

Some observations about faith

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Some apologists like to argue that religious faith is rationally unobjectionable because everybody, not excluding the most doctrinaire atheist, believes some things on faith. Apologists are not the only ones saying that, either. I have seen secularists claim that every worldview, whether or not it includes a religious component, is faith-based on some level. If the argument is valid, though, then faith is such a trivial thing that there can be no virtue in it, and the notion that there is no virtue in faith is hardly one that any Christian is going to accept. The triviality of faith, so construed, certainly is contrary to certain assertions made by some of the Bible's authors.

Of course we all believe some things that we cannot prove, and it's also true that we cannot avoid doing so. It is demonstrably impossible for anyone to produce a proof for every statement that he or she accepts as true. But are we therefore supposed to believe that there is nothing more than that to having faith? Proof-texting a dictionary won't answer the question. We're asking whether Christians, when they talk about having faith in God, actually do mean nothing more than that they believe without proof whatever it is that they think is true about God.

When a dictionary lists more than one meaning for a word, there is a reason, and the reason is that people do not always mean the same thing when they use that word. Furthermore, it is not the case that only one meaning is the real one. No meaning is more real than another, no definition more true than another. Every word in every language means just whatever the people using it, at the time and in the context of the particular occasion of the usage, understand it to mean. Anything that it could mean at another time or in another context is simply irrelevant.

So, let us see what the *Oxford English Dictionary* has to say about what people are thinking of when they use the word *faith* in the various contexts where the word shows up. For the sake of thoroughness, we'll look at some of the OED's citations while we're at it.

1. a. Confidence, reliance, trust (in the ability, goodness, etc., of a person; in the efficacy or worth of a thing; or in the truth of a statement or doctrine).

Sample usage: *Such an one has great faith in Ward's pills.*

Note that there is nothing here about lack of proof or any other reason for “confidence, reliance” etc. A person may or may not have a reason for this sort of faith—the definition doesn’t say either way. I have no idea what was in Ward’s pills or what they were supposed to cure, but a person might have trusted in their efficacy because the pills really did what they were supposed to do. Christians sometimes say, “If I had a reason to believe, it wouldn’t be faith,” but it just is not always the case that having faith means having no reason. An employer who has noticed that a certain worker is always on time and always performs his job well will have faith in that worker, and with good reason. It would be false to assert, in this context, that the employer, because of that good reason, doesn’t really have faith in his employee.

Two of the apologists’ favorite examples are also relevant here: “When you sit in a chair, you have faith that it will support you” and “When you get on an airplane, you have faith that it won’t crash.” Yes, you may correctly say that I do. But if you ask me why I believe that the chair will hold me or that the plane will land safely, I will give you some good reasons for believing those things.

Here is another definition:

b. Belief proceeding from reliance on testimony or authority.

Sample usage: *When we derive the Evidence of any Proposition from the Testimony of others, it is called the Evidence of Faith.*

This clearly is belief with a reason—a justified belief. We believe it because we heard it from someone we trust. Whether we have good reason, or any reason at all, to trust the source of that testimony is another matter. The point is that no matter why we trust them, we believe what they say, and the reason we believe it is just that they said it. We trust them to speak the truth, and that gives us a reason to believe what they said.

Next we find:

2. Phrases. *to give faith:* to yield belief *to*. *to pin one's faith to* or

upon: to believe implicitly.

Sample usage: *You believe..that I am willing to give faith to wonderful stories.*

This is similar to the previous. Here, “faith” means “implicit belief.” So, what makes a belief implicit? It is belief engendered by one’s perception that the source is perfectly reliable. If a source is perfectly reliable, it logically follows—i.e., is implied—that whatever they say is true. Therefore, if I hear something from such a source, I will believe it implicitly.

Now we come to:

3. Theol. in various specific applications. **a.** Belief in the truths of religion; belief in the authenticity of divine revelation (whether viewed as contained in Holy Scripture or in the teaching of the Church), and acceptance of the revealed doctrines. **b.** That kind of faith (distinctively called **saving** or **justifying faith**) by which, in the teaching of the N.T., a sinner is justified in the sight of God. This is very variously defined by theologians (see quotes.), but there is general agreement in regarding it as a conviction practically operative on the character and will, and thus opposed to the mere intellectual assent to religious truth (sometimes called **speculative faith**). **c.** The spiritual apprehension of divine truths, or of realities beyond the reach of sensible experience or logical proof. By Christian writers often identified with the preceding; but not exclusively confined to Christian use. Often viewed as the exercise of a special faculty in the soul of man, or as the result of supernatural illumination.

Sample usage: *Faith is the believing of God’s promises, and a sure trust in the goodness and truth of God, which faith justified Abraham.*

Notice the label “Theol.” This is faith *in the context of Christian belief*. It is faith of a particular kind, uniquely Christian, and it is very obviously something different from faith in any other context. It is not primarily about why one believes or whether one can say why one believes. Nor is it an assessment of the source of the statements that are believed. It is about what one believes: one’s faith is in the truth of certain

propositions. This faith is applied not to people but to certain beliefs. If one has those beliefs, then one has faith, and if one does not have those beliefs, then one lacks faith. In such a context, it is vacuous to say, “I believe because I have faith,” since that is equivalent to saying, “I believe because I believe.”

In the opinion of many people, the OED is the best English-language dictionary there is, but not everyone agrees, and in any case no reference book is infallible. Some other dictionaries, unlike the OED, do make note that when people speak of faith, they often do mean to suggest belief without evidence or without proof. But as noted above, they don't always mean that. Apologists who try to compare the average person's faith in chairs, airplanes, and dependable employees with their belief in unproven religious dogmas are just equivocating.

Up to this point, all we have is a semantic dispute. Most apologists say that the beliefs constituting their faith are justified. That is, after all, what apologetics is all about. An apologetic for any belief system is simply a reasoned defense of that system. Those who say “If I had a reason, it would not be faith,” are simply advocating pure fideism, whether they know it or not, and most of them don't know it. If the essence of faith is belief without reason, then apologetics is at best a waste of time, and at worst is actually inconsistent with faith.

Where the dispute goes past mere semantics is where moral culpability is imputed to lack of faith. We may, or we may not, question the wisdom of someone who will not fly because of their lack of faith that the airplane won't crash. We might think that an employer who does not trust an employee with an impeccable work history is too cynical. We are likely to suspect that a person constantly afraid of collapsing chairs could use some psychiatric help. But in all these cases, most of us will not accuse the person of any moral deficiency. We will question their wisdom or their judgment, but not their character—except possibly in the case of the cynical employer, who we might suspect is engaging in some projection, i.e. that he knows himself to be untrustworthy notwithstanding appearances and assumes that everyone else is just like him in that respect. Even in that case, we think the lack of trust is not itself immoral, but only evidence of immorality. We think the lack of trust per se is simply foolish. It just isn't

smart to not trust people who have proven themselves trustworthy.

But in certain Christian circles, lack of faith is per se a moral defect: It is wrong not to believe, and it makes no difference why you don't believe. According to that worldview, God has commanded us to believe certain things, and so disbelief is disobedience, for which there can be no excuse. Here is the OED again: “**b.** That kind of faith . . . by which, in the teaching of the N.T., a sinner is justified in the sight of God . . . a conviction practically operative on the character and will.”

Let an apologist assert that for some of my beliefs, I have no more justification than he does for his Christian beliefs. The assertion is either true or false. If it is true, then if I fault him for his faith, I am being a hypocrite. But my hypocrisy, if I am guilty of it, provides him with no justification. It just means that we are equally guilty of believing something without justification. But there is this difference in any event. Whatever it is that I believe without justification, I am not accusing anyone who doesn't believe it of being a bad person. I am not claiming that every disbeliever deserves to be punished. But some Christians will say that my disbelief is all the reason God needs to send me to hell for all eternity.

At this point some apologists will insist: “No, we don't say that.” Well, no, not in so many words. But let us examine what they do say and try to find a significant difference. Here is Lee Strobel quoting D. A. Carson in *The Case for Christ*:

[H]ell is not a place where people are consigned because they were pretty good blokes but just didn't believe the right stuff. They're consigned there, first and foremost, because they defy their Maker and want to be at the center of the universe. . . . It's filled with people who, for all eternity, still want to be at the center of the universe and who persist in their God-defying rebellion.¹

So, according to Carson (with Strobel's implicit endorsement), in Hell we'll be punished not for unbelief but for rebellion. Apparently, though, the only way to stop rebelling is to start believing; until you believe, you are in rebellion against God, so far as God is concerned. In the divine lexicon, then, unbelief per se is essentially equivalent

¹Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 165. (Zondervan, 1998).

to rebellion. Any distinction between punishment for rebellion and punishment for disbelief is no real difference.

But, on this issue, Carson and Strobel are probably not representative of Christians in general. And, the OED notwithstanding, most Christians—at least among those I’ve met online—seem not to have the theological definition in mind when they carry on about how everybody including atheists has faith, and if everybody has it, then what’s wrong with it?

Now, I myself have never said there is anything wrong with it. I suppose plenty of atheists do say so, but whether they’re justified depends on what kind of faith they’re talking about, and in any case, Christians can’t win this argument just by changing the subject, which they’re usually doing when they say, “Everybody does it.” From the observation that we all believe things we cannot prove, it does not follow that every unproven belief is justified. Nor does it follow that there is something virtuous about holding any particular unproven belief. We do a lot of things out of necessity, and relying on assumptions is one of them, but that just means we’re being rational. It doesn’t make us virtuous, except only insofar as it is virtuous to be rational.

What we see so far is that the defenders of faith do not agree among themselves on what it is they are defending. That being so, if someone tells me I ought to have faith, I have no good idea what they’re telling me until they have explained just what they mean by “faith.”

If faith is taken to mean nothing more than “belief without proof,” then the term is redundant because we already have a word for that kind of belief. The word is “assumption.” Here the accusation that skeptics are guilty of using a double standard is often justified, but the believers are usually asking for it. Of course anyone who says, “You should never believe anything that you cannot prove,” is rhetorically hanging himself, but if the believer points that out, all he has established is that the skeptic in this case is a hypocrite. Granted that we all assume things, there is a reason why some of us don’t apply the label “faith” to our own assumptions, and that reason lies in the way Christians have treated the particular assumptions on which they base their religion and to which they insist on applying that special label. Christianity’s characteristic

assumptions are called articles of faith. The assumptions made by Euclid or Hilbert in geometry, or Peano in arithmetic, are not, in ordinary discourse, called articles of faith. They instead are called axioms. No apologist, to my knowledge, has ever referred to God's existence as axiomatic, and I cannot help suspecting that there is a good reason for this. I suspect that apologists are being disingenuous when they assert the intellectual equivalence of their particular unproved beliefs with the unproved beliefs that everybody else holds. If we have two propositions P and Q , and if in fact nobody questions P but many people question Q , then it is probable that P and Q are not really in the same epistemological ballpark.

We noted earlier that *faith* can and often does refer to beliefs held with good reason. So, why do we call those beliefs instances of faith? Because we cannot prove that they're true. But, don't our good reasons prove them? That depends on the sense of *prove*. To a logician, it means *deduce by valid argument from undisputed premises*. It is widely presumed that the only people who can routinely do that are mathematicians. Proof in this sense needs a deductive argument, but our knowledge of empirical reality requires inductive arguments, which at best can lead only to probable conclusions. But most of us, at least most of the time, take it for granted (i.e. assume) that we are entirely justified in believing something if we have a good enough inductive argument for it. So what constitutes a good inductive argument? Philosophers of science haven't reached any consensus on that, but the rest of the world usually knows one when it sees one. We could, and often do, say that a good inductive argument proves its conclusion, by which we mean that it gives us all the reason we need to believe the conclusion. To steer clear of equivocation, though, in careful discourse the word for "all the reason we need" is *justification*.

The distinction between proof and justification seems to be that proof eliminates any possibility of error while justification does not necessarily do that. Thus, if I claim to have proven some proposition P , I am claiming that there is no way I could be wrong in believing P , while if I claim only to be justified, then I'm admitting some possibility of being mistaken. We must keep in mind, though, that even a deductive proof rests ultimately on premises that can only be assumed true, not proved. What this tells us is

that our belief in the conclusion of any deductive argument cannot be any more justified than our belief in its premises.

If we construe *faith* as referring to any justified but unproven belief, then of course we all have faith, but to say we all have faith in that sense is, at best, to say nothing useful and, at worst, to muddy the dialectical waters by applying a controversial label to an uncontroversial proposition. We can still ask, regarding any assumption we make, whether we are justified in making that assumption. In many cases the answer will be obvious, but that doesn't mean we're not supposed to ask the question.

With those who say that I have some kind of secular faith, I won't waste time arguing about it, because it's bound to degenerate into an argument about how the word *faith* ought to be defined. But I'm OK arguing about justification. And I do not have any religious faith, simply because I can find no justification for believing any propositions that are uniquely religious. This is not to say that I think religious beliefs cannot be justified at all by anybody. I think there are many beliefs that some people, but not all people, can justify holding. We are not all in the same epistemic situation, and from the sole fact, whenever it is a fact, that it is rational to believe *X* we cannot infer that it is irrational for anyone to believe not-*X*.

Some seem to be under the impression that merely calling some belief "faith" is all the justification they need. Ask them why they believe *P* and all you get is the answer, "I have faith that *P* is so." I am at a loss to figure out what they mean, unless it's just some kind of code for "I don't need a reason." But in that case I will insist that their faith puts no obligations on me. To paraphrase Christopher Hitchens, if they don't need a reason to believe it, then nobody needs a reason to disbelieve it.

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