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Bradley Kime
Brigham Young University

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol42/iss1/13

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Human Nature and the Integration of Faith and Reason

Bradley Kime

In his 1838 Divinity School address, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that “every man is an inlet into the deeps of Reason.”¹ Heavily influenced by Hindu Monism, Emerson believed human beings were one with the universal soul—the immanent divinity of the natural universe. Because of humanity’s divine nature, Emerson saw reason as an intuitive revelation springing from within every individual, while faith was simply a recognition of one’s innate intuition. Faith and reason were two sides of the same coin.² Emerson’s Transcendentalism illustrates how conceptions of faith, reason, and their relationship often rest on underlying beliefs about human nature.

This essay discusses faith and reason in the context of three philosophical anthropologies. Calvinist and Enlightenment thought, broadly-speaking, represented extremes in their estimations of human nature. Both consequently envisioned conflict between faith and reason.³ The restored gospel’s insights into human nature navigated and transcended reformed theology and the Enlightenment, illuminating the possibilities for the integration of faith and reason. In

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² For more on Emerson’s concept of “Reason” see Patrick J. Keane, Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005).
³ Calvinism and the Enlightenment were arguably the two most powerful shaping forces in the two centuries of American religious thought that preceded Joseph Smith. See E. Brooks Holifield, Theology in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
my own experience, the Holy Ghost has drawn on the epistemological capacities inherent in human nature to enable a practical implementation of those possibilities in scholarship.

Such an integration of faith and reason was not something John Calvin's view of human nature imagined. In Book II of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin defined original sin as "an hereditary pravity and corruption of our nature, diffused through all parts of the soul." After explaining the universality and totality of our depraved human nature, Calvin emphasized that this condition extended to our reasoning capacities in particular. The corruption was "not solely in the sensual part of the soul, but even in the mind itself." Such a mind, unless regenerated by a predestined election of grace, was wholly corrupt. Unaided reason, in this light, could have no integrated relationship to faith. When detractors argued that the tenets of Calvin's faith contradicted reason, his standard response was that faith "transcend[ed] our powers of discernment" and should not be "subjected to our understanding." Just as salvation was determined by God's will regardless of human choice, knowledge—to Calvin—was obtained by faith independent of human reason.

Two centuries after Calvin and surrounded by religious wars, intolerance, and superstition, enlightened *philosophes* traced nearly every problem plaguing society to the disparaging of human nature and human reason. According to Baron d'Holbach, "The human mind, confused with its theological opinions, forgot itself, doubted its own powers, mistrusted experience, feared truth, disdained its reason, and abandoned her direction." The neglect of reason, in other words, was a natural result of dogma that denigrated human nature. In contrast to Calvinist thought, Enlightenment thinkers saw human nature as inherently good and self-sufficient. From this understanding of human nature flowed their conviction that reason was a panacea: "Men have no need of theology, of revelation, or gods," continued d'Holbach, "They have need only of reason. They have only to enter into themselves, to reflect upon their own nature." Whereas in Calvinist thought, humanity was wholly corrupt, in the Age of Reason, man was the measure of all things. But both estimations of human nature placed faith and reason in conflict.

5 Allen, Institutes, 305.
6 Hillerbrand, *Protestant Reformation*, 231.
8 Kramnick, *Enlightenment Reader*, 144.

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Transcending Calvinism and the Enlightenment, Joseph Smith Jr. taught that human nature was neither utterly depraved nor self-sufficient. It was human and divine, imperfect but perfectible. It was infinitely malleable according to human freedom and divine grace. It was a product of choices—both human and divine. As immortal beings with freedom and intelligence, men and women were, to Joseph Smith, capable of obtaining knowledge by both faith and reason. The fullest use of either required the integration of both. Temporary separation from God and the need for experiential development necessitated such an integrated epistemology. The integration depended on the agency of humans and the agency of God working in dynamic synergy. From an understanding of men and women as co-eternal with God, intelligent and free, but only midway through their eternal progression, flowed an affirming and reconciling view of faith and reason.

In his 1855 *Key to the Science of Theology*, Parley P. Pratt built on Joseph Smith’s insights. In Pratt’s view, human nature was developmentally divine, and our innate, divine capacity for reason could be unlocked through the influence of the Holy Ghost. “An intelligent being,” Pratt wrote, is “in the image of God” and “possesses every . . . attribute . . . which is possessed by God Himself,” but “these attributes are in embryo, and are to be gradually developed.” Pratt continued: “The gift of the Holy Spirit adapts itself to all these . . . attributes.” In particular, “It quickens all the intellectual faculties. . . . It develops and invigorates all the faculties of the . . . intellectual man.” To Pratt, reason—intellect—was in our divine genetics, and faith facilitated its development and utilization through the influence of the Holy Ghost.9

My own experiences in scholarship have verified this view of human nature, faith, and reason. Neither Calvinistic pessimism nor Enlightenment hubris has dominated my epistemic outlook, and faith in the power of the Holy Ghost has enlivened my innate intellectual capacities. I have relied on the quickening effects of that faith in tandem with my reason and intellect as I have pursued knowledge and rigorous scholarship. For me, that process has blurred the epistemic line between faith and reason, even in academic contexts. Human nature allows for the integration of faith and reason, the Holy Ghost enables that integration, and scholarship is enhanced by the quiet, careful discernment that such integration produces.