What Do We Mean by "Balance"?

In different ways appropriate to their different concerns, Calvin Rock\textsuperscript{1} and Jon Dybdahl\textsuperscript{2} each affirm the essential relationship of religious experience and theological understanding, of faith and reason, of what we are calling the "spiritual" and the "rational." The subject is one about which the questions are usually obvious but the answers are often difficult—which, presumably, is why the general theme of this meeting is "Balancing the Rational and the Spiritual," and why we are thinking more specifically this morning about "The Adventist Balance Between Reason and Religious Experience." While Rock explains what this "balance" ought to be in terms of commitment and critical reflection, Dybdahl argues that it is not yet, but should be, reflected in the curricular shape of Adventist religious education.

\section{}

The ambiguity of "balance." Rock and Dybdahl not only invite further reflection on the general theme and their own particular concerns about it; they also give us the occasion and incentive to clarify the somewhat ambiguous notion of "balance."

On the one hand, "balance" suggests equal (or at least proportionally appropriate) amounts of time and effort. Since these resources are limited, what is given to one thing (in this case, the "spiritual") is diverted from the other (the "rational"). Accordingly, when Dybdahl argues that in Adventist education more time be given to spiritual formation, he is \textit{ipso facto} arguing that less time be given to Biblical, theological, historical, and professional studies. I have no quarrel with this use of the metaphor of "balance." I be-

\begin{footnotesize}

\end{footnotesize}
lieve Dybdahl is right: Adventist education does not in general adequately attend to spiritual formation.

But this metaphor can be mischievous if it is understood to mean that the "spiritual" and the "rational" as such are thus related reciprocally, so that the more there is of one, the less there is (or the less there needs to be) of the other. For the relationship is not a matter of "going 50-50" (or "60-40" or "30-70")—that is, of having some, but not too much, of spirituality and rationality. To be "more spiritual" does not mean being "less rational," or vice versa. For spirituality and rationality are not mutually limiting elements in religious experience. They are not competing values; they are complementary dimensions. They are properly symbolized not by the opposite ends of a one-dimensional line, but by the $x$ and $y$ coordinates of a two-dimensional graph. At the most basic level, "balance" between the "rational" and the "spiritual" should be understood as complementarity.3

So Calvin Rock is right: "commitment" and "criticism" are both essential and belong together in religion—both in one's own individual experience of God and in the collective experience of the community of faith.

The priority of religious experience. Rock is right also in suggesting, already in the title of his paper, that in an important sense religious commitment precedes critical reflection. From Augustine's prayer that God may "give us to understand what we have first believed,":4 to Anselm's famous definition of the theological task as "faith seeking understanding,"5 to Paul Tillich's notion of the "theological circle,"6 it has been frequently recognized that faith is primary and theology is secondary. Indeed, it has observed that

---


5Anselm, "An Address" (*Proslogion*), preface, in *A Scholastic Miscellany*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather, Library of Christian Classics, 10 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 70. Cf. also Anselm's dictum, *Credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order to understand"), ibid., ch 1, p. 73. This idea appears frequently in Anselm's writings, including "Why God Became Man" (*Cur Deus homo*).

theology is parasitic upon religion." The experience of encountering Ultimate Reality and responding in faith is both the presupposition and the motivation of the best critical reflection on religion.

II

Rock encourages us to proceed to two further questions related to the "balance" between the "rational" and the "spiritual." First, to what, precisely, are we properly committed? And second, what, if anything, is "off limits" to critical examination?

The object of commitment. To the first question, Rock suggests the correct answer when he talks about "surrender to True Reality Himself" in contrast to commitment to something that is merely descriptive of that True Reality (p. 5). True Reality is absolute; it is what it is, independent of our own perceptions, conceptions, descriptions, and interpretations of it (which are always partial and defective). In short, God is God, independent of our theology. It is obvious that God, not our theology, is the proper object of religious commitment. Our fallible theology is as much in need of forgiveness and improvement as is our behavior.

But it is difficult for us to maintain this basic distinction between God as the object of our faith and theology as our attempt to understand and express our faith. Our problem here is not simply our perversity and arrogance. As basic as it is, the distinction is easy to overlook, because the only God we know is the God we know through our understanding. Just as in science there are no uninterpreted data, so in religion there are no uninterpreted experiences of God.8

A marital analogy may help to clarify the point I am trying to make here. A true marriage commitment is a commitment to love, honor, and cherish a particular person "as long as we both shall live." Unfortunately, however,

8See, for example, Hans Kung, Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 109-10: "Every experience—of love, but also of revelation, salvation, grace—is never given 'pure,' but interpreted, even if it is not reflected on in advance. Every experience already brings elements of interpretation with it. At the same time it is enriched through further elements of interpretation and finally expressed in language: in specific conceptual or pictorial articulations of interpretation . . . which can have a retroactive effect on the original experience, deepening or even flattening it out."
often one is in love, not with the reality of the other person, but with a perception of that person. The mystery of personhood is such that one's perception of another person is never entirely accurate, and when the reality of that person turns out to be different from the perception, the consequence is often traumatic, sometimes fatal to the marriage. Part of the courageous risk of marriage\footnote{Another part of the risk of marriage comes from the possibility that the partner will actually change in character, or will disavow the commitment. In this respect, of course, the marital relationship is not analogous to religious experience.} lies precisely here in the distinction between reality and perception: in marriage one is called to make a lifelong commitment to the reality of a person that is beyond one's perception. In religion as well as in marriage, it is useful to recognize that one's proper commitment is to the reality, not the perception.

This distinction may illuminate some of the tensions between those who are, in Rock's terms, "committed but uncritical," and those who are "committed and critical." To a person whose commitment is to one's perception of truth and reality rather than to "the True Reality Himself," others, whose commitment is not to perception but to the Reality, may seem to be "uncommitted. To use Rock's terms: those who "find satisfaction in dogma" may not be comfortable with those who find satisfaction in "meaning" (p. 8).\footnote{The differentiation between the "non-critical/committed" and the "critical/committed" on the basis of the Kantian distinction between "phenomena" and "noumena" (p. 8) is interesting, but not entirely successful. It is hard to see how the "dogma" on which the "non-critical/committed" rely is any more "phenomenal" or "sensory" than the sorts of data on which the "critical/committed" rely in their concern for "meaning." In any event, the current theological tensions in Adventism seem to center primarily on the appropriateness of incorporating secular evidence into religious beliefs.}

*The scope of criticism.* The second question follows quickly from the answer to the first: if our commitment is to God rather than to our theology, are all of our theological convictions subject to criticism and revision? Once again, Rock suggests an answer: "We are not only safe but urgently obedient to our commitment when we bring the critical sense to the task of viewing our presuppositions and methodologies" (p. 6). Criticism of "presuppositions" and "methodologies" is the most fundamental kind of theological criticism; and if criticism at this level is not only permitted but required by our faith,
then there are no a priori limits to theological criticism, and every specific theological affirmation is open to examination.

While this conclusion may seem disconcerting to those whom Rock identifies as the "non-critical/committed," it is certainly well within our Adventist heritage. Nearly a hundred years ago Ellen White gave a ringing declaration of independence from theological tradition:

There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.11

Earlier she had declared, "We have many lessons to learn, and many, many, to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible."12 More recently, the (one and only) official doctrinal formulation by Seventh-day Adventists advises its readers: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truths."13

Because faith wants and needs to understand, "commitment" and "criticism" are complementary elements in Adventist religious experience; and because our religious commitment is to God rather than to our understanding, our theology is in principal always open to criticism and revision.

III

And of course Jon Dybdahl is right too: if religious experience is prior to theological expression, spiritual formation surely ought to be included in Adventist education, and especially in Adventist education for professional ministry. From the very beginning, however, Adventist religion has been

---


heavily Biblical and theological: it began in prophetic interpretation—first the interpretation of the apocalyptic chronology of Daniel 8:14, and then the reinterpretation of the "cleansing of the sanctuary." Furthermore, what distinguishes Adventism most evidently from other forms of Christianity is a set of behaviors derived from theological convictions about the sabbath and the multidimensional unity of human being. So Adventist religious education has been, as Dybdahl observes, predominantly Biblical, theological, and behavioral. For seminarians there is an additional, professional component under the rubric "church and ministry." But there has generally been little curricular attention to spiritual formation.

So Dybdahl's concern and appeal are entirely appropriate, validated not only by the evidence he cites but also by the recent emergence of Adventist "charismatic" congregations,14 in which the "spiritual" is a prominent dimension of worship. The resulting conversation about spiritual formation should be continued and broadened well beyond this meeting of scholars; it should include all who are professionally involved in Adventist education.

A theology of spiritual formation. Dybdahl is more interested in highlighting the need for courses in spiritual formation than in specifying their content; but to the extent that he suggests or implies content, he points in the direction of practical instruction rather than theological reflection and understanding. One envisions courses that attend to what to do and how to do it, rather than why it ought to be done and how it is related to other dimensions of religious life.

It might therefore be argued that what Dybdahl is talking about is not, strictly speaking, theology at all; but my primary concern is not semantic precision: it is the need to include in courses on spiritual formation some careful reflection on its meaning. These courses should consider spiritual formation in relation to an understanding of God, the totality of human experience (including its intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions), and the process of salvation. In other words, these courses should not only "devotional" but also truly "theological." "Because we must as humans understand as well as exist, and understand truly if we are to be 'truly,' so reflection on religion is an aspect of all religious being, and theology is a

---

14For example, the Milwaukie congregation in Portland, OR, and the Azure Hills congregation in Grand Terrace, CA. The latter is one of the most rapidly growing Adventist congregations in North America.
genuine aspect of being Christian.” 15 Without forgetting the priority of experience, we must remember that being human involves thinking, and being religious involves thinking about religious experience.

Adventism urgently needs a theology of spiritual formation, a careful and comprehensive reflection on the on the nature, possibilities, and limitations of spiritual experience in the light of Biblical revelation. This theology should consider the possibility of providing a clear, comprehensive, and coherent definition of "encounter with God." Can this dimension of humanness be de- fined—or even described—without jeopardizing their reality or distorting their quality? But if not, how does one talk about it persuasively? How does one avoid talking nonsense?

Some attention should also be directed to the dangers involved in any structured effort toward spiritual formation. It is not enough to "admit their existence and move on" (p. 14); the dangers are sufficiently serious to warrant some attention to ways in which they may be minimized. It is not merely excessive rationalism that has led contemporary Adventists to be generally suspicious of immediacy-oriented, emotionally intense religion.

And attention should be given to the significance of different tempera- ment types 16 in the process of spiritual formation. Too often those who are interested in spiritual formation fail to recognize a pair of crucial facts: that personality characteristics profoundly affect the shape, style, and content of religious experience; and that people who are temperamentally like them- selves are a minority of the general population—perhaps a small one. 17

The contribution of theology to religious experience. While it is common knowledge that theology depends on religious experience, and that theology can help protect religious experience against inappropriate or excessive feelings, it is less frequently recognized that theological understandings and convictions make their own contribution, for better or worse, to the quality of one's religious experience. While good theology does not guarantee "good" experience, bad theology—theology that both reflects and facilitates a dis-


17Using the Keirsey and Bates models, one would suppose that the temperament type most likely to be interested in spiritual formation would be the Apollonian (or "NF"), which comprises 12% of the general population.
torted perception of truth and reality—contributes to "bad" experience. On the one hand, this means that "all theology should be measured by its significance for personal religious experience."18 On the other hand, it means that thinking—the "rational"—is an essential component of religious experience itself. Theological understanding is not just reflection on religious experience; it is part of the experience in the first place.19

According to Jesus' revision of the ancient Hebrew commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."20 This is what we mean—or should mean—by "balance." A person cannot be "too spiritual" or "too rational," any more than one can be "too healthy."

Fritz Guy

The University Church, Loma Linda, CA 92354

---


19In this respect religious experience is perhaps similar to aesthetic experience; thinking about the experience itself as it is occurring tends to diminish the experience, but thinking about the object that is being experienced tends to enhance the experience.

20Lk 10:27; see also Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30. Compare Dt 6:5, "... with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength."