

Faith and Believing in God

Key words

Faith, belief, human being, identity, individuation, church

Abstract

Faith and belief can be distinguished from one another fruitfully. Faith is an essential human impulse which opens us up to the 'other' beyond our experience. Beliefs give expression to our faith and help us to harness its potential for personal growth and social benefit. Although not exclusive to this sphere, systems of belief perform a key function within Christianity and other religions. Ultimately, believing in God is not so much a *judgement* about divine existence as a *commitment* to live in the light of the sacred.

Article

What exactly is faith and is it the same as belief? Is it exclusive to Christianity or religions more generally? How does faith relate to knowledge, understanding and reason? Is it incompatible with scientific inquiry? What is the opposite of faith – doubt or certainty? Why is it that some people are able to believe in God and others aren't? In the end, what difference does faith make?

Faith raises many complex and challenging questions which touch on many aspects of life. For this reason, a good place to start is with a brief analysis of what it means to be human. Growing out of the European Enlightenment, we find an increasing emphasis in the West upon defining the self in *individualistic terms*, epitomized by the French philosopher René Descartes' (1596-1650) famous diction, 'cogito ergo sum' – 'I think, therefore, I am.' Within such an approach, the central core of personhood is located within the thinking capacity of an individual, who can be considered to exist independently of everyone and everything else. What is the most fundamental characteristic of 'me' being 'me' and 'you' being 'you'? It is the incontrovertible recognition that we are rational beings. One important consequence of this is that our relating to other people, and to the outside world more generally, become undertakings we choose to embrace and, as such, are *derivative* – rather than *constitutive* – of our selfhood.

Is there an alternative? Thinkers such as Martin Buber (1878-1965), John Macmurray (1891-1976) and others question whether such an individualistic approach to personhood satisfactorily accounts for the nature of human being. In contrast to Descartes' 'I think, therefore, I am,' they propose something along the lines of 'I relate, therefore, I am,' thereby affirming that we are essentially *relationally-constituted beings* whose personhood takes shape and finds expression within a *web of interrelatedness* – a web embracing not only other persons (who are similarly constituted), but also other creatures and entities within the outside world. This is why, for example, the loss of a loved one can be so diminishing – in truth, part of us has died also.

From the moment our umbilical cords are severed, we are instinctively, and somewhat paradoxically, reaching out beyond ourselves in order to become ourselves. And it is here, within a relationally-constituted dynamic of human being, that faith emerges. At its most fundamental, faith is the *individuating impulse* within each person-in-the-making – that inclination towards and capacity for being-in-relation. It has been described as an 'existential openness' (Raymond Panikkar) and one that necessarily engenders

trust and expectation, whilst exposing us to vulnerability and risk-taking: not everyone or everything is worthy of our faith and sometimes relationships affect us detrimentally, which requires us to develop discernment and resilience if we are to survive, let alone flourish.

Essentially, then, faith is a vital ingredient of being human. It is not a narrowly religious aptitude, but a universal capacity. As a consequence, from a phenomenological perspective, the faith impulse drawing us into relationship with persons is the same impulse fuelling our exploration of transcendence and the quest for the sacred. In both cases, a sense of incompleteness and yearning or, equally, a sense of fascination and inquisitiveness inclines us to reach beyond the safe confines of the self in pursuit of a fuller sense of self in relation to the other.

To aid our faith-ful explorations, *systems of belief* have evolved which provide a framework for our endeavours, supplying an interpretative lens through which to experience the outside world and, to a large extent, determine what we discover there. These belief systems can be found in many walks of life, including scientific inquiry where it is assumed that the universe is real (ie not simply an illusion), closed (ie not subject to supernatural intervention), contingent (ie open to change), rational (ie understandable) and predictable or, at least, predictably unpredictable. None of these can be proven, they are all beliefs; but by adopting them, scientists have been able not only to make sense of the physical world, but also to harness its resources. And, in a practical sense, this can be garnered as evidence for such beliefs being close approximations of whatever reality lies beyond our experience. But they remain *provisional* and, from time to time, need to be revised to accommodate new discoveries, such as, in science, the quantum world. These belief systems are also *partial* in the sense that they only relate us to a sub-set of human exploration. For example, when researching the nature of beauty through contemplating one of Rembrandt's works of art, we are unlikely to make much progress by analysing its chemical constituents or measuring its dimensions.

Religions such as Christianity are also systems of belief which exist to further our faith-ful explorations of, in this case, the spiritual or transcendent dimension of human being, as well as to find meaning in our fleeting existence. In certain parts of the world, these religious belief systems are *implicit* in the sense that they are simply assumed and, as such, are adopted unconsciously, providing a worldview shaping how life is experienced and lived – in a similar fashion to how the scientific worldview holds sway in the West today. In other parts, though, religious beliefs, if tolerated at all, tend to be excluded from public discourse and viewed as a relic from a bygone age with no constructive contribution to make.

One consequence of this 'flattening of the universe' (cf Charles Taylor) is that an essential aspect of human being disappears from the radar or ends up finding expression in other ways. For instance, we turn our football stars and fashion icons into gurus. Consumerism becomes the new religion with shopping malls serving as temples where masses gather for worship. Rather than exploring why we are here or what life is for or how we should live or where we are heading, we become distracted by the cult of the self or preoccupied with social networking or mass media. Through doing so, we place unrealistic and unrealizable expectations upon persons and pursuits that neither merit nor can sustain them. There is no reason why a footballer should know how to solve the world's problems or purchasing one more unnecessary item should sate our sacred hunger or losing ourselves in the latest computer game should vanquish our fear of death, yet this is what tends to happen when our yearning for transcendence and engagement with essential matters go unacknowledged.

One of the difficulties faced by any belief system, religious or otherwise, is that its *plausibility* is almost always dependent upon participation and, as such, it can appear incredible to the outsider. For instance, a diagnosis along the lines that we are suffering from a blocked chakra preventing the flow of chi along one of the principal meridians is unpersuasive for anyone unfamiliar with the worldview of Chinese medicine – what is more, any subsequent treatment is unlikely to prove effective. In a similar way, the prospect that human beings bear the divine image which has become tarnished through sin yet can be restored through gracious forgiveness will appear far-fetched and irrelevant to anyone who does not belong to a community shaped by these beliefs. Yet within such a community, not only do these and other beliefs become plausible, they can also help us make sense of human nature and enrich our experience of living. And it is principally here that their truthfulness resides – at the level of existential utility.

In a comparable way to how scientists are incapable of proving the existence of the physical universe and yet, through assuming its reality and conformity to certain beliefs, are able to make sense of what they experience through experiments and observation; so religious believers, unable to prove the existence of God, find such a belief adds meaning to their lives, offers insight to the human condition, inspires wholesome living and orientates them towards the sacred in creatures, creation and beyond. Ultimately, it may be demonstrated that there is no physical universe, only images constructed in our minds, and no creator God, only mental projections of the same – but if believing in both makes our lives worth living and orientates us constructively towards the perceived ‘other,’ then do they not remain real and true?

Viewed in this way, sacred texts, holy shrines, religious beliefs and rituals create a *symbolic world* which can transform our experience of living. Within a believing community, their effectiveness resides in their capacity for giving expression to faith, relating us to the sacred and, through doing so, engendering divine life within us. Christian beliefs, for example, invite us to reframe our lives within the story of Jesus and to participate in the unfolding of a world transfigured by ethical grace and compassionate justice – a world infused with divine spirit and unharnessed potential. Whether these beliefs are true can only be measured against their capacity for growing Christ-like persons dedicated to furthering Jesus’ mission and message. To subject such beliefs to objective scrutiny is no more appropriate than attempting to perform a similar task on the rules of football or the musical score of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony – in all three cases, the only meaningful criterion by which they can be assessed is their capacity to accomplish what they are about.

At their best, then, religious beliefs supply an *anatomy*, animating a living experiment in which believers participate. In one sense, it is like learning a second, first language – enabling us to articulate and communicate matters of ‘ultimate concern’ (cf Paul Tillich). In another sense, it is an acquired sensitivity – one attuned to life’s spiritual dimension, an aptitude comparable to developing an ‘ear’ for music or an ‘eye’ for art. In yet another, it is an exercise in imaginative play in which we explore a new identity and vocation within an unfolding, hopeful story yet to be resolved. And, finally, it is the possibility of finding meaning within the constraints of our mortality and fulfilment within the challenges and opportunities of human existence.

So, ultimately, believing in God is not a matter of weighing up whether or not God exists – self-evidently, God doesn’t exist, because existence is a contingent or creaturely quality, incompatible with divine essence. Rather, believing in God is the acceptance of an invitation to find our place within this

living experiment outlined in the previous paragraph and, through doing so, to discover in our own experience whether and what God is.

Recommended Reading

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