BOOK REVIEW

FAITH, REASON, AND CULTURE
An Essay in Fundamental Theology

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Abstract: Faithful to the exhortation of Pope St. John Paul II in his Encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, George Karuvelil, in his latest book, *Faith, Reason, and Culture: An Essay in Fundamental Theology*, aims at furnishing a 'rationality of faith' – justification of religion in general and Christianity in particular – against the backdrop of the challenge of modernism and its offshoots such as pluralism, scientism, secularism, atheism as well as the current relativist postmodern culture. For this purpose, the author calls to his aid several contemporary philosophies/arguments, especially those that endorse existential reasons and produce a new solution to the above-mentioned contemporary challenges under the umbrella term, 'Fundamental Theology,' which he claims the twentieth-century successor to the traditional 'Natural Theology'. The book is a fresh contribution to the literature on religious epistemology.

The book, *Faith, Reason, and Culture: An Essay in Fundamental Theology* by George Karuvelil, systematically achieves its aim in three parts, spread over three chapters each, excluding the first chapter entitled "Reason: The Multi-Coloured Chameleon" (1-36), which serves as a

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general introduction to the book, stating the aim, rationality of faith, and the overall plan of the book. The first part of the book, "Science and Religion" (37-135), comprising the second, third and fourth chapters, presents a solution to the problem of religious pluralism and the age-old conflict between science and religion. To begin with, the second chapter, "Religious Diversity and Theology," argues that for pluralists such as John Hick and Paul Knitter, 'absolutism,'—the uniqueness/superiority claim—becomes a stumbling block for peaceful cohabitation and interreligious dialogue, and so it should be uprooted (47). Careful analyses suggest that absolutism is rooted in 'Ptolemaic Theology' that adamantly sets one's own religion at the centre. Consequently, uprooting it involves a 'Copernican revolution' in theology, which refers to the removal of one's religion from the centre (48) and considering it 'one among many' religions as well as venturing into a scientific study of all major religious traditions (49). However, this chapter, drawing inspiration from Soren Kierkegaard and Hans-Georg Gadamer, proves that Ptolemaic Theology should not be seen as a problem, because Ptolemaic character comes from existential nature, i.e. human beings can know objects only within an existential horizon, which propels them to firmly commit themselves to their viewpoint. Accordingly, all philosophical views, except modernism, are existential and Ptolemaic (64). Therefore, theology/religion is an existential act done on a lived horizon (66), and so it "will always be Ptolemaic" (68).

Taking up the next challenge—scientism—which holds that religion be studied using the method of science, namely 'falsification criterion' (78), the third chapter, "Science and Religion: Some Parables and Models," critically analyses four contrasting perspectives in vogue about science-religion relationship: (i) the conflict model that science and religion are at mortal fight; (ii) the holy science model that science is a religious pursuit; (iii) the autonomy model that science and religion are independent of each other; and (iv) the experiential model that science and religion are based on experience (84-85). Finding the first two models to be contrary to facts and ambiguous, this chapter squarely rejects them.

The fourth chapter, "Science and Religion: Autonomy and Conflict," rejects the third model, for it downplays the reality of the

conflict between science and religion (114). Nevertheless it upholds the experiential model as a rational account of science-religion relationship, because it argues that 'everyone lives by some kind of faith' (123), and so not only religion but also science functions from its own faith or existential horizon. From this perspective, science and religion are merley 'alternative faiths' (131), and not opposing faiths. Accordingly, the so-called conflict exists simply 'between the different faith-horizons' (134).

The second part, "Existential Reasons: Conviction, Communication, and Truth" (137-244), consisting of the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters and building on the finding of the first part, presents not only a 'perspective' to understand the deep-seated disagreements among 'faiths' (144-145), but also offers rational grounds to justify disputed claims of truth and natural beliefs. As a starter, the fifth chapter, "Communication, Culture, and Fundamental Theology," argues that communication is relational (153-154) in that both the communicator and the recipient are led to respect the presence of each other for the sake of successful communication, which enables them to enter into each other's horizon, either by confirming or correcting their initial understanding. Consequently, a 'common space'—an overlap of existential horizons—is created, reducing the tension between two horizons/faiths. Such a process is called the 'hermeneutical circle' (157-159) or 'communicative reason' (148). This understating, however, provides insights into understanding disagreements, but the question of justifying disputed claims of truth remains unanswered.

To answer that question, the sixth chapter, "Justification: Beyond Uniformitarianism," introduces Michael William's 'Wittgensteinian contextualism' (182), which holds that one's knowledge claim involves defence commitment, namely justification, and so one justifies one's knowledge claim by presenting evidence from the context—the external world (184-185). Contextualism, nonetheless, falls into relativism. So, this chapter brings in 'pluralistic realism', which states that just as different types of maps about one stretch of land are true and possible, so there are several ways of knowing and expressing the same world, whereby the truth of one in no way

undermines that of the other (192-194). Nonetheless, the question of obtaining evidence (for justification) remains unanswered. So, the chapter argues that we get evidence by using our natural ability to learn as well as following science's 'theory-guided observation'. Such evidence fulfils the three essential conditions of evidence (relevance, accessibility, and link to reality), which could comfortably put the discussion on disputed claims to rest (207-209).

Continuing the theme of justification, the seventh chapter, "Perception: Its Nature and Justification," tries to justify natural/perceptual beliefs and knowledge claims of sophisticated modern science. Taking inspiration from Wittgenstein, this chapter first follows the grammatical approach, i.e. it first forms the rules/grammar of perception based on the theories of perception (225). Next it calims that these grammatical rules of perception/ perceptual beliefs could help justify the truth claims of sophisticated modern sciences. So, it says that when the perceptual/natural beliefs are modified by natural environment as well as historical, cultural and personal factors, they become sophisticated modern disciplines (239-241).

Besides natural beliefs and sophisticated sciences, the contemporary culture is also replete with diverse religious claims of truth. So, the third part of the book, "Reasoning About Faith," (245-357), in the last four chapters, proceeds to justify them, employing the grammatical approach used for justifying the natural beliefs, because just as natural/perceptual beliefs are direct perceptual experiences, religious truths are the outcome of religious/mystical experience, which is the core of religion (257). Accordingly, the eighth chapter, "Mysticism," studying varied mystical experiences, boils down to three common characteristics of mystical experience: identity, accessibility (intelligibility) and adequacy (253), as well as three prominent types of mysticism: nature mysticism, unitive mysticism, and theistic mysticism (281).

Among the three types of mysticism, the ninth chapter, "Nature Mysticism and God," argues that the nature mysticism is not only common to all religions and cultures in the sense that it leads to the experience of the "wholly other" (294), but also fulfils all three characteristics of mysticism, which, in turn, leads to drawing up a

grammar of mystical experience—noetic, ineffability, simplicity, positivity and elicits living presence. Such grammar proves to be matching with the theistic understanding of God as well as justifies religious truth in general (297-304).

To justify the diversity of religious truth, the tenth chapter, "Religious Diversity, Christian Faith, and Truth," disputes that besides the locus of nature, mystical experience takes place in certain events of life and inter-personal relationships; they are called 'event-mysticism' and 'person-mysticism' respectively. They are collectively called 'natural mysticism'(317-318). Both prove to fit into the grammar of nature mysticism (321-322), i.e. since mystical experiences happen in diverse events and persons, diverse religious truths are possible; thus, religious diversity is justified (329). Based on person-mysticism, this chapter also justifies Christian faith by pointing out the disciples' mystical experience of a 'humane God' in the 'historical person' of Jesus (330-331). Next, it proves the divinity of Jesus through 'ineffability' and 'simplicity' of mystical experience (340-341). It also demonstrates how humanism experienced in Jesus is 'transcendent humanism,' which, in turn, justifies Christianity's affirmation of human dignity, universalism, and the sacramental character of marriage as well as shows the rationality of Salvation from a communitarian perspective (343-344). The last chapter, "Pulling Together," summarizes the book's main arguments and ends with a few hints for justifying other doctrines of Christianity.

Overall, the author, George Karuvelil, is to be appreciated for progressively building arguments not only in favour of religion but also in a language that intellectuals appreciate. Further, his justification of religion on impartial grounds, namely nature mysticism, becomes a major contribution to interreligious dialogue. On the contrary, the facts prove that ironically the loci of mystical experience—nature, events of life and persons—perpetrate the existential problem of evil as well, thus becoming the loci wherein one also feels the absence of the divine. Furthermore, not all scientists and agnostics experience the 'wholly other' (God) in nature, because they only see matter in nature. Such experience and evidence, the foundational arguments of the book, eventually lead the book to the pitfall of relativism, which it tried hard to overcome.