility, which is able to submit to what is greater, but also authentic courage, which leads to belief in what is truly great even if it is manifested in a helpless Baby. They lack the evangelical capacity to be children at heart, to feel wonder, and to emerge from themselves in order to follow the path indicated by the star, the path of God. God has the power to open our eyes and to save us. Let us therefore ask him to give us a heart that is wise and innocent, that allows us to see the Star of his mercy, to proceed along his way, in order to find him and be flooded with the great light and true joy that he brought to this world.

Today, many say “I am not convinced that Jesus Christ is God”. For them it would be totally unnatural, since what is natural is all there is. Yet many “unnatural” acts are considered perfectly natural by the same people. Natural has become what is acceptable in human society, and not necessarily what nature offers us. We are justified in trying to control nature for the good of mankind, but are often reluctant to exercise a degree of control over ourselves, nature's greatest gift by our own standards. But we, who have neither caused Nature nor Man as a part of nature, often fail to have faith in an intelligent supernatural act of creation beyond nature. As a result we hypothesize on more and more dimensions of time and space, this could be called our creative self righteousness. The Centurion, on the other hand, probably having heard about or seen the powers that were available to Jesus, never thought for a moment about questioning Jesus' willingness to use those powers to cure his servant. His only thoughts were compassion for the servant and his own humility in the face of such power.

Because of his faith, or assurance, he got what he hoped for. His faith preceded his reasoning and his understanding. It worked out well for the Centurion. For us, Jesus left a different lesson: *“Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

There is absolutely no doubt in modern scholarship that Jesus was anything other than a miracle worker, and an earth shaking force for goodness, surely proven to one gentile in this case, and probably those to whom Jesus expressed astonishment. The miracle stories tend to strengthen our assurances of Jesus’ power over the natural world in the three or so years of his teaching, but it was only with his death and resurrection that we got a complete picture of the Father’s commitment to us in him. Only since then are we able to see ourselves in him and understand what he meant when he said that we too can be perfected. It is through Jesus, the Christ, that humanity is renewed and re-born and led to perfection by the Spirit to the one true God – in a “kingdom”, “not of this world”. Only with the incarnation, had this “kingdom” come among us, and the will of God truly known by those of good will through grace.

This then, is the channel of justification, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” and through our baptism into his body. This was “when the fullness of the time came”; little to do with a chronology of events, but a time chosen by God when the Good news could be more easily spread throughout the world. St. Paul in Galatians three states it clearly:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."

Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"-- in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul continues in verse twenty eight:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Our justification comes only through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Only in him are we "righteous"

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.