

■ Homo Religiosus's Ascension, ■ or, a Brief History of the Depreciation of Reason

*The Lord knows the thoughts of Man,
That they are futile.*
Psalm 94:11

Homo religiosus, a religious man, first came into being and became established as a feature of Judaism, but it was only later, within Christianity and Islam, that it assumed its full power and might.

At first glance, the idea of the One God appears altogether positive, progressive, and useful. In place of the perpetually squabbling pantheon of amoral deities, the believer was offered God-as-an-Idea, personified as an exclusive abstract order and a unity of all being. It also offered exclusively absolutist morality and law, capable of uniting humanity in the name of common earthly values and a bright future beyond the grave.

However, when you dig a bit deeper, it appears a lot less attractive. It is, unfortunately, a fact that the vast majority of progressive, positive, and useful human endeavours have a tendency to come to a bad end – the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Against all expectations, the noble and exalted idea of the One God resulted not in the blooming of reason but in its general impoverishment. There was one entirely obvious reason for this; once the metaphysical origins of Revelation are accepted, the belief in the One God and the belief in reason become incompatible.

To understand this better, let's look at the relationship between faith and reason in the age of monotheism. In the 'Reason in the Ancient World' section earlier in this chapter I asked myself: 'How did reason in the Ancient World achieve its superstar status?' Now I pose another question: 'How did it happen that reason lost its superstar status in the age of monotheism?' Because not only did it lose this status, it did so only thanks to itself.

The path travelled by Greek philosophy led from irrational, mythologised thinking to an entirely rational thought process. Monotheism made the same journey in reverse, finding itself back at the irrational mythological starting point. Ancient philosophy is now supplanted by the grim and universal Written Law. All world events are now explained by the irrational will of God, and this becomes monotheism's main distinguishing feature compared to ancient mythological thought where decisions were made in accordance with human nature and individual desires.

Since the tenets of the faith are above reason, the laws of rational thinking are not applicable to faith. Thus, the irrational is placed higher than the rational and religious spirituality higher than secular materialism. As faith is higher than reason, it refuses, in principle, to attempt to prove its main propositions, and instead bases its claims on the authority of tradition and miracles. The Ancients' well-developed rational mind struggled in the company of Revelation, tradition, and miracle. After sojourning for many centuries alongside the exacting and demanding Logos, it was then being asked to embrace the notion of metaphysical events which contradicted the all familiar logic-based order. As

a result, reason became gravely ill and quickly lost its strength. No cure was attempted; monotheism, which succeeded Antiquity, didn't attach much value to human reason, having no real use for it. Reason's increasing weakness was also due to the fact that monotheistic religions are inclined to favour ascetic practices; reasonable thought is impossible without a healthy body and the harmonious co-existence of body and soul found in Antiquity. By tormenting the body, we also torment the mind. The obvious success enjoyed by reason in the Ancient World could be explained by the complete freedom it also enjoyed in selecting its areas for research. The advent of faith in One God and in Revelation sounded the death knell for the freedom of thought. The stronger the religion, the less willing it is to allow individual thought. Faith itself exists within well-defined boundaries: God is the one and only centre of all and the source of all power. There is only one unalterable sacred text and only one worldview. Man has ceased to be the law-maker and the source of reason in the world; henceforth God is the only centre of the world, the universal source of all reason and the acknowledged authority for everything. This makes religion's endeavours to undermine the Ancients' tradition of independence of thought logical from religion's point of view.

The weakening of reason in these conditions is par for the course; an acceptance of premises formed by the workings of one mind invariably undermines one's own.

Unfortunately, it hasn't been possible to destroy reason completely, so the only solution was to limit the areas where it could be used. Reason became corralled off within certain boundaries and as a result it lost its zest for life. The service of God, with its purpose of attaining a more exalted spiritual state, became reason's only worthwhile purpose of existence. Thus, the summit of intellectual development was seen to be possible only through the most exhaustive study and the most profound understanding and detailed interpretation of the Revealed Truth.

In the Ancient World, reason used the consequent knowledge to improve everyone's quality of life and create a system of values. Reason was naturally attuned to the real world; it was inclined towards independent critical analysis. It demanded objective proof for everything and was ontologically opposed to mystical experiences, murky traditions and miracles. Unlike reason, religion is guided not by the world as it really is, but by the blind faith in truths dictated by the Sacred Scripture. This kind of faith is most easily embraced by the grey, nameless masses enticed by promises of personal immortality and scared of punishments for sin. From a religious point of view, Man is unable to understand the material world, let alone comprehend God's purpose with the aid of reason alone; all our logical conclusions about the world depend entirely upon the will of God. The tremendous success enjoyed by reason in the Ancient World is explained by the fact that it was based on individual consciousness and for that reason possessed absolute tolerance of all metaphysical constructs and religious beliefs, and was simply an alternative point of view.

Monotheism swiftly put an end to tolerance; the Holy Book contains absolutely everything one needs – it describes the past, lays down the rules of life for the present, and predicts the future. Within the constraints of a religious worldview, theology replaces

philosophy as the most respected discipline of the Ancient World. All other disciplines suffered a complete collapse.

Theology's chosen subject is the study of the belief in God. By its very nature, theology is as authoritarian as its object of study; it denies reason any autonomous purpose on the basis that reason is also the product of God's creation. It is fundamentally inclined to irrational and subjective thinking based on the miraculous and the absurd.

Theologians claimed that once Man has been shown absolute and universal divine truth through Revelation, commandments, and dogma, he has no need to waste time on further enquiries into philosophy and science. All truths have been discovered already and further searches simply detract Man from God. divine truth must be accepted without any discussion or investigation. If I had been a theologian, I would have adopted an even firmer stance against reason. All that reason stands for is diametrically opposed to religion's purpose, which makes all attacks on reason justified from religion's point of view. Reason is a significant threat to religion. As in the struggle over Man's influence, it is religion's main rival. Let's not forget about culture either. The existence of the one dominant book has rendered all other books superfluous. Who needs them? You can't argue with dogma; it guides the direction of Man's worthless and weak mind and forms his conclusions. All statements found in religious literature must be accepted by faith, and we must disregard any internal logical contradictions, obvious inconsistencies, and even copying errors.

A true believer should be perfectly content without empty secular education and unnecessary information about the world around him. At best, it's superfluous. At worst, dangerous and undesirable. An absence of education was frequently a source of pride, and for many centuries all that remained of great ancient philosophy was scholasticism. It's still the case today. Professional believers waste all their time in studying the divine Law for the whole of their lives. They have no interest in acquiring purely human, secular knowledge and do everything they can to avoid discussing matters which their faith doesn't recognise. A 'wrong' question causes them torment and makes them lose their cool, which is why their answers never address the matter in hand but rather skirt around the issue, postulating hackneyed doctrines, and quoting their proponents.

Through developments within culture, Antiquity was facilitated by the passionate but peaceful struggle of ideas, seeking out new concepts in the understanding of the world and the principles behind human existence. A critical attitude to old ideas was very much welcomed in the world of knowledge.

The acceptance of the eternally fossilised Written Law changed this situation once and for all. Deprived of competition or criticism, reason lost all impetus for development. Henceforth, criticism was not just unwelcome, but strictly proscribed. All people capable of critical thinking were also 'proscribed'; understandable as these were the kind of people who had particular difficulties with placing their whole faith into the Revealed 'truths'.

This was especially true when it came to questioning Revelation's principal propositions, the kind of heresies deemed highly dangerous for the stability of the ruling religion. Asking questions such as 'What if He doesn't exist?' was considered equal to treason and

punishable with the whole strength of the law, usually resulting in death. The Fathers of the Church understood very well the personal dangers inherent in any impartial doctrinal criticism: Revelation could not withstand any rational analysis as it simply would fall apart. The unknowable mystery of the doctrine had to be guarded and remain inaccessible for the purposes of verification.

There didn't appear to be many volunteers willing to take this risk and the unwillingness to assume personal responsibility for one's opinions slowly destroyed the ancient tradition of individual authorship. Names, personalities, and individual standpoints moved to the background – any author merely became the mouthpiece of the divine truth, no more than that.

The ancient thinkers prioritised reason over ethics and were convinced that, aided by reason, Man is capable of creating his own morality. After all, everything – morality included – needs a rational basis.

Through the mouths of its theologians, monotheism declared the human mind to be secondary; because of its innate inability to discern moral good independently, reason alone can't make the right moral choice. The source of true morality is to be found outside of Man and can only be realised with the help of religious faith.

Should people, by some miracle, begin to have an ardent faith in the One God again, mankind would be immediately freed from the injustice of social inequality, offences against human beings, and wars. Once again, I must return to the fate of all good ideas. The idea that religious people are somehow endowed with a higher moral sense is not supported by facts – indeed, quite the opposite. This would be the logical conclusion of any dispassionate observer; paganism, the period immediately preceding monotheism, didn't place faith at the top end of the scale of human values and this is precisely the reason why religious wars were unknown in paganism. With the advent of monotheism, faith became everyone's main occupation in life and, as a result, religious conflicts cut short the lives of tens of millions of people who perished in defense of the most nebulous ideas, completely removed from their daily lives.

Ancient philosophy supposed that the outside world could be comprehended by reason alone and it was this knowledge that was the key to Man's happiness.

From a monotheistic point of view, reason is unable to bring happiness, as it's unable to rise above its earthly existence, which is by definition nothing but a vale of tears, suffering, and a temporary place of preparation for the eternal life. It is only through faith that he is given the opportunity to know God, to approach Him, 'to see His face', and to gain hope. In this way, happiness flees life on earth for life after death.

The principles of abstract thought were first formed in ancient philosophy and science, and we continue to use these principles to this day.

Monotheism claimed that that the origins of abstract thinking lay with itself and not with Antiquity. Abstract concepts, devoid of any factual basis, were used directly in relation to objects from the material world, calling into question all previous ideas about Man's existence and purpose. In relation to this, Nietzsche said that religious faith presumes the

existence of hypostatic objects – that is, objects which do not belong to the material world and exist outside of time and space, such as God, angels, and devils. It also presumes an ‘ability to communicate with these objects, accepting the existence of mythological events as a reality symbolised by religious action and the supernatural power of authorised persons (ministers of the cult, teachers, saints, prophets etc.).’

It is not the findings of enquiring reason that theology advances as its main argument to prove the veracity of Revelation, but rather an appeal to the past. No amount of progress or the latest scientific discoveries can be equal in value to the ‘eternal truths’ of the past. The truth of Revelation is not just based on God’s word but is also sustained by tradition and authority. The source of both these concepts is in the past, which is also their exclusive point of reference. The ideas and opinions of contemporary believers, however well-educated and authoritative, are considerably less valuable than the opinions of authoritative believers from the past, despite being uneducated and living many millennia ago. In other words, a thing is believed to be true only because our ancestors said so. It is clear even to children that this approach does not make any sense. Freud spoke admirably about it in *The Future of Illusion*:

Religious ideas are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one’s belief. Since they give us information about what is most important and interesting to us in life, they are particularly highly prized [...] When we ask on what their claim to be believed is founded, we are met with three answers, which harmonize remarkably badly with one another. Firstly, these teachings deserve to be believed because they were already believed by our primal ancestors; secondly, we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from those same primeval times; and thirdly, it is forbidden to raise the question of their authentication at all. In former days, anything so presumptuous was visited with the severest penalties, and even today society looks askance at any attempt to raise the question again.

In general, religion considers the past much more valuable than both the present and the future. It’s hardly coincidental that the most important religious miracles took place way back in the past. The further removed a given miracle is, the more readily one is meant to believe in it. It’s fair to say, however, that miracles are rather rare nowadays – God’s probably very disappointed and doesn’t love us any more.

It’s not surprising that all views based on the same unchanging premise are as similar to each other as identical twins. The original authors of sacred texts were the only ones displaying any degree of individuality of expression; all their successors were allowed to do was to repeat.

As a result, religious science closed in on itself; a commentary on the Book became the beginning, middle, and end of all its investigations. These were invariably followed by ‘commentaries on the commentaries’ (the Talmud being an excellent example of this) and so on ad infinitum, thus blocking the way to any new knowledge. A crowd of religious experts flapped around Revelation, like moths around a flame; their expert opinions served to strengthen tradition and attained a sacred status themselves. (Of course, civilisation’s progress was consequently slower, but it couldn’t stop entirely and sooner or later new



Duccio di Buoninsegna, Jesus Opens the Eyes of a Man Born Blind, 1308-1311.

ideas forced their way through. This, however, only happened because their proponents didn't believe as fervently as they ought to have done.) I don't want to lay the blame for the unfortunate fate suffered by reason in the Ancient World entirely at monotheism's door. It'd be as unreasonable as blaming a lion for being hungry and devouring an antelope. What happened to reason was inevitable – no 'monofaith' is compatible with reason. Faith is a cage for reason. Confined to this cage, reason ceased functioning as reason and was quickly transformed into a simple interpreter of Holy Scripture. Reason became weak and atrophied, much like muscles which have wasted away without physical activity. Your arms grow spindly, your six-pack gets covered up with a layer of fat, and your glutes become soft and flabby. Anyone looking in the mirror would spot this

deterioration of his body straightaway, yet the mirror unfortunately can't show him his mind's sad deterioration.

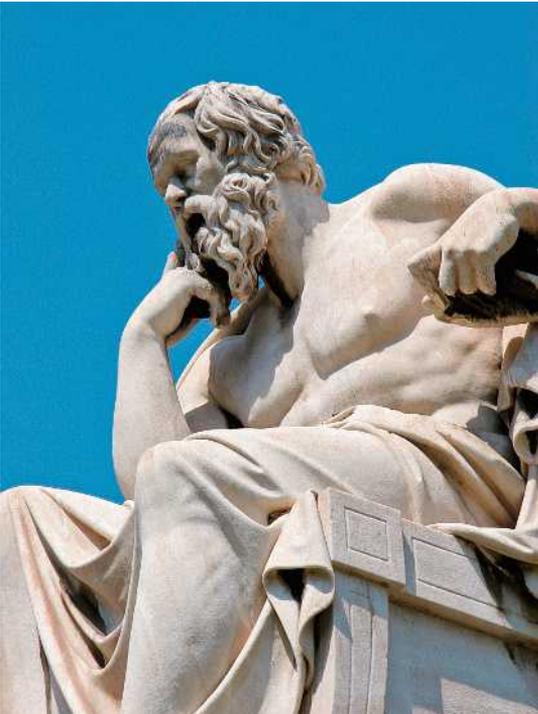
The time has come to draw some conclusions. We were taught both in school and university that in order to conduct an unbiased investigation, we must not only question everyone's position, but also play Devil's advocate against ourselves. I've decided to do just that.

Does an ordinary person even need reason? Does it make life easier? Developing and maintaining reason requires self-sacrifice and a great deal of work, commensurable with the effort required in the world of professional sport, high finance, or glittering artistic success.

Wouldn't it be easier and more logical to forego reasoning altogether and instead to live out your life steeped in religious faith in the hope of eternal life after death? Isn't this artless life worthwhile and even enviable?

No, you can't call this life worthwhile, still less enviable. On the contrary, it's unworthy.

In the first place, whatever anyone says about free will, for practical purposes any truly believing person is deprived of his right to make an autonomous and considered moral choice. In any case, his need for morality is in order to ensure a more successful religious life and to extract the advantages that follow it, namely a guaranteed place in heaven. If, by way of experiment, you could imagine this person suddenly learning that there is neither God nor heaven, you would see his whole earthly existence collapse forthwith. Deprived of the ability to make up his own moral code, the believer stops growing intellectually and his natural creative potential begins a slow but inextricable decline. So,



Socrates and Moses.

instead of a creative life in the company of other people as befits a free individual, the believer ends up with an almost vegetable existence. Is this really what we all dreamed of in our childhood?

Secondly, being a creature of God robs the believer of his freedom and a person that isn't free is not capable of creating values for himself or others. His contribution is confined to creating chimeras. This isn't because he is lacking in natural talent, but because adding anything to dogma is, by definition, impossible. The denigration of the culture of the mind and the inability to form one's own values lead to a catastrophic decline in quality of life. Instead, participating in a world of plurality of people and opinions, the believer has to content himself with living by himself with only the Book for company.

Thirdly, deprived of the ability to create his own moral code and value system, Man's multifaceted and three-dimensional nature, common to all human beings, becomes flat. *Homo religiosus* is a one-dimensional fellow; with dogma for a backdrop, nothing is allowed to stand out and shine.

So it's no wonder that he thinks of himself as a complete cypher rather than the master of the universe. There he stands – a single weedy stem in a field of religious similitude, a speck of dust, a lowly creature; a thin, fragile line on a single page of a colossal Book of Genesis.

■ Why do we Need Reason if we Have the Torah? ■

*Seek not out the things that are too hard for thee,
and into the things that are hidden from thee inquire thou not.*

*In what is permitted to thee instruct thyself;
thou must not discuss secret things.*

Jerusalem Talmud, Hagiga 2, 2; B'reshith Rabbah 8

Reason first came under attack under Judaism, the first monotheistic religion. The Revelation purported to come from God imprisoned reason within an intellectual cage and confined its activity to the 'permitted' areas only. God has plenty of reason to impose such limitations. He knows the thoughts of men, and that they have no value whatsoever: 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the counsel of the cunning is brought to a quick end.' (*Job 5: 13*)

Judaism spares no effort in criticising Greek philosophy, so influential amongst the young educated Jews of the Hellenistic period, and explains that a philosophy seeking to find answers in a material rather than a spiritual reality will always be unable to rise to the true understanding of His Being. Indeed, analysing the reality is a heinous crime itself.

None of this means that Judaism denies the value of human reason altogether.

But reason in Judaism is intended to comment upon and disclose the meaning of the Revelation. It is only a means of knowing about God and drawing closer to Him. Judaism emphasises that God is unknowable by reason alone and even forbids any attempt to prove His existence by this means.