

Reason and Culture

Know What You Believe-And Why You Believe It!

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Philosopher of religion C. Stephen Evans comments on the notion of reason that a culture might adopt at a given time, writing,

Every concrete human society holds up particular practices of thinking and belief formation as those that embody ‘reason,’ those that are thought to give us the best chance at arriving at truth. However, which practices are regarded as part of ‘reason’ is not something that is historically and culturally invariant. Rather, we find substantial changes over time in the weight attached to such things as the testimony of authoritative texts, tradition, experimental evidence, and deductive theorizing. The question of what counts as ‘reason’ is itself one about which reasonable people may disagree.¹

Evans has made an insightful point. Christians live in a day and age where these latter authorities (i.e. experimental evidence and deductive theorizing) are held in such high esteem that any position that would gainsay their conclusions is immediately heralded as “irrational” or “unreasonable.” One need only attend to the recent books put out by prominent physicists (e.g. L. Krauss and S. Hawking) on issues that deal with ultimate reality to realize that our Western society has become infatuated with whatever the natural sciences say about the world.

This infatuation with the natural sciences has reached a crescendo and is part and parcel of our society’s move away from the other influences mentioned by Evans (i.e. testimony of authoritative texts and tradition). For those who are drunk on the nectar of science we might issue two salient warnings: First, if one familiarizes oneself with the history of science, the present day pronouncements of scientists will seem less infallible; Second, the idea that the methods of the sciences is the only viable means to obtain truth is self-defeating. It is a position called “scientism” and it is a philosophical position in epistemology (that branch of philosophy that studies theories of knowledge).

The dilemma is this, if one only accepts what the sciences say, then one cannot accept scientism, because scientism is not a *conclusion* from the sciences it is *about* the sciences. And if one can accept this *philosophical* position, why not other philosophical positions relevant to how we interpret reality?

The bottom line is what Evans has already concluded, “The question of what counts as ‘reason’ is itself one about which reasonable people may disagree.” Christians ought not to allow ourselves to be bullied by the ideological fashions of the day. The true inoculation to these passing fads is, as it always has been, to truly understand *what* you believe and *why* you believe it.

¹ C. Stephen Evans, “Faith and Revelation” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, William J. Wainwright, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 323-343.