

Faith, Reason, and Adventist Education

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church from its inception in the mid 1800s has been mindful and unapologetic about three facets of its mission and destiny: (1) Its self-definition as a body of believers committed to the Bible as its foundational authority for belief, doctrine and lifestyle; (2) Its vision and mission in terms of a global witness to build a church without borders in order to prepare a people who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus”(Rev. 12:17) and await earnestly for the soon coming of Christ; and (3) Its structure and ministry to address its diverse needs that include world-wide growth, reaching the unreached, stewardship and spiritual advancement, and faith nurture and development.

The third facet, particularly the one concerning faith nurture, is fundamental to our discussion in this paper. From its early days, the church recognized that if it has to survive as an eschatological body of believers, it must take the task of faith nurture seriously. While the church realized that such a nurture takes place in various ways within its ecclesiastic functions, it could not afford to overlook or hand over to other agencies the significant task of educating its youth. Indeed Ellen White, as one of the founders and builders of the church, saw under what the church believes as God’s inspiration that the work of redemption from sin and education toward excellence is the same. While the former is theological in nature and involves the church as a missiological, worshipping, and evangelizing community, the latter assumes that the church’s young people do not live in a spiritual vacuum. They must be trained to face the world and its challenges. This commitment to training the youth, so that they can be in the world but not of the world, is at the basis of the church’s philosophy of education. Ellen White defined that philosophy in these timeless words: True education “is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”¹

While the need for physical development poses no significant challenge in the world of education, the inclusion of the spiritual development along with the mental in what constitutes true education is a strongly contested issue since the dawn of the modern age. Until about the end of the Middle Ages, culminating in the Reformation era, no great question was raised on the role of faith in education. Those were the days when theology reigned as the queen of studies. But with the beginning of the age of reason and science, theology had to yield its primary role to other studies, particularly science. The trend kept moving faster and faster so that the issue of faith and reason, faith and science, became increasingly contentious and often, in the heat of the debate, the harmony of faith and the coolness of reason were well nigh lost. While faith cries, in the words of Tertullian, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?,” science simply dismisses faith as the occupation of the meandering wanderers in the desert of an irrelevant utopia.

This paper will consider three areas that are pertinent to the issue under discussion: myths regarding faith and reason; the role of reason and faith in the Christian life; a pursuit of balance in Christian education.

Myths regarding faith and reason

Both faith and reason have their own suspicions about each other, and around these suspicions have developed several myths.²

Myth 1. Faith and reason are incompatible. Even a simple observation will show the meaninglessness of such a statement. The fact is that both faith and reason are God's gifts to humans, and hence they cannot be incompatible, per se. Even theologians would admit that the power to think and to create is part of God's image in which He chose to create human beings. Take away the rational capacity of the humans or posit it as opposed to faith, you immediately undermine a significant distinction between humans and other earthly creatures, and raise questions as to reason being part of the image of God. That image is not altogether lost, but latent in humans,³ and it is the sacred responsibility of Christian education "to restore in man the image of his Maker, ... [and] to promote the development of body, mind, and soul."⁴

Such restoration is a two-fold task. The first one is that of faith by which we are to grasp and believe in the existence of God and His manifest revelation, culminating in the saving work of Christ. The second one is that of reason; that is to say, our faith is not blind, but informed, capable of standing up to the rigorous pressures of a world that may deny any role to faith. Christian education, while rooted in the revelation and in the earnestness of knowing God, also has the biblical mandate to develop the mind to its full. Growth in knowledge is part of the sanctification process (2 Pet. 1:5-7), and that a Christian is called to possess a transformed and active mind (Rom. 12:1-3). Indeed the God of the Bible is neither unreasonable nor irrational. His bid to every human being is to "come and reason" (Isa. 1:8).

While some in either camp will jump to conclusions that will deny the need for the other in the process of education, informed faith and "reasonable" reason will not choose such an option. Both need and use the other to begin and fine-tune their functions. Can a pastor preach about faith without utilizing the tools available to him from the Scriptures and at the same time use the tools of logic and reasoning? Or can a scientist rely only and exclusively on verifiable data without some hypothesis that calls for a certain amount of faith that a data exists and exists in a particular way. Even an axiom, basic to geometry and mathematics, requires acceptance without a provable basis. The unprovable nature of an axiom does not make its claim untrue. If that is acceptable in the world where reason is the reigning monarch, why not the same be extended to assertions of faith in areas where the heart provides meaning for the entire being?

Myth 2: Rational growth undermines Christian faith. Far from it. While we do not say that every Christian must know the ins and outs of philosophy and science, we must note that a well-informed Christian can be a better witness to the faith that underscores Christian claims. The Bible recognizes uneducated fishermen as well as intellectual giants like Paul and Moses who could employ reason, logic, poetry, drama and law to convey to their time and to generations to come the imperatives of faith as well as the compulsions of life. Who could question the faith of Daniel or attack the well reasoned discourses of Paul? To be

sanctified does not mean to be stupid. “Dullness and ignorance are no virtue,”⁵ as Ellen White states, and “knowledge will not necessarily dwarf Christian growth.”⁶

While faith is willing to recognize the importance of reason, often reason does not return the complement. This is one danger that faces believing Christians who study in secular universities where they are constantly bombarded that faith is naïve and has no place in the world of the intellect. The danger needs to be faced not by attacking the role of reason in education, even Christian education, but with thorough preparation and commitment to one’s faith, even though some of that faith may be seeing through a glass somewhat darkly, and one’s need and readiness to live within the world of reason and science. Christian education does not deny or attack reason and science but point out their limitations by using the very tools reason employs.

As far the believer is concerned, it is well to remember: “Ignorance will not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently. The great object of education is to enable us to use the powers which God has given us in such a manner as will best represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God.”⁷

Myth 3. Since faith and reason are incompatible, we must separate them. Such a dichotomy is impermissible in Christian education. The fundamental philosophy of Adventist education is the harmonious development—not the disharmony of division—of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. While the mind has its wings to soar to the heights of knowledge, the heart has its depths to ponder and wonder at both the miracle and the mystery of the world of faith. The Christian cannot subscribe to a dichotomy where the sacred and the secular, the faith and the reason, exist in separate and un-unitable realms. The song “You ask me how He lives, He lives within my heart” is only partly correct theology. What completes the truth of the poet is the affirmation that the God who lives in my heart is also the captain of my thoughts and the transformer of my dreams to a realistic platform of achievement, for “I know He lives.” Faith is not bereft of certainty. Nor can reason claim absolute certainty.

To Christians the issue must not be confusing. While we make a distinction between the sacred and the secular and live that distinction, we must make sure that we do not despise or reject the latter because of the former. While the life of faith is crucial to us, it does not call us to reject the life of reason, but rather embrace it so that our faith is not the cry of the blind but the trumpet of the informed. God is a God of both the pulpit and the laboratory, and a Christian must not be apologetic of the former or be enamored by the latter. Thus a Christian has the integrated privilege of both affirming with Paul that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16) and joining with Einstein in the quest of probing the unknown in nature. Both have mysteries, and mystery is an invitation to study, not denial.

Having said that we must not forget the hidden danger of the rational and the secular. The danger is that they will want to crush the claims of faith or promote a dichotomy where the rational and the secular control the educational process and restrict faith claims to the arena of the personal, limited to the Sabbath and to the private moments of meditation. Such a dichotomy acts as though God does not exist, and if He does at all, He is to be chain bound to the limited world of one’s own dreams and fantasies outside the classroom. Such a view, while denying God as we know Him, in fact either forms its own god (e.g., Marxism) or

elevates self to a status of God. In either case, human sufficiency (as C. S. Lewis argued) abolishes both God and the human.

That picture is totally unacceptable to Christian education. The call of Adventist education is neither for a permanent and hostile dichotomy between faith and reason nor for silence in the face of secularization of the sacred, but for faith and the sacred to mediate God's grace to the secular and the rational. We live in the world but we are not of it. The world is both our home and our mission. Christian education must take up the intellectual tools and bear a credible witness to its faith basis. The Christian must never forget his/her intellectual and faith residence is anchored to the Bible, and out of that springs forth his/her relationship to the world.

Myth 4. Reason cannot weaken or shake a strong faith. The Christian needs to be careful that he or she does not succumb to the dangers of the subtleties of this myth. While it is true that our faith must have roots unshakable by either friend or foe, the enemy of faith is capable of subtle use of reason and logic, philosophy and science, to undermine, often subtly and slowly, the very foundations of our faith life. Rational knowledge can detract us from Christian life and priority, if it is thought of an end in itself, rather than a means to be critically and carefully applied to an end. Knowledge, even the logic and beauty of theology, at the neglect of Christian communion (with both God and human) and commitment, can eventually turn into a god whose worship draws its respect and dignity from the world. Knowledge, obtained or practiced apart from the purposes of God, can lead to the arrogance of intellectualism or to the indifference of religious ceremonialism.

Ellen White's counsel to the Christian educator and learner is appropriate: "True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements; but above information it values power; above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principle."⁸

Faith, reason and Christian life

While Christian students must be aware of the myths that surround faith and reason, they must also be prepared to face the role faith and reason play in at least two areas of life: a life to live and a life to live responsibly.

A life to live. What defines one's life has much to do with how that life is lived. For example, a life that is defined by the reason and logic of Plato will not be the same as the life that is contoured by the claims of Micah or John. At times the philology or claims may appear the same, but the foundation and the fruits will be different. The logos of philosophy is not the same as the logos of John, and certainly the fruits of an educational system based on such divergent points of departure will not be the same.

With this as a given, what is the option before Christian education? To dwell exclusively on the logos of the Greeks, such as most educational systems do? Take that option, you have a rational product—with skills in reasoning, with aims that are humanistically laudable, with a life perhaps fit enough for this earth. But Christian education takes the logos of John (1:1-3) as its point of departure. What is the result? It discovers that its first and foremost objective must be to know God and His revelation through Jesus Christ. To say this is to choose an absolutely different definition for life: we are not a cosmic

accident—rational or otherwise—in this world, but we are created by the eternal logos, who is God. “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Such an affirmation does not mean that we reject the need to know the logos of Plato but to insist the need to know the logos of John. Thus Christian education has a dual advantage. First, it knows Plato and brings him under the critique of what it considers as divine revelation—an advantage that secular education does not have; it is restricted only to Plato. Second, it recognizes that we as Christians do not live in a vacuum. No one does. We live in the world, therefore are obliged to know the world. More than that, we are obliged to communicate, relate, and mediate to the world of reason the priorities and the essentials of the world of faith.

Such a task makes an extraordinary demand on Christian education. While it prepares student to understand their unique world of faith, it also challenges them to live that faith in the world of reason. Thus while there is nothing Christian about mathematics, for example, a Christian mathematician should live as the best person in the community—that is to say, even as they practice mathematics, they would not fail to practice their Christianity—its grace, its compassion, its hope. Christian knowing and Christian living are not separate from each other; the latter must inform the former and create a unity of faith and reason within the citadel of God’s eschaton. That is the task of integration of faith and learning.

A life of responsibility. Education in the secular world, dominated by reason with no room for faith, places four major responsibilities on the Christian. First, there is *judgment*. In the study of any field, the Christian must ask the question whether such a study is in harmony with the Christian worldview. In passing such a judgment, we are not asserting intellectual superiority, but place a reservation on what is studied and bring to bear upon such studies the critique of our faith commitment. Such a view is not unreasonable, but only affirming the framework of our thinking. Truth, springing from faith or reason, can afford such a scrutiny.

Second, there is *acceptance*. “All truth is God’s truth.”⁹ Gaebelein’s famous dictum should keep Christian students humble and teachable. Christian education rests on the foundation that God is the Creator of all things and that He is the source of all truth. Wherever truth is found, the Christian mind should grasp it, and develop it for His glory. There is no such thing as secular truth and sacred truth. “The world has had its great teachers, men of giant intellect and extensive research, men whose utterances have stimulated thought and opened to view vast fields of knowledge; and these men have been honored as guides and benefactors of their race; but there is One who stands higher than they. We can trace the line of the world’s teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them. As the moon and the stars of our solar system shine by the reflected light of the sun, so, as far as their teaching is true, do the world’s great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gleam of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world.”¹⁰

Third, there is *firmness*. While Christian educators must be concerned with knowledge as it comes from diverse sources, they cannot compromise their faith/value system when the world confronts them with one that is contradictory. The lostness of the human such as the Bible describes must ever be kept as a limitation of the human system of knowing, while the image of God latent in the human should leave the door ajar awaiting future discovery or clarification.

Fourth, there is *witness*. Adventist education must recognize that it has the necessity of being true to its faith calling while at the same time it must interact with the world of

reason. It sees that the two are not competitive, but at the same time it is aware that it lives within the possibility of being overwhelmed by the latter to the loss of the former. This predicament must make Adventist educators recognize their responsibility and privilege of witness. This privilege consists of mediating what it knows as the divine pattern of truth to others who do not recognize the validity of its faith claims. This, perhaps, is the greatest challenge to Christian intellectual growth. Such witness will be marked not by the arrogance of the medieval church or the intellectual isolationism of today's extreme fundamentalism, but by a spirit of dialogue and exploration such as modeled by Paul on Mars Hill—moving from the known to the unknown, journeying from grace that meets the deepest needs of the heart to knowledge that challenges the loftiest of human intelligence.

The call to balance

In the issue of faith and reason, what is the Adventist choice? The option to choose the easiest way out—abandon or minimize the one and embrace the other—is not available to Adventist educators. What, then, must we do?

First, never lose sight of the concept of wholistic education. The definition of such a philosophy of education, as derived from the writings of Ellen White, did not come to us by an accident. It is a result of inspiration, and God expects us to be faithful to every demand such a definition makes upon our teaching ministry. In God's plan the intellectual is just only one of the dimensions of life. The spiritual, the physical, the social, the relational dimensions of life are very much an integrated part of education, and to that task an Adventist educator must seriously be committed, without of course neglecting the need to remain intellectually honest and skillful. Our view of Christian education demands of us "not apology but bold presentation. As Christian teachers, our task is not only to outlive and outserve those who do not stand for God's truth; it is also by God's grace to outthink them."¹¹

Second, remember Christian education is theo-centric. The philosophic basis of Christian education must ever be structured around the centrality of God who has created humans, bestowed them with power to think, do, and relate, revealed to them the truth, and has redeemed them from the predicament they are in, and is at work in history, as it moves toward its ultimate fulfillment in the restoration of all things to their original perfection. The primary responsibility of the Christian teacher is not intellectual advancement per se, but an intellectual growth that will grasp the meaning of history, existence and destiny within the context of God. A teacher whose life is not a testimony to God cannot be a Christian teacher, whatever his or her claims may be. "In the beginning, God..." (Gen. 1:1). So in creation. So in education.

Third, practice the truth that Christian education is redemptive. At the end of the day, a Christian teacher must be able to return home with the satisfaction that he or she has done his teaching as well as one could possibly do. The measure of excellence in that teaching is not how well the teacher has fulfilled the curriculum or how well the student has grasped the contents of what was taught—these are important—but whether the student found a fresh glimpse of the alpha and omega of all knowledge—God. The world of reason can exist without such agenda, but the world of faith cannot. An abiding interest in the soul and the struggle it faces with sin, with emotional turmoil, with moral challenges, and with spiritual and social tensions provides a golden opportunity whereby a teacher can reach out and touch that soul even as he or she touches the mind. A mind without the benefit of the

heart is on the way to meaninglessness; a heart without mind lives without a constructive agenda to face the real world. Hence redemption provides an arena where the heart can be saved and the mind can be transformed, and the whole person becomes an integrated one. If such a redemption is not the first priority of Adventist education, then why have an Adventist school system?

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¹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1952), p. 13.

² Parts of this section were published by the author in an article, "Philosophy and Christian Education," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, December-January 2007, pp.4-9.

³ -----, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), p. 194.

⁴ -----, *Education*, 15.

⁵ -----, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Pub. Assn., 1923), p. 316.

⁶ -----, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 3:223.

⁷ -----, *Fundamentals*, p. 45.

⁸ -----, *Education*, p. 225.

⁹ Frank E. Gaebelein, *The Pattern of God's Truth* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1985), p. 28.

¹⁰ White, *Education*, pp. 13, 14.

¹¹ Gaebelein, p. 107.