
FAITH AND REASON ACCORDING TO ANTONIO ROSMINI

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(Received 19 June 2012)

Abstract

In this article I sought to answer two questions: in fact, who was Antonio Rosmini, because the same Catholic Church condemned him in 1849 and blessed him in 2007? And, the second one, why do we need a harmony between faith and reason in our religious life?

After explaining, briefly, the unfriendly context within Antonio Rosmini worked as catholic priest, as philosopher and as theologian, I present the Rosminian philosophy pointing out the concept of ideal Being, some elements of his ontology and of his creationist metaphysics. This philosophy focused on the innate idea of Being, represents the basis of his sentences about the relations between faith and reason. But the main thesis of this article is that, according to A. Rosmini, faith presupposes reason. Starting from this point, we could understand why A. Rosmini was contrary to radical tendencies, such as rationalism, supernaturalism, fideism, or irrationalism. In conclusion, Antonio Rosmini could help the people to live in peace, even if they share different faiths, values and religious ideas. But with one important condition: if anyone acts always according to his/her reason!

Keywords: faith, reason, idea of Being, creationist metaphysics, *recta ratio*.

1. Introduction

An Italian philosopher and theologian, Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) deserves to be more widely known today. There are three things that prompt me to speak about him.

First, we are dealing with a brilliant Catholic thinker, a true prophet for the age he lived in, and as proof, I mention here that in 1849 he was placed upon the index, condemned for his daring ideas displayed in his book *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church* and not only that; yet, in 2007 Pope Benedict XVI raised him to the honour of the altar and declared him Saint (to be liturgically correct, Blessed). The misunderstandings, envies and hostility he drew upon himself throughout his earthly life continue, even to this day, to keep under the bushel his philosophical and theological works, though, somehow unwillingly, in virtue of a whole tradition of rejection.

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Antonio Rosmini was born and lived at a time when modernity was beginning to assert itself, an age marked by profound cultural and political changes. He fully took part in the social and religious revolutions of his time, both as a priest, as well as a philosopher and theologian, seeking to offer guiding lines to those who were trying to emerge out of confusion and reach the light of truth. He thus rejected the mixture between politics and religion within Church, more precisely Josephinism, Gallicanism and the exclusively social and political Christianity on the one hand, and on the other, he fought against the libertarian ideologies, especially the French liberal Catholicism of the XVIIIth century. As a consequence, he had several life-long opponents: the bishop of Trent and the priests subservient to the political and ecclesiastical power, the Austrian ambassador to the Holy See of that time, the cardinals in favour of maintaining the powerful influence of the Austrian emperor over the dioceses of Northern Italy and, above all, cardinal Antonelli, who regarded with disfavour Pope Pius IX's intention to appoint A. Rosmini state-secretary of the Holy See. But Rosmini had enemies even after his death, several Dominicans being first counted among them (Tommaso Zigliara, Alberto Lepidi), and Jesuits (Domenico and Serafino Sordi, Giuseppe Pecci, P. Perrone, P. Cornoldi, P. Matteo Liberatore and other collaborators of the 'Civiltà cattolica' journal) who, out of excessive zeal in applying the norms of Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* encyclical, accused A. Rosmini of worshipping human reasoning, of getting too close to the thinking of modernity, of distancing himself from the scholastic and medieval tradition or of slipping into ontologism, pantheism, idealism, subjectivism and so forth. The accusations lack however any foundation, since the similarities between the Rosminian thinking and the Thomistic one are many and quite extensive [1-3].

Of his remarkably vast and profound work of over one hundred titles, a number of just forty has been published so far. It will still take some time and determination to fully read and deepen them.

Secondly, I have chosen to speak about Antonio Rosmini because I discovered in him a rigorous method of thinking in which faith does not come into conflict with reason, but is harmonised with it. Indeed, for Rosmini to think means to think *Creation*. The Rosminian method presupposes "that non-vicious circularity wherein the totality of the multiple is found in the being that penetrates everywhere and enables that multiplicity to be significantly articulated in words and communicable or *predicable*". Born out of the character of the object it applies to, the method mirrors "in itself the intimate encounter and the common consummation of all beings and of all their operations in the Being from whom any being, whatever its nature may be, draws the actuality of its existence" [4].

Thirdly, I have chosen Antonio Rosmini because in his view on education he pleaded for the formation of the whole man: mind, body and soul. The integral character of education is, to a certain extent, linked to the integral character of knowledge, as Rosmini stated in his *Introduzione alla Filosofia*, next to his contemporary, John Henry Newman, in his famous work, *The Idea of*

University. In terms of education, there are at least four common points between Rosmini and Newman, namely antinaturalism, the tension towards the unity of knowledge, anticipating the role played by the lay, and the idea of historical and gradual growth. Both thinkers are anti-traditionalist, anti-liberal and anti-modernist. They are convinced that the lack of faith and devotion specific to modernity are the fruit of the progressive alienation from the fundamental sources of Christianity, namely the Holy Scripture, Tradition and the Holy Fathers. Due to the chaos of the political and ecclesiastical situation of his time, Rosmini refused, out of caution, to have a meeting with John Henry Newman, who intended to see him in Milan in October 1846 [3, p. 173].

The Rosminian principle, according to which only great people can educate great people, corresponds to another similar epistemological principle, namely that of *pensare in grande*, that is ‘think big’, thinking within a universal metaphysical horizon, and these two principles may be, in practice, integrated within the following postulate: “perform all your life activities in the spirit of reason” [5].

In this context, the term ‘reason’ is to be understood as *recta ratio*, right, good or healthy judgement. It refers to the universal understanding or philosophy, independent of any age or culture, which contains universal truths about the nature of reality, man and the world. About this *philosophia perennis* Pope Leo XIII spoke, in the modern times, in the *Aeterni Patris* encyclical (1879), with reference to Saint Thomas Aquinas and the whole Church philosophical tradition. Leo XIII’s ideas have been successively taken over by other popes, the last of them being John Paul II, who was writing the following in the *Fides et Ratio* encyclical (1998): “Quotiens ratio percipere valet atque exprimere prima et universalia vitae principia indeque recte consecraria propria deducere ordinis logici et deontologici, totiens appellari potest ratio recta sive, quemadmodum antiqui loquebantur, *orthos logos*”. [John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* Encyclical, 1998, no. 4. Philosophy as *philosophia perennis* is an integral part of the compulsory university curriculum for those who want to study Catholic theology. Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, cann. 251-252.]

Antonio Rosmini was convinced that most of his contemporaries were not thinking enough and hence, were weak-willed. He had the same conviction regarding the relation between faith and reason in theological studies, which were threatened either by an invasion of faith (fideism), or by the pressure of a hard and strong reason (deism and rationalism). Rosmini’s reflections about this matter are so fresh in our Christian or post-Christian European society today, that he can be rightly counted among the modern authors of the third millennium [6].

This aspect of the freshness of Rosmini’s thinking was also emphasised by Pope John XXIII, by Pope Paul VI and, recently, by Pope John Paul II, who mentioned Antonio Rosmini in his encyclical devoted to the relation between faith and reason. Thus, speaking about the fruitfulness of this relationship, John Paul II said: “I gladly mention, in a Western context, figures such as John Henry Newman, Antonio Rosmini, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson and Edith Stein

and, in an Eastern context, eminent scholars such as Vladimir S. Soloviev, Pavel A. Florensky, Petr Chaadaev and Vladimir N. Lossky” [John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* Encyclical, 1998, no. 74]. In referring to these, John Paul II intended not to endorse every aspect of their thought, but simply to offer significant examples of a process of philosophical enquiry which was enriched by engaging the data of faith.

2. Antonio Rosmini’s philosophy

Every philosopher is the son of his own time. Antonio Rosmini lived in an age when the tenets of Enlightenment and empiricism were coming to the foreground. In order to reject them, he found his inspiration in the thinking of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, and at times he resorted to Plato. In his search for arguments against gnoseology, solely based on senses, and while trying to discover the ordering function of experience, he reached Kant. But he did not stop at him, because he felt that the multitude of inborn categories Kant was speaking about was unconvincing and useless, on the one hand, and on the other, because of the subjective changes taking place in the act of knowing, as Kant was arguing, due to which the thinking subject fails to encounter reality. In order to ensure the objective character of knowledge, Rosmini propounded instead an itinerary of ontological search of the truth, an objective principle able to enlighten the intelligence with immediate, universal and immutable evidence. For him this principle was the concept of ideal Being, which primarily presents itself as an indeterminate content of the mind, which can become determinate when applying itself to the data provided by the senses. It precedes and informs all judgements asserting the existence of a particular thing.

In order to understand how the thinking subject arrives at the idea of being and in order to answer, to a certain extent, the critiques of ontologism brought against A. Rosmini, let us briefly take a look at several elements of his ontology.

First of all, A. Rosmini spoke about three types of being: a) the *ideal being*, that is, the logic beginning of everything, the light through which beings can be known, the *a priori* condition of knowledge, being in its potentiality and indeterminacy, being as the mental image of the infinite being; b) the *real being*, that is, the actual and objective existence of a thing, entity, a substance (material or spiritual, finite or infinite); c) the *moral being*, that is, being as good, being as fulfilment, the value and perfection of beings and the loving union of the two former types of being (ideal and real).

The existence of these three forms of being is proved by the human mind’s ability to contemplate, because indeed, the mind is able to know the inner structure of being. However, being is something analogous or a thing that can be conceived in different ways; this theory emerges from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and it has been taken over by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Thus, though being is at first ‘simple’ and ‘unique’, it multiplies itself in the mind of the thinking subject, either due to the diversity of the forms it takes on, or to the human faculties of abstraction (which give birth to the abstract, inferred and indeterminate being),

or again due to the faculties that relate it to certain realities taking part in its own reality (which give rise to the virtual being, to being as an *act of any entity*). According to this relation with the realities participating in its own reality, we speak about the *one being* and the *threefold being*, the *infinite being* and the *finite being*, the *absolute being* and the *subsistent being*. All these participations in the being are possible due to the *common being* or the *initial being*, which is predicated both about God, as well as about creatures (here being is *univocal*).

Then, although the initial forms of being can be thought each in itself, they exist only together, linked as in a body; it is here that the *ontological law of synthetism* steps in, according to which each thing has its own existence only because it is conditioned by, and bound to, another thing. The most telling example of ontological synthetism is the human compound, wherein the sensitive principle (the understanding soul) and the felt body are two opposed and different substances, yet connected to each other through an essential relation. In virtue of this law of synthetism, the world is governed by order, reason, relation and cooperation, instead of chaos or contingency. Each thing, be it ideal, real or moral, cannot exist by itself, but it is always open to the relation with other things, so that not one thing can be virtually excluded, because all of them are implicitly included. Nevertheless, we must not forget the fact that synthetism has an *ontological* character, both at the *epistemological level* (any anthropological, moral, psychological, political discourse and so on, has always being as something given initially, to which any other thing relates itself) and at the *real one*, since in any thing we speak of, being is always its foundation, essence or the element without which nothing would exist.

Finally, being has different properties, among which are counted those that cannot be communicated to other beings, such as infinity, universality, necessity, immutability, eternity, absolute simplicity and so on. If the finite being is aseity, identity and participability, the finite being (any created thing) has the opposite properties, that is, it does not exist by itself, but by another; it can influence other beings, but it cannot communicate their being; it is equal to itself and, at the same time, unequal [2, p. 16; 7; 8].

Thus, the concept of Being is the unique content of mind that does not derive from senses, being therefore inborn. Yet, Kant's question of the inborn ideas re-emerges here. In order to avoid any confusion, Rosmini points out that in the act of knowing, the human mind formulates judgements in which the idea of Being has the role of a predicate, that is, of a category, while perception is the subject something is predicated about. He also stated that in a judgement, the predicate determines itself, whereas perception certifies itself. If such is the specific function of judgement, any concept can subsist only as the predicate of a judgement. This means that even the concept of Being obeys this necessity and therefore, is given only in the activity of judging, as a form of judgement. However, Rosmini rejected this reductionism and excluded the predicate of existence from the function of judgement, attributing an objective, transcendent nature to it. The transcendent being reveals itself to man, enlightens him and helps him think *in grande*, in a metaphysical horizon [D. Fusaro, *Antonio*

Rosmini. *Breve schizzo dei sistemi di filosofia e del proprio sistema*, online at <http://www.filosofico.net/rosminischizzo.htm>].

Right from his youth, Rosmini sought to lay the foundations of both the order of knowledge and that of society, of an integral and coherent manner. This search was also obvious to his contemporaries, who were saying: “In Milan we heard that one of Rosmini’s proposals was that of laying the foundations of a real positivist philosophy (...). He is of opinion that our times need a philosophy, since there is none altogether at this very moment”. [9] The foundation of his theoretical constructions is represented by creationist metaphysics, as this is the one able to justify the ontological dimension of the person and of societies, and the plurality of beings, each of which, by itself or all together, are in relation with the person, just as instruments are related to a purpose, or just as the entire creation, including the human person, situated at the top of the hierarchy of creatures, is related, in the metaphysical order, to the Creator’s glory. By the help of this metaphysical perspective, the human being can relate itself to that transcendence that is relation and, at the same time, foundation. For Rosmini, as one can see in his *Commentary to the Gospel of John*, the ineffable becomes foundation: “This is what the sacred text wants to say when it states that *In the beginning God created the world*, namely that it excluded any idea of distance between the world and God’s act of creation” [10].

So, the metaphysical order determines the objective relations between principles and the terms of their application, between means and purposes, both at a gnoseological (or scientific) level, and at a moral (or practical) and sapiential one. The metaphysical order of being, of all beings, structures itself according to the triad of the forms of being – ideal, real and moral –, and their circular character underlies the integrality of the person and of any form of understanding, feeling, knowing, willing, acting and loving. By his insistence on the metaphysical order, Rosmini was in continuity with the patristic thinking, especially with the Augustinian and Thomistic thinking. Through his critique of the subjectivism dominating the Philosophy of Enlightenment and his plea for the unity of the principle in his *Massime di perfezione* (1828) or *Cinque Piaghe della Santa Chiesa* (1832), Rosmini was inviting his contemporaries to recover the link with the cultural and spiritual tradition of the West [3, p. 29]. Thus, the manner in which Rosmini raised the question of the relation between faith and reason is also situated in the context of a truly encyclopaedic effort of recovering the values of the classical and medieval world.

3. The harmony between faith and reason

In a work dated in 1850, entitled *Introduzione alla Filosofia*, Antonio Rosmini entrusts the philosopher with the following mission: “to solve, before everything else, the question of the agreement between reason and faith, two inseparable elements of civilised nations. (...) Will this mean that philosophy is mixed up with faith, or the other way around? No, because faith is something altogether different from Philosophy. Faith is a voluntary assent offered to a

revealing God, whatever the way of knowing this authority may be. Philosophy is a science that examines the final grounds of things and out of these final grounds it deduces the consequences, and as such it requires an explicit reasoning, which is unnecessary (...) in faith. Faith contains truths that can be delivered by Philosophy too and supported by arguments with the help of natural reasoning, but it also contains other truths that, without contradicting natural reasoning, go beyond its power. Faith has one sole, yet very strong reason it relies on, namely that of the authority of a revealing God, which does neither condemn, nor exclude, but gives value to all the other reasons; Philosophy draws its reasons solely out of the intimate nature of things and the relations existing between them. Just as nature represents the subject-matter of a primary philosophy, faith also offers the point of departure for a more sublime philosophy that does not destroy, but enlarges and fulfils the former. Thus, faith always stays independent in relation to Philosophy, self-sufficient and sufficient to all people. Yet, it is not, because of this, hostile to philosophy, which is richness for just a few, but it keeps its middle ground between two philosophies, a natural one that precedes it and the supernatural philosophy that follows it, and as a kind of peace-maker between them, but also a mediator, it unites them both.” That is why, for those “who do not understand how faith presupposes reason (...) and how faith and reason help each other, and who, out of a mad love for faith become enemies of reason, we do not possess two distinct categories, one of those who, fearing the deductions of reason, which might be contrary to faith, are against its development, and could be called the *shy ones*; another of those who, losing all trust in reason and believing it unable to accept the truth, may be called *distrustful*. A third category may be added to these two, no better than the preceding ones, that of the *indifferent*, who profess this particular principle: ‘It is no good to adhere to any philosophical system, because any system is good as long as it does not oppose faith and it is good to use all of them in order to serve faith’. Should one analyse this assertion, who would not find it strange and absurd? (...) As for myself, I confess (...) I have found the truth so different and so apolitical, that it always seeks to stand alone and it refuses to be halved”. [11]

I would like to add another excerpt from *Teosofia* (1846-1855), the *summa* of Rosmini’s thinking, unfortunately unfinished, to this all too little political synthesis about the dangers threatening the harmony between faith and reason. It is about two tendencies present in all ages and in all places and found among the radical interpretations of rationalism and supernaturalism (that is, of fideism and irrationalism): “These two tendencies struggle against each other and divide the World between them. The former prevails in some people, meaning rationalism and the refusal to accept any supernatural element; the latter is dominant in others, who either embrace superstitious beliefs or profess religion in its truth. Both tendencies are natural in man; but rationalism is natural in man due to what it is in its nature, while supernaturalism due to what is absent in it. Because of rationalism, man seems to be independent; science in its entirety belongs to him, because the means through which he comes to

knowledge, which also becomes the object of knowledge, is innate in him. At the same time, that means is universal, so that no knowledge, not even the supernatural one, can renounce it. Everything that is added to man by a supernatural authority comes from the outside, but it does not seem to him to be his science; only that man who is supernaturally disposed to such a thing considers it his own. (...) The two tendencies may struggle against each other, yet they cannot destroy each other completely. And even when rationalism prevails, without realising it man turns many times to the supernatural, and the effort he takes to free himself of the supernatural proves that he fights against an invincible necessity. When the supernatural tendency prevails instead, necessity and the power of reasoning accompany it, without him being able to free himself from them. All systems that turn to only one of these two tendencies are futile and futile is also their reconciliation if, under that pretext, one of them is crossed out". [7, p. 858]

When referring to action, Antonio Rosmini distinguished between reason and intellect. The (essential) intellect is that principle that senses the ideal-indeterminate Being, whereas reason is that faculty that applies the ideal-indeterminate being to feelings, or to real and ideal beings. Next to this function of applying principles, reason has a role of integration then when man makes use of the principle of the absolute that helps him complete, in a particular way, the knowledge of real beings and reach the knowledge of God's existence. Finally, the third function of reason is abstracting, by the help of which concepts and the world of beings belonging solely to reason come into being.

Regarding faith, we have found the following important division in Rosmini's work, between natural and supernatural faith. The way in which the relations between these two types of faith are articulated may be synthesised as follows [3, p. 42]:

1. The truths of faith brought before men by external revelation are partly ideal-negative, and partly positive. The understanding of these truths does not overcome the possibilities of natural reason, and the assent to these truths does not overcome the power of natural will. When God intervenes in the natural order, the human will is stimulated by the supernatural elements and thus, man can enter the order of grace.
2. Faith emerges out of the incipient divine perception and the assent of our will. The order of knowledge finds its expression in faith, that of feelings in charity, and the order of operations in action. Faith acts, but through charity. Faith is a practical judgement, not a purely speculative judgement. It is a judgement whereby we assert not only that God exists, that divine things exist, but also that God is known and lived by us, a judgement whereby we voluntarily recognise God and through this recognition moral life begins in us.
3. The living and supernatural faith is always accompanied by three elements: good acts, the charity that yields them and practical judgement, which represents the principle of charity.

4. Reason is the guide of faith in God, yet not every kind of reason, but *recta ratio*. This is not about subjecting revelation to the light of reason, but about subjecting man to reason, which is why we say that man needs to be formed, educated, and corrected in order not to make bad use of the light of his reason.

4. Conclusions

For Rosmini, the ‘human reason’ is assimilated to that *lumen mentis* spoken about in the *Introduction to the Gospel of John*. With the help of this natural light, man perceives the two aspects of the concept of participation, namely that of *ex parte participantis* gift and gratuity, and that of *ex parte fruientis* spiritual and intellectual energy. These two aspects must be kept together against the law of syncretism or otherwise, we run the risk of losing sight of the participant’s divine character (first aspect) or the intellectual excellence and spiritual dignity of the human person (second aspect) [4, p. 21].

While commenting on the sixth principle of Christian perfection, namely that of “performing all one’s works of life in the spirit of reason”, A. Rosmini was writing: “The Christian must never walk in darkness, but always in light. He must reach this goal, asking for the gift of understanding, from the Holy Spirit, through which he may deepen and understand the sublime truths of faith; for the gift of wisdom, through which he may properly understand the divine things; for the gift of knowledge, through which he may properly understand the human things; and finally, for the gift of counsel, through which he may amend himself by applying the truths known in all his life’s works”. [5, p. 313]

As such, *lumen mentis* must govern the path of the perfection of Christian life, and this path materialises itself in living charity. Though charity is manifold, intellectual, spiritual and temporal, reason teaches the Christian that “God’s will manifests itself, above all and ordinarily, in the external circumstances” [5, p. 316]. Nevertheless, the general and unshakable rule is the peace and quiet the Christian experiences in the depth of his conscience. If something does disquiet him, then he is to discover the evil causing this vexation of his conscience, distinguishing between what comes and what does not come from God’s spirit. By the help of natural light, the Christian identifies God’s spirit and, making room for it in his life, he lives in full peace.

So, believing and loving God means to listen to what *recta ratio*, the good reason, tells us. Man follows this principle of reason in all fields of science without an exception. Faith enriches or broadens reason, while reason protects faith, in the sense that it helps it not slip into irrationality, superstition, ideology etc. By means of faith, reason can encompass larger horizons, while faith, based on reason, becomes stronger.

But the interpretation of the relation between faith and reason in the manner of a mutual help can be forwarded again today if the dialogue takes place on the ground of creationist metaphysics and there where the person’s dynamism represents the ultimate principle of history and society.

Indeed, the true truth is not only the known truth, but also the loved truth, therefore I end by saying: do not fear to live your life according to your reason, even your religious life!

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