

Faith

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FAITH AND ITS DISCONTENTS

I BELIEVE IN GOD, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, CREATOR OF HEAVEN and earth.” This is the beginning of the Apostle’s Creed, shared by both Catholics and Protestants. I take it to be at the center – the very heart – of the Christian religion. If you believe this, then you are on the way to being a Christian. If you do not believe this, then you are not a Christian. I say “believe,” but in this context I am not inclined to make much of the difference between knowledge and belief. “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.”¹ You might say that there is a difference and that is that knowledge is justified true belief, or some such thing. Fair enough, but for now I am going to ride roughshod over such issues, for all that they have given fellow philosophers many happy hours of thinking up counter-examples. Obviously, many people believe in the existence of God. No one knows that God exists – because, he doesn’t! For the moment, though, I shall take it that when someone recites the Apostle’s Creed, they think that God really does exist. They know that God exists.

Why do they believe or know that God exists? Because they have faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”² It is here that the New Atheists – biologist and popular science writer Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, sometime graduate student and neurobiologist Sam Harris, and the journalist the late Christopher Hitchens – become eloquent. In *The God Delusion* (2006), Richard Dawkins says, “Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification

¹ Job 19:25. ² Hebrews 11:1.

and brooks no argument.”³ The title of Sam Harris’s book, *The End of Faith*, tells the tale. He states flatly that “the truth is that religious faith is simply unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern – specifically in propositions that promise some mechanism by which human life can be spared the ravages of time and death. Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse – constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor.”⁴

Others hold forth in the same way. A more recent member of the group, Chicago biologist Jerry Coyne, laments that the problem is not with religion as such but with “its reliance on and glorification of faith – belief, or if you will, ‘trust’ or ‘confidence’ – without supporting evidence.” Faith is dangerous both to science and to society. “The danger to science is how faith warps the public understanding of science: by arguing, for instance, that science is based just as strongly on faith as is religion; by claiming that revelation or the guidance of ancient books is just as reliable a guide to the truth about our universe, as are the tools of science; by thinking that an adequate explanation can be based on what is personally appealing rather than what stands the test of empirical study.”⁵

DOES FAITH MATTER?

Let us focus in a little more on this dreadful phenomenon. You might be inclined to say that we could escape altogether having to discuss this obviously dated issue. Coyne brings up the matter of science, and if anything is true it is that we today – as compared with even the most recent past – are living in an age of science and technology. That spells reason and evidence. Why don’t we just jump therefore to possible alternatives for getting at the Almighty and pick up the God discussion there? What reason and evidence are there to believe in the Christian God? We shall turn to this issue in later chapters, but I am afraid that right now there is no getting away from the faith question. That faith is all-important is right at the heart of the Christian religion. Whatever the powers of reason and evidence, they are trumped by faith.

³ R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2006), 308.

⁴ S. Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 65.

⁵ J. A. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion Are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), 225–26.

WHAT IS FAITH?

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Jesus set the scene. The disciple Thomas, on meeting the risen Lord, expressed some doubt, astonishment.

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”⁶

This is and always has been the essential Christian tradition. Faith is where it is at. Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), affirmed this position strongly. “The results of reasoning may in fact be true, but these results acquire their true meaning only if they are set within the larger horizon of faith: ‘All man’s steps are ordered by the Lord: how then can man understand his own ways?’”⁷

WHAT IS FAITH?

So, we’re stuck with faith. First, let us ask a bit more about it and how it functions. Without in any sense intending irreverence, it is a bit like a direct Skyping line with God. Calvin – and his later followers like Alvin Plantinga – spoke of a *sensus divinitatis*.

That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.⁸

The *sensus* is not faith itself but leads to faith. This, in the Christian context, is perfectly reasonable. We humans are made in the image of God. We are not the only care of God – “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father”⁹ – but we are the uniquely loved and favored. Jesus did not die on the cross for

⁶ John 20:27–29.

⁷ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: Encyclical Letter of John Paul II to the Catholic Bishops of the World* (Vatican City: L’Osservatore Romano, 1998), 16. Quoting Proverbs 20–24.

⁸ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1536] 1962), chapter 3, section 1.

⁹ Matthew 10:29.

kangaroos, even though one supposes that in some sense they are tainted by sin because they die. One would expect humans to be directly aware of God. Can we dig a little further? Let us turn to a couple of faith experiences. First, most famously, that of Saul of Tarsus. He has set out for Damascus to find and persecute Christians. Then it happened.

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”¹⁰

Famously, Saul has been struck blind. He is taken to Damascus, where Ananias comes to him.

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized.¹¹

Paul, it will be remembered, was the chap who took faith very seriously, valuing it over good works.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.¹²

So much for the Sermon on the Mount. A sympathetic explanation is that Paul is reflecting on his own experience of being saved without having any merits to his name. The point is that, through his love, his grace, God gives us understanding without our having earned it.

There is more to faith than just a spartan knowledge component: $2 + 2 = 4$ sort of thing. There is an overwhelming feeling of love, irresistible. The eminent (English) philosopher of religion John Hick wrote of his conversion to Christianity as a late teenager. He was resisting the call. Then it happened. “An experience of this kind which I cannot forget, even though it happened forty-two years ago [1942], occurred – of all places – on the top deck of a bus in the middle of the city of Hull. . . . As everyone will be very conscious who

¹⁰ Acts 9:3–5.

¹¹ Acts 9:17–18.

¹² Romans 5:1–2.

can themselves remember such a moment, all descriptions are inadequate. But it was as though the skies opened up and light poured down and filled me with a sense of overflowing joy, in response to an immense transcendent goodness and love.”¹³

Of course, Paul did not think that faith meant there was no more to be done. Like the shipwrecked sailor in the A. A. Milne poem, there was so much to be done

– And he wanted a hat,
 and he wanted some breeks;
 And he wanted some nets, or a line and some hooks –

In the end, the sailor sat on his bottom.

But he never could think which he ought to do first.
 And so in the end he did nothing at all,
 But basked on the shingle wrapped up in a shawl.
 And I think it was dreadful the way he behaved –
 He did nothing but basking until he was saved!¹⁴

This was very much not St. Paul. His bottom went unused. No sooner was he converted than he set about preaching and writing, without pause, until his life was ended by an executioner’s sword in Rome. Hick had a less grisly end, but he was through his life a great force for religious and racial harmony, working in the British Midlands industrial city of Birmingham on and within interfaith groups and the like, nonstop.

Faith is this sense of being embraced by love, an experience over which one has no control. It does not necessarily come in a flash, but it comes and it cannot be resisted. C. S. Lewis, conservative Anglican and now the idol of the evangelicals:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.¹⁵

¹³ J. Hick, *An Autobiography* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 205.

¹⁴ A. A. Milne, “The Old Sailor,” in *Now We Are Six* (London: Penguin, [1927] 1988), 36–41.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 115.

Dejected and reluctant, perhaps. Compulsively sharing his experience, certainly.¹⁶

AND THE WORLD SAID

Now what are we to say about all of this? Or rather, what is a nonbeliever to say about all of this? I am a case in point. I was born in England in 1940, early in the years of the Second World War. My father was a conscientious objector, I think mainly for political (he was very far left) than for religious reasons. Unsurprisingly, he came into contact with members of the (pacifist) Religious Society of Friends, Quakers. After the war, he and my mother joined that group, and I was raised very intensely within it. In my teens, I went to a Quaker boarding school. Yet around the age of twenty, my faith started to fade and has never returned. It was quite independent of my becoming a philosopher. If anything, I think it was connected to my intense dislike of my headmaster, an emotion reciprocated. My identification of God was with the worse kind of Old Testament bully – the God of the New Atheists – and it was as much with relief as regret that my identification as a Christian faded away. I don't hate religion. If you are raised a Quaker, you don't hate religion. It is just not for me.

So, what does a nonbeliever have to say on the faith issue? On the one side, the Christians; on the other side, the New Atheists. You cannot just dismiss those who have faith as stupid or weak or ignorant. Like a lot of us, I often have my doubts about St. Paul, but anyone who can write I Corinthians 13 – the King James Version! – has my money over Richard Dawkins. Apparently, *The God Delusion* has sold a mere 3 million copies. I hope, in Paradise, St. Paul will not be too condescending when they compare sales figures. Although I am closer to Dan Dennett than (let us say) to St. Augustine on the God question, the saint has my vote in the *Philosophical Gourmet's* competition for the “Ten Greatest Philosophers of All Time.” And John Hick? Intellectually and morally, he has it over the rest of the motley crew. But because you respect the people of faith – not just men but women of faith, like Sophie Scholl of the White Rose Group, who died on the guillotine for her opposition to the Nazis – if you do not have

¹⁶ I do not intend to imply that every person of faith had a road-to-Damascus experience. Some have faith naturally, as it were, all their lives. Others, notably Mother Teresa, have ongoing doubts (*Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, New York: Image, 2009). What I claim is that there is a shared experience of knowledge and love of God that is simply part of one's being, without need of argument. It is given, not earned.

faith yourself, you should not be pushed or bullied into pretending faith for yourself. Or into going all subjectivist and saying truth for me is not necessarily truth for them, and their position is just as good as mine. It seems to me that John Hick is a bit prone to this last fault, something that I shall pick up on later.

I doubt the New Atheists and fellow travelers will be much impressed by the point I have just made – they tend not to be impressed by any points but those they themselves make – so let us keep pressing the case. There is in the writings of Dawkins and company a contempt – not just implicit – for anyone who has faith-like experiences and who takes them seriously. Real white men – as critics have pointed out, the New Atheists tend to be at least as sexist and Eurocentric as any fervent Evangelical¹⁷ – don't have such experiences or, if they do, they brush them to one side. Science, mathematics, logic, evidence, observation, experiments make faith simply untenable in any direction. Someone like St. Paul may not seem weak, but obviously he was given to delusion. Most probably, the fear of death drove him to his conversion experience and future activities. However, let us leave on one side the cowardly nature of St. Paul, who knowingly preached up to his expected execution, and dig a little further. I do this even though, as a nonbeliever, I do – must – conclude that there is something inauthentic about faith. Only by making the strongest positive case can we then turn to criticism.

THE FAITH EXPERIENCE

What about the faith experience itself? An overwhelming sensation, experience, that is out of your hands and that leads to new insights. Is this, in itself, a sign of weakness? It is certainly a sign of being human, but weakness is another matter. Take falling in love, a very human experience, for all the obvious biological and social reasons. David Copperfield, in Charles Dickens's novel of that name, still a (late) teenager, is articulated to become a proctor. This was a kind of lawyer who dealt with the oddest mélange of issues – wills and misbehaving clergymen and (very strange to say) nautical matters. After a few months, David is invited down for the weekend to the home of the (widowed) senior partner, where he meets the daughter.

¹⁷ T. Crane, *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

We went into the house, which was cheerfully lighted up, and into a hall where there were all sorts of hats, caps, great-coats, plaids, gloves, whips, and walking-sticks. “Where is Miss Dora?” said Mr. Spenlow to the servant. “Dora!” I thought. “What a beautiful name!”

We turned into a room near at hand . . . , and I heard a voice say, “Mr. Copperfield, my daughter Dora, and my daughter Dora’s confidential friend!” It was, no doubt, Mr. Spenlow’s voice, but I didn’t know it, and I didn’t care whose it was. All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny. I was a captive and a slave. I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction!

She was more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don’t know what she was – anything that no one ever saw, and everything that everybody ever wanted. I was swallowed up in an abyss of love in an instant. There was no pausing on the brink; no looking down, or looking back; I was gone, headlong, before I had sense to say a word to her.¹⁸

Not much reason or evidence here. Yet – as always with Dickens – so human, so very human. And if this doesn’t at once click with John Hick on the top of the omnibus, I can only conclude that you are not human, so very human. The experiences are nigh identical. We have seen how people of faith stress that although it has a propositional content – God exists – there is so much more. Faith “seeks acceptance as an expression of love.” The sense of being swept up by a force stronger than oneself – a force that is entirely good and beautiful.

So, let us have no more nonsense about faith being untrustworthy simply because of its nature. If this is simple weakness, then thank God for weakness. We know weakness. Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, who, when faced with difficult decisions, doesn’t have the guts to choose the right option. The young soldier in the Great War who cowered in the trenches as his comrades went over the top. Paul, Hick, and David are not weak in this way. Does this mean that their experiences are beyond criticism? No indeed! People who fall in love often make disastrous decisions – both Dorothea and Lydgate in *Middlemarch*. (Fortunately, Dorothea gets a second chance.) So, for the moment, keep this in mind about religious experiences. More importantly, for all their similarities, there is surely a major difference between David Copperfield and John Hick. David, and the rest of us, would understand (and probably approve of) his emotions, but we would see them in some sense relative. David thinks – believes, knows – that Dora is the most beautiful person in the world, an object of irresistible attraction. We think – believe, know – that David thinks – believes, knows – that Dora is the most

¹⁸ C. Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1850] 1948).

beautiful person in the world, an object of irresistible attraction. However, we don't think – believe, know – that Dora is the most beautiful person in the world, an object of irresistible attraction.

We surely know why David feels as he does, and we probably have a pretty good idea of why we don't share that emotion. We may already ourselves be in love with another. We may find Dora not quite to our taste. As serious thinkers we would prefer a bluestocking over the rather shallow little person Dora proves to be. Not that we are not glad for David, for apart from anything else he is no longer a competitor for the person I want as my beloved. The point is that it is all relative. Objectively, Dora is not the most beautiful person in the world, an object of irresistible attraction. Whereas the believer wants to claim that objectively God exists, Jesus is his son, and these truths are given to us by an irresistible overwhelming force. And those of us who do not have faith are left outside wondering why we should accept this as an objective truth. In the end, given the similarities and differences between love and faith claims, it seems that one cannot – should not – condemn a faith experience because of what it is, namely, not reason and evidence, but that does not in itself confer self-validating status on such an experience.

SCIENCE VERSUS FAITH

The New Atheist will keep hammering. Let's take up the all-important question of science and what it tells us about faith. The answer is simple. Science tells us that faith is quite unreliable; it is just a crutch for the inadequate. Dawkins takes without argument that the God question is a scientific question. "Either he exists or he doesn't. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability."¹⁹ Significantly less than 1 percent! Jerry Coyne is eloquent on the subject. In *Faith vs. Fact* (2015) – a title that tells of where he goes and how – he speaks of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* as the "greatest scripture-killer ever penned." He argues that "science and religion are engaged in a kind of war: a war for understanding, a war about whether we should have good reasons for what we accept as true."²⁰ To use a wicked metaphor, Coyne has a statement of faith.

My claim is this: science and religion are incompatible because they have different methods for getting knowledge about reality, have different ways

¹⁹ Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 48.

²⁰ Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*, xii.

of assessing the reliability of that knowledge, and, in the end, arrive at conflicting conclusions about the universe. “Knowledge” acquired by religion is at odds not only with scientific knowledge, but also with knowledge professed by other religions. In the end, religion’s methods, unlike those of science, are useless for understanding reality.²¹

Why, then, are people deceived? Someone like John Hick may be as deluded as the alcoholic who sees pink rats running up the wall, but he is not an alcoholic. He is a solid citizen. Here we get into (scientific) explanations of religion and its hold on people. Opinion is divided. Some think it an evil phenomenon that has a life and history of its own, a life and history that involves humans but not their welfare. This is Dennett’s position. He regards religion as a parasite, just as much as the liver fluke is a parasite on sheep. “You watch an ant in a meadow, laboriously climbing up a blade of grass, higher and higher until it falls, then climbs again, and again, like Sisyphus rolling his rock, always striving to reach the top.” Why does this happen? The ant gets nothing out of all this activity. “Its brain has been commandeered by a tiny parasite, a lancet fluke (*Dicrocoelium dendriticum*), that needs to get itself into the stomach of a sheep or cattle in order to complete its reproductive cycle. This little brain worm is driving the ant into position to benefit *its* progeny, not the ant’s.”²² Just as the liver fluke is up to no good for sheep, so religion is up to no good for humans.

Some think religion is just a by-product of more useful adaptations. This is Richard Dawkins’s position. It could be that the clear biological utility of learning from your seniors, your parents, and others – stay away from the cliff; red berries give you stomachache; crocodiles are not friendly – backfires and leads to religious conviction. “To say the least, there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you. Obey your parents, obey the tribal elders, especially when they adopt a solemn, minatory tone. Trust your elders without question.”²³ Regrettably, this is just what happens with religion, and, like a Dennettian parasite, one has it because it is good at propagating itself for itself.

A third suggestion makes religion of great adaptive importance. This is the position of Edward O. Wilson, today’s most distinguished Darwinian evolutionist. “The highest forms of religious practice, when examined more

²¹ Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact*, 64.

²² D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 3–4.

²³ Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 174.