How do we know what we know about god?

There was a medieval theory about that said that every word represented a concept which represented the reality it was trying to talk about. This triangle theory of knowledge was very popular and deeply formative to the way that we think about and talk about matters of faith.

Then, as always happens, somebody tried to simplify it and flattened it to be more of a straight line. Words represent the realities that talk about. It was a case of over-simplifying to the point the theory fell apart. Then a battle broke out: some became really aggressive in their critique and criticism while others became really defensive in their attempt to preserve The Faith.

Some groups tried to rescue the idea by being more nuanced and elaborate. Other continued to double-down in simplistic and literalists understandings. Some alternative schools of thought sprung up to try and get out of the either-or all-or-nothing game altogether.

Fideism is one of those alternative approaches and it is both tempting, and thus, a potentially dangerous development on the religious landscape for our lifetime.
Fideism: The view that matters of religious and theological truth must be accepted by faith apart from the exercise of reason. In its extreme, fideism suggests that the use of reason is misleading. Less extreme fideists suggest that reason is not so much misleading as it is simply unable to lead to truths about the nature of God and *salvation.

- *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Kindle Locations 552-554).

Fideism has been around for a long time but it has taken on a new tenacity recently. There are several new schools of thought that we will cover in a moment, each of them has an element of ‘you won’t fully understand until you believe’ or ‘what we have (or have been given) is a self-contained unit and really only works if you play the game by its rules”.

The 19th Century was a tough one for ‘reasoned faith’. Those bastions that survived into the 20th Century were not left unaltered. In fact, since WWII the effect of those descended from who Paul Ricoeur dubbed ‘The Master of Suspicion’ – Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx (some add Darwin) - has grown and intensified.

Another way of saying this is that the fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and science have deeply impacted the way that faith and religion was understood in the latter half of the 20th century. It is almost as if the pressure created by the work of these Masters of Suspicion was building up in the 19th century and was unleashed with the events of the early part of the 20th century.

The two merged into a storm of doubt and decline that has yet to end in our current situation.

Think about how much changed from just 1906-2007.

From Pentecostal revival that started in 1906, to the great depression, the World Wars, the Civil Rights movement, television, Watergate, Vietnam, the Cold War, cable TV, Monica Lewiski, Y2K, September 11th, the internet, and the first iPhone in 2007. In that 101 years from the Azusa Street revival to the iPhone … think about how much psychology, sociology, philosophy, and science changed and changed how we think about things - how we conceive of them, interpret them, and participate in them.

Understandably, part of ‘reasoned faith’ is that it had to adjust and modify. It had to account for new data (scientific and sociological) and, more importantly, it had to stop playing by its own rules.

The rules of engagement changed. Faith no longer got a free pass. The ‘church’ was no longer running the uni-versity. Fields like science had grown up since the Copernican revolution were no longer afraid of the church - and began to act like they were running the show now.

Psychology asked why we did things. Sociology questioned the venue in which we did them. Philosophy examined what was behind those things in the first place. Science explored the means by which we did them and expanded our ability to do them.

Not only had the rules of the game changed, the game itself was changing.
Modern Christianity had to choose to:

- Fight
- Flight
- Concede
- or Adjust-Adapt-Evolve

These are modern Christianity’s temptations.

A subtle form of this impulse toward fideism is simply to speak of ‘Non-Overlapping Magisterium’. Science and reason take care of their areas and faith takes care of its area. Those who take this impulse further retreat into what Wittgenstein would call ‘private language games’. They take on a formal defense of the given-ness of faith say that faith doesn’t have to be reasonable. Those two things are just speaking different languages and that science of reason doesn’t even have the ability to understand what faith is doing. That is why neither can even provide a critique let alone a correction. Religion is thus except from an investigation-integration from outside.

I would argue that what we believe in private has massive implication for how we participate in the public arena. In our present societal unrest what folks believe in private really does impact how that participate in public. I have found it very useful to multiply the categories from 2 to 4 so that we talk about the:

1. Private
2. Personal
3. Public
4. Political

It is helpful to expand the existing categories to reflect more of how actually think about and engage in matters of faith and politics.

This is why we have to care about fideism. I understand the desire to preserve the past and stake out ones territory for the given-ness of the tradition. It is a way of protecting what is deeply valued and – let’s be honest – in grave danger. Those who are attracted to fideism look at the evolution of their religion and the disappearance of treasured practices and think “I don’t even recognize this contemporary mutation as the same thing that we inherited from those who came before!”

… and that might be true. But we live in a world come of age and The Faith both needs to and is bound to change.

“How do we know what we know about God?” is a very timely question. Later in this series we are going to talk about the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Until then, we need to be very honest about the ways that science, politics, philosophy, religions, and social action all overlap and interact. They do influence each other – we just want to be honest about how they do that.