



# Is the Conflict between Faith and Reason real or imaginary?

Abraham Adebajo Okunade  
Department of Religious Studies  
Bowen University  
Iwo State, Nigeria  
Pst.okunade@gmail.com  
ORCID- 0000000196935270

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10423>

## Abstract

From time immemorial there have been diverse opinions and presuppositions about the subject of faith and the subject of reason in both theology and philosophy from different schools of thought in the west and even in African Christianity. Some theologians have considered faith and reason as being incompatible and as two parallel lines that can never meet; the early Christian writer Tertullian asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What is the relationship between the church and the Academy? These rhetorical questions suggest that the conflict between faith and reason is real and not just imaginary. Other schools of thought see no discord between faith and reason and thereby conclude that the seeming rift between the duo is just founded on human imagination. Nevertheless, faith and reason are seen as the two 'wings' upon which theology or religion thrive and sustain themselves in comprehending religious concepts and beliefs. Consequently, there abound diverse hypothesis and presupposition about the duo (faith and reason). Various schools of thought exist in history and in the contemporary scene on the controversy, rift and conflict between faith and reason, fideism and rationalism. Rhetorically, is the conflict between faith and reason real or imaginary? Consequently, this paper addresses the historical overview of the concept of faith and reason, the conflict between faith and reason and the equilibrium cum negotiation therein. The research method employed was a historical-analytical one.

**Keywords:** Faith, reason, rationalism, fideism, conflict.

## Introduction

Since time immemorial there have been diverse opinions and presuppositions about the subjects of faith and reason in both theology and philosophy, and also from different schools of thought emanating in the west and also in African Christianity. Various theologians have considered faith and reason as being incompatible and are thus viewed as an two parallel lines that can never meet; the early Christian writer Tertullian (XXXX) asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What is the relationship between the church and the Academy?" These rhetorical questions suggest that the conflict between faith and reason is real and not just an imaginary one. Other schools of thought see no discord between faith and reason and thereby conclude that the seeming rift between the duo is just human based on imagination. Nevertheless, faith and reason are seen as the 'two wings' upon which theology or religion thrive and sustains themselves in comprehending religious concepts and beliefs. According to Taylor (1983: 207), faith is



the voluntary assent that man gives to the revelation of God and the self-committal or trust of the entire man to the control of such truth; thus, faith involves the intellectual elements of apprehension and conviction of the truth. This suggests that for faith to be effective there is need for assent to revelation and inferentially, the said assent connotes reason. Africans are incurably religious and oftentimes take religious propositions hook, line, and sinker, without subjecting some things to critical reasoning while their western counterparts subject certain religious concepts to critical reasoning. Douglas (1992: 725) opines that reason on the other hand is the capacity of the human intellect to carry out organized mental activity such as the association of ideas, induction and deduction of inferences, or formulation of value judgments; the human reason in question is adequate to meet certain tasks, finite, and a process of renewal of mind. This implies that reason is based on the intellectual prowess of people in dissecting and analyzing concepts or phenomena. In other word, reason is the power of the person to experience order in the universe and to bring order into his or her own thoughts and actions (Taylor, 1983:442).

Consequently, there abound diverse hypotheses and presuppositions about the duo (faith and reason). Various schools of thought abound in history and in the contemporary scene on the controversy, rift and conflict between faith and reason, fideism and rationalism. Rhetorically, is the conflict between faith and reason real or imaginary? Consequently, this paper addresses the historical overview of the concept of faith and reason, conflict between faith and reason and the equilibrium cum negotiation therein.

### **Historical overview of the concepts of faith and reason**

There are different approaches to faith-reason interaction ranging from one age or period to another. There exists a synergy between faith and reason from church history to date ranging from Middle Ages, to the Reformation period, the Enlightenment period, and the contemporary period with various arguments posited by different proponents.

Omogbe asserts that the Middle Ages involved the dominance of faith. Ramsay corroborated the assertion of Omogbe (2012: 40) submitting that Christian thinking prevailed in the Middle Ages because in this period, knowledge was considered possible through faith in God's revelation; thus, a key question for theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas was the relationship between faith and reason (Ramsay, 2007:35).

According to Ramsay, Augustine (354-430 CE) said "I believe in order to understand" (*Credo ut Intelligam*), and he insisted that even the most mundane knowledge requires faith; for example we trust our family to tell us who our father is. Craig (2008) on the other hand argues that Augustine's attitude towards faith and reason is very difficult to interpret because he was a strict authoritarian who held that the ground for faith was sheer unquestionable, divine authority of both scripture and the church. Augustine believed that reason alone was incomplete (Augustine <https://ehyde.wordpress.com>>2010/06/29. Accessed 25/01/2018). Because the scripture was inspired by God, it implies that reason has no role to play in the justification of belief (see Matthews, 1999). He asserts that "one must first believe before he can know: unless you believe, you shall not understand". Thus, the fundamental principle of the Augustinian tradition throughout the Middle Ages was "*Fides quaerens intellectum*" meaning "faith seeking understanding" (Craig, 2008:29-30).

Ramsay is of the opinion that Anselm (1033-1109 CE) concurs with Augustine on the relationship between faith and reason thus: "for I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand"; Anselm also affirmed that after initially obtaining truths through faith, reason can elaborate rational proofs for the same doctrines (Ramsay,2007:36).



William Craig argues that Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) wrote *Summa Contra Gentiles* to combat Greco-Arabic philosophy and develop a framework for the relationship of faith and reason; by making a distinction within truth about God: on one hand there are truths that completely surpass the capability of human reason, for instance, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; on the other hand, many truths lie within the grasp of human reason, such as the existence of God (Craig, 2008:32). According to Richard B. Ramsay (2007:36), Aquinas assigns reason a greater importance over faith than Augustine and Anselm; G.K Chesterton said Aquinas “reconciled Religion with reason”. Aquinas admired Aristotle, and according to Aquinas, we can study creation (general revelation) and use our reason to understand many things. For example, we can come to believe that God exists by studying arguments for His existence; but this method of reasoning only helps us to a certain point, after that we need a special revelation and strong faith. For example, nature will not lead us to believe in the Holy Trinity, we need faith for that.

Aquinas believed that one could conclude that God exists using reason alone; reason is thus necessary to decide which authority ought to be believed (Grisez, 1965). Like Augustine, Aquinas believed that reason alone was incomplete; faith comes after reason and then faith allows reason to grow. Faith enables a believer to understand further truths that could not be discovered through reason alone. For instance, reason may enable all humans to know science, but only faith informs us of the ultimate end, goal, purpose, and plan for science (<https://ehyde.wordpress.com/2010/06/29>. Accessed 25/01/2018). Craig further supported Ramsay by submitting that in the first three volumes of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas attempt to prove these truths of reason, such as the existence of God, and the nature of God, the order of creation, the nature and end of man etc. However in the fourth volume where he handles subject like the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Sacrament and the last things, Aquinas suddenly changed his method of approach. He states that these things are to be proved by the authority of the Holy Scriptures, not by natural reason. Because these doctrines surpass reason, they are properly objects of faith. Craig posits that the fact that the Enlightenment period is known as the Age of Reason gives us a good clue as to how thinkers of that period regarded the relationship between faith and reason. For theologians of the Enlightenment- for example Reimarus and Semler- the point lay in the hardened anachronism of orthodoxy and its dogmatic metaphysics which is against those who wanted to be honestly enlightened and to maintain their identity as people permeated by a rational faith (Thielicke, 1990:6).

Ramsay submits that Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626 CE) moved away from Medieval faith in revelation and embraced the inductive method for finding truth. He used his powers of observation to study nature, that is, using the five senses (empirical method) to discover truth (Ibid). This implies that anything that goes beyond the five senses cannot be accepted and believed to be dependable.

From Ramsay’s (2007:38) perspective, Rene Descartes (1596-1650 CE) decided to follow the guideline that he would not accept anything as true if he could doubt it. He concluded (Rene Descartes) that since he perceived himself to be thinking, he could not doubt that he existed: “*cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am). This implies that anything that can be doubted is not true even if it is beyond human reasoning.

According to Craig, the book or essay of John Locke (1632-1704 CE) concerning human understanding (1689 CE) laid down the epistemological principles that were to shape religious thought during the Enlightenment Age. John Locke rejected the philosophical rationalism of Descartes as an ardent theological rationalist by maintaining that religious beliefs must have an evidential foundation and that where such a foundation is absent, religious belief is unwarranted. He attempted to provide such an evidential foundation by submitting that when one moves beyond such matters of demonstrable reason into matter of faith, revealed truths cannot contradict reason (Craig, 2008:34). Locke emphasizes the



reasonableness of faith to such an extent that a religious doctrine irrationality- conflict with itself or with known facts is a sign that it is unsound (*Faith and Reason Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [www.iep.utm.edu/faith-re](http://www.iep.utm.edu/faith-re). Seen 25/01/2018).

From the foregoing, having examine the historical overview of the concept of faith and reason, there is the need to 'X-ray' and examine the speculative conflict or rift between the duo.

### **Conflict between Faith and Reason**

Theology and philosophy could be interchanged with faith and reason and Immanuel Kant (1724 –1804 CE) saw a conflict between the two faculties and called faith (theology) higher while reason (philosophy) is the lower and the higher faculty which is faith-based will be scrutinized by the lower faculty which is truth based (Farrow, 2018:3-5). The two seemingly extremes of the rift between faith and reason are fideism and rationalism. The former refers to that view in the field of religious epistemology which states that truth in religion rests on faith, not on reason or written propositions; a fideist places his faith in faith by placing faith above reason. The latter implies the ability to reason, to know and communicate logically organized truth through the higher cognitive powers of the mind (Ibid, 216). Geisler (2019:13) in his book titled *Christian Apologetics* stressed that the seeds of rationalism have been firmly implanted in the western world since at least the time of Plato; in the middle ages, the cause was advanced by thinkers such as Avicenna, and scholars such as Duns Scotus; but the movement flowered in the modern triumvirate of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. This presupposes that the Christian faith is not immune from critical reasoning and analyses in the western world, thus there is the need to defend the Christian faith with philosophical thought using the known to explain the unknown.

Fideism claims that faith is the precondition for any correct thinking about religion, and thus attempts to destroy faith in reason in order to restore faith in faith. Evans and Manis remarked that fideists cannot attempt to win over their critics by rational argument or even attempt to engage in rational dialogue with those who disagree. This implies that faith has nothing to do with reason. This has resulted in making the rift between faith and reason real. Fideism is from the Latin word, literally meaning "Faith-ism." A radical form of fideism holds that evidence is of no relevance to the nature and integrity of faith. Less radical forms of fideism allow for some justificatory reasons through religious experience, for example, but resist rationalist or empiricist methodologies and what some call evidentialism (the thesis that for a belief to be licit it must be supported by available evidence) (Charles, 2010:89).

In the same vein, Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) called reason a "harlot" and insisted that the gospel was contrary to reason and Tertullian (155 - 220 CE) asked the celebrated question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem" and avowed belief in the absurd (Elwell, 2000:990). This implies that there is conflict between faith and reason and as such they are incompatible.

### **Equilibrium and Negotiation between Faith and Reason**

Packer (1988:247) opines that the conception of both faith and reason have varied so widely in the Christian church, thus, there is no answer to the question of the relationship between the duo. This is because reason means the faculty of reasoning, drawing deductive and inductive conclusions from data; this agrees with the Christian faith because faith or acts of faith is compatible with reason because they require reason both in order to understand what is believed, and to articulate what is believed in an orderly, coherent and systematic way.



Evans and Manis (2009:31-35) argue on the validity and feasibility of the faith-reason hypothesis when they propose that fideism precludes rational reflection and instead of seeing reason as presuppositionless thinking, reason should be viewed as a willingness to test one's commitments; in this way, reason makes belief or faith to be feasible and not a mere abstract. The fideist is right in claiming that it is impossible to begin without commitment; granted that every belief is doubted by reason in principle, it is not all belief that is doubted because simple beliefs about particular matters of fact are subject to fairly direct experiential tests. A genuine and robust faith will not shrink from the process of testing, for it is confident that it will indeed pass the test and if one really believes that God is real, one will not be afraid to examine alternative views and listen to problems and objections raised by others. This implies that faith-reason hypothesis is not only theoretical but also feasible and valid in the action and inaction of contemporary Christians.

Robin Keeley (1985:273) corroborated Manis and Evans on the feasibility of the faith-reason hypothesis viewing faith as using a shared language; submitting that if the language of faith uses ordinary words; the language of faith should not be based on concerns and interests which belong solely to the believing community; for God is God of the world, and not only of the church; the language of faith informs, invites, testifies, promises, warns, heals and even creates understanding. Faith is about passionate commitment: this is because, before one believes in someone or something, then there must be a certain amount of believing that things are true (Ibid). Faith is recognized to be the basic assumption to knowing of any kind because all reason involved in the acquisition of knowledge is leavened with faith; this is because faith is an essential part of every sane life (Young, 1954:36).

The rationalists upheld a high view of reason using a deductive approach: working out everything on the basis of first agreed principles; reason seeks to understand the way things are and how they function. Reason seeks to offer a description and interpretation of reality which is true to the facts; reason seeks objectivity as against subjectivity (Ibid). Conversely, once reason has reached the climax of its elasticity, reason might resign and call religion the business of faith alone, thus, suspending reason in its entirety, by this both faith and reason has their point of diminishing return having been exhausted (Ibid, 16).

Faith and reason are both sources of authority upon which beliefs can rest (<http://en.m.wikiversity.org/wiki/faith...> Accessed 25/01/2018). This implies that there are cases where one needs to employ faith alone (*Sola Fides*) because the subject or phenomenon in question may be mysterious. On the other hand, a situation may warrant the use of human reason (*Sola ratio*), for example, man (Adam) uses his intellect and ingenuity in christening (naming) all animals created by God.

The Encyclopedia of philosophy posits that, traditionally, faith and reason have each been considered to be the sources of justification for religious belief. Because both can purportedly serve this same epistemic function, it has been a matter of much interest to philosophers and theologians how the two are related and thus how the rational agent should treat claims resulting from either source; some have held that there can be no conflict between the two; that reason properly employed and faith properly understood will never produce contradictory or opposing claims, whereas others have maintained that faith and reason can be in genuine disagreement over certain propositions or methodologies.

Other thinkers have theorized that faith and reason each govern their own separate domains (Faith and Reason/internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy [www.iep.utm.edu/faith-](http://www.iep.utm.edu/faith-)



reason). This connotes that faith has its territory where it operates and reason also has her territory where she operate thus, serving as a means to an end.

Insofar as beliefs are reflected in action, and people must make choices, everyone also has faith in the sense of commitments, which may or may not be informed by rational reflection (Manis, 2009:209). In other words, people behave what they believe and vice versa. Thus, in the ongoing life of an actual person, there is the faith dimension of life; the faith which we bring to our reflection embodies previous commitments, and the commitment which is the outcome of reflection is the faith which we bring to our future reflection. Therefore, faith can legitimately be thought as both prior conviction and commitment (Ibid, 210).

Nels Ferre buttresses the interaction between faith and reason when he writes:

Just how closely faith and reason are related can be seen by the fact that men ask us to trust reason and to have reasonable faith, to trust the scientific methods to solve our problems and to have a scientific religion with which to meet them, and to trust philosophy and to have a philosophy in which we can trust...faith does not go beyond all experience and reason. If so, we could know nothing about it. Faith is not the knowing only of negations. It is rather, a selective reason which uses the ideal as a distinct perspective or principle of explanation (Young, 1954:36).

From the above statement, it can be deduced there is a symbiotic relationship between faith and reason and that reason always functions within the framework of faith- that is, in relation to what the individual believes to be of consequence; thus, faith and reason cannot be separated as faith is the basic category of all knowing (Ibid).

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855 CE) took a strong stance “[What if] the opponents have succeeded in proving what they desire about the Scriptures, with a certainty transcending the most ardent wish of the most passionate hostility – what then? Have the opponent thereby abolished Christianity? By no means. Has the believer been harmed? By no means, not in the least” (Bloom, 1989). He thus argues that even if Christianity were invalidated, his faith wouldn’t be even slightly damaged. His position was that faith is needed, and reason is in essence irrelevant.

Coincidentally, man can know God exists by merely reflecting on creation; “reason lays the foundation for faith and makes revelation credible”, thus, reason is the common ground between believers and unbelievers (<https://www.catholiceducation.org>fides...> Accessed 08/02/2018.). Thus, there exists a meaningful interaction between the subject or phenomenon of faith (theology) and that of reason (philosophy) some of which are as follows (Ibid): Reason prepares the way to faith; the apologist used philosophy as a preamble to the faith; philosophical logic shows how the catholic faith is not contrary to reason. Thus, Clement of Alexandria was right when he called philosophy a stepping stone to faith. This implies that reason is an antecedent to faith. Reason can show that there is a God and can reveal His primary attributes such as his power and divinity. Reason lays the foundation for faith and makes revelation ‘credible.’ Faith without reason withers into myth or superstition; deprived of reason, faith is left with only feelings and experience; it loses its universality. Reason provides a language for faith (theology), philosophical language permits theology to speak about God.

Furthermore, Pope John Paul II was right when he opines that faith support reason in the following ways (John Paul, <https://www.catholiceducation.org>fides...> Accessed 08/02/2018): Human reason is inherently weak and inclined to error; faith warns reason



against the paths that will lead it astray. Faith stirs reason to explore paths that it would not otherwise have suspected it could take. Faith gives the philosopher the courage to tackle difficult questions such as the problem of evil and suffering. Faith and spiritual life protect the philosopher from intellectual pride that would impede his ability to search for the truth. Interestingly, truth is known through a combination of faith and reason; the absence of either one will diminish man's ability to know himself, the world, and God.

Human reason seeks the truth, but the ultimate truth about the meaning of life cannot be found by reason alone. Faith and reason are man's part to truth, thus, there is complete compatibility; there is harmony between the knowledge of faith and the knowledge of reason; "faith asks that its object be understood with the help of reason, and that the summit of its searching, reason acknowledges that it cannot do without what faith presents", thus there is the need for integration between faith and reason. Conclusively, faith is a valid avenue for knowing truth, and there can be only one truth; reason on the other hand can reveal truth, and the truth arrived at by faith and the truth arrived at by reason must be the same (Corduan,1981:74). There is a fundamental harmony between faith and reason because faith asks that its object be understood with the help of reason, and at the summit of its searching, reason acknowledges that it cannot do without what faith presents (<http://www.w2.vatican.va>ncyclicals>document> Seen 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2018.). This presupposes that the purported and speculated conflict between faith and reason is never real but a mere imagination and human assumption.

## Conclusion

The historical overview, conflict, and equilibrium of the concept of faith and reason have been examined in an attempt to answer the question: "Is the conflict between faith and reason real or imaginary?" Therefore, faith and reason are both assenting to each other; this is because for effective faith to come to play, there must be inner conviction or consent and for reason to be effective, there must be an iota of faith or belief irrespective of the object of faith. Thus, there exists a cordial relationship between faith and reason which is meant to make them complementary in order to avoid the two extremes of fideism (superstition) and rationalism (nihilism).

Granted that there are areas of convergence and divergence between faith and reason, there exists a meeting point or convergence where both coexist to form a whole. This presupposes that the ostensibly age long conflict which seems real are just mere imagination of human beings and vice versa because the God of faith is at the same time the God of reason because He enabled man to respond to His revelation by faith and He also is responsible for the faculty of reasoning that is in man. In reality, there is no conflict between faith and reason because God wants every mind irrespective of its composition or world view to know Him and relate to Him. This is because our God is the God of a faith inclined being and that of the reason inclined being as He is both responsible for the human faculty of faith and that of reason, and appreciates both without partiality or discrimination.

## References

- Adeyemo, T. et al., Eds. (2006). *Africa Bible Commentary*, Kenya: Word Alive Publishers.
- Bloom, H. (ed.). (1989). *Søren Kierkegaard*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Corduan, W. (1981). *Handmaid to Theology: An Essay in Philosophical Prolegomena*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House.



Craig, W. L. (2008). *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.

Douglas, J.D. & Philip W. C. (1992). Eds. *Who's who in Christian History*, Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Elwell, W. A. (2000). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology - Second Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

Evans, C. S. & R. Zachery M. (2009). *Philosophy of Religion*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.

*Faith and Reason Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [www.iep.utm.edu/faith-re](http://www.iep.utm.edu/faith-re). Seen 25/01/2018.

Farrow, D. (2018). *Theological Negotiations*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics.

Geisler, N. L. (2013). *Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

Grisez, G. (1965). "The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the Summa Theologiae, 1–2, Question 94, Article 2", *Natural Law Forum*, 10, 168–201.

Heward-Mills, D. (2012). *Basic Theology*, Edo: Hosanna Christian Bookshop and Publishing House.

Keeley, R. et al, Eds. (1985).. *A Lion Hand Book, Christianity: A World Faith* Tring, Herts: Lion Publishing Plc.

Matthews, G. B. (ed.). (1999). *The Augustinian Tradition*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Omeregbe, J. (2012). *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy* Ikeja, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publication Limited.

Packer, J.I. et al ., Eds. (1988). *New Dictionary of Theology* Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press.

Paul, John (II) in Fagan, E.J. (2006). *Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason)* <https://www.catholiceducation.org/fides...> Accessed 08/02/2018.

Ramsay, R. B. (2007). *The Certainty of the Faith*, New Jersey: P&R Publishing.

Taylor, R. S. et al., Eds. (1983). *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, Missouri: Beacon Press.

Taliaferro, C. & Elsa J. M. Eds. (2010). *A Dictionary of philosophy of Religion* London: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Thielicke, H. (1990). *Modern Faith and Thought* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Young, W. C. (1954). *Christian Approach to Philosophy*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House.





**Conflict of Interest Statement:** *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



**This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence**  
*The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.*

