

## Is faith anything other than uncertain belief on incomplete evidence?

### **Introduction**

Following the high-profile emergence of the New Atheist movement in the early twenty first century, many of its adherents have taken an increasingly aggressive stance toward religious faith. This, they argue, is because faith involves belief in supernatural ideas which we lack conclusive evidence for – therefore no one is justified in having a full belief in God (Forrest 2021). In the words of the prominent New Atheist, Richard Dawkins (1992), “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence...Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument.” Such a view might appear exceedingly reductionist to the religious believer, who would respond in kind that religious faith is admirable for the very reason that the believer is able to maintain their view, absent of complete evidence. Furthermore, they argue that it would be impractical to define certainty in terms of the principle of verification, a philosophical doctrine New Atheists agree with which posits that only statements which can be verified through the senses or analytic are cognitively meaningful. This is because following such logic almost no beliefs would be completely certain, yet humans are meaning-seeking creatures who thrive on purpose.

This essay contends that proclaiming faith as none other than uncertain belief on the incomplete evidence is neither fair, since few modern scientific claims can achieve the high standards for justification set by New Atheists, nor fruitful in a world where numerous populations rely on religion to guide them spiritually. In what follows, we will first examine the definition of religious faith in the eyes of the believer, as well as the New Atheist’s rebuttal on the importance of verification. Furthermore, this essay will primarily focus on Western religious views, in particular Christianity which has been under the heavy scrutiny of New Atheists.

### **Faith in the Christian Context**

Faith, understood in the general sense, is synonymous with trust (Bishop 2016) and often entails commitment or an act of will. In a religious context, faith signifies trust or strong belief in a transcendent source (Swindal n.d.). In certain situations, such as in Christianity, the transcendent source takes the form of a powerful deity possessing an ability to perform miraculous actions which exist beyond the understanding of the mind. However, beyond committing to the mere belief

that such a being as God exists, the concept of faith further encompasses the acceptance of and trust in a creed that seeks to provide direction and guidance for individuals via, as theologian N.T. Wright suggests, “the intimacy of prayer and the life of discipleship” (Wright 2002).

Although some evidence exists to corroborate religious statements, such as but not limited to testimony and the works of other believers (Swindal n.d.), faith, on the whole, possesses the ability to transcend beyond boundaries set by empirical observation. According to the New Testament, “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1, *New International Version*), suggesting that the emergence of faith itself serves as ample proof and reassurance that religious beliefs are meaningful. When we utter the saying “taking a leap of faith”, we suggest that a decision or judgement is rooted in a deeper will to find purpose. Likewise, the Christian interpretation of faith, by large an “irrevocable commitment” (Kenny 2007), views such a “leap” in the face of incomplete evidence as necessary for the fostering of faith. Herein lies the meaning behind the biblical saying “[b]ecause you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29, *New International Version*). Only through surpassing doubt and accepting concepts which exist beyond what is immediately observable by the senses would one be able to demonstrate that they possess true faith. By contrast, strictly circumscribing the evaluation of religious beliefs to the verification principle is discouraged and often perceived as a category mistake (Swindal n.d.) juxtaposing the willful nature of faith.

### **New Atheist Principles**

Popular New Atheist arguments challenge the legitimacy of religious beliefs by rejecting the notion that anything can be certain without conclusive evidence, a concept adopted from logical positivism. Within the system of logical positivism is the postulation that only analytic statements concerning logic and mathematical theories, or empirical statements verified by scientific induction, can be understood with certainty whilst also being meaningful (Burnett 2012). Under the stipulation of logical positivism, theological statements that consist of *a priori* synthetic propositions such as “God is loving” are therefore regarded as meaningless (The Basics of Philosophy n.d.) since they do not posit theses which admit of verification (Simon 2008). As Thomas Edison (1910), the “ultimate empiricist” (Lee Mitgang Associated Press 2019), says, “I

cannot accept as final any theory which is not provable. The theories of the theologians cannot be proved. Proof, proof! That is what I always have been after; that is what my mind requires before it can accept a theory as fact.”

New Atheists hold the opinion that *all* beliefs should be susceptible to verification and questioning. Thus, they solely construct their worldview on concepts they encounter and observe via sensory perception. On the other hand, they frequently challenge the sanctified nature of faith, which they feel allows religious arguments to unfairly escape the principle of verification. As Sam Harris (2011) argues, “Faith is nothing more than the licence that religious people give one another to believe such propositions when reasons fail...When we find reliable ways to make human beings more loving, less fearful, and genuinely enraptured by the fact of our appearance in the cosmos, we will have no need for divisive religious myths.”

### **Seeking meaning**

The Christian’s counter to the New Atheist’s logical positivism approach to faith is likely twofold. Firstly, she may challenge the principle of verification through the problem of induction, revealing the self-refuting and unpragmatic nature of the former doctrine. In light of this, she would argue that we have a right to base our worldview on values which we approve of instead.

Most scientific beliefs cannot be held to the very standards that logical positivism used to render theological and philosophical statements meaningless. There is always reason to doubt the soundness of a belief, including beliefs which New Atheists consider to be true and based on ‘complete’ evidence, because inductive reasoning, from empirical evidence to general beliefs, can always potentially be falsified by subsequent empirical data. The conundrum, known as the problem of induction, is substantiated by the following example: at one time, Europeans believed that swans were always white. Yet following the discovery of black swans in Western Australia in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, they realised that their original perception was in fact false (Low 2019). Likewise, common empirical claims on which we base much of our worldview, such as ‘the sun rises in the East’, are susceptible to the same problem of induction. Whilst collecting data, scientists are therefore required to make presuppositions, for example, that things which were experienced in the past will be repeated in the future, or that human senses are compatible with

understanding the natural world. However, we have no real rational reason to believe that that is the case (Philosophy dungeon n.d.). Hence Albert Einstein (1919) writes, “[t]he truth of a theory can never be proven. For one never knows if future experience will contradict its conclusion.”

Many New Atheists accept and even embrace the surfeit of uncertain beliefs that are a byproduct of logical positivism and the problem of induction. Dawkins (1996), for example, concluded that “[t]he universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference”. Yet religious believers argue that maintaining such a “detached” view (Mitchell 1971) towards living is excruciating and unnecessary; humans are “meaning-seeking creatures” who “cannot simply eat, sleep and reproduce” (Winterson 2013). The dissonance between science deeming unverifiable views as meaningless and man’s inherent desire to seek meaning through spiritual conviction is stressed by David Hume (1748), who upon examining the philosophical challenge declared that the worldview it proposed was “so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further”.

For assertions that are by large “immeasurable by tangible instruments of assessment” (Bethune-Cookman University n.d.), their unfathomableness does not equate to irrelevance. This idea is best demonstrated by RM Hare’s parable of the paranoid student who believes that all her teachers are plotting to kill her: no amount of opposing evidence could mollify her worries and convince her otherwise. To her, every kind gesture made by a teacher is a façade masking murderous intention. Although the student’s statement is a *blik*, a biased belief that is “incompatible with any finite number of...tests” (Mitchell 1971), her views are nonetheless important as they severely impede the student’s mental health and put those around her in potential harm. The idea that driving is safe is another commonly held *blik*: even though 77% of automobile owners encounter at least one car accident during their time on the road (Griffin 2020), most of us choose to ignore this fact whilst driving; if we did not, we would need to overcome insurmountable anxiety to perform the simple task of travelling by car, which is a strenuous way to live.

Although religious statements such as “God is loving” cannot be settled through logic (Gould 2013) nor verified, they nonetheless make a significant difference in how we lead our lives. Faith

provides religious believers with a ready-made *blik*: a worldview (Guillen 2021) that not only helps navigate the physical realm where evidence is incomplete but also, as stated in the Book of Common Prayer (1928), serves to “bear up the pillars” of our spiritual realm. Rather than succumbing to uncertainty in a contingent world, followers of religion therefore choose to believe in their faith with certainty as it provides helpful spiritual guidance and guards them against the dread of the unknown. To quote C.S. Lewis (1965) on the matter: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else”. Since we selectively choose *bliks* that are compatible with our values and “filter out” those we disbelieve (Philosophy dungeon n.d.), it could be further argued that New Atheism serves a similar function as faith for those on the other end of the belief spectrum who seek solace in using empirical claims to supersede the supernatural (Simon 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the essay, I have examined both sides of the argument regarding the question “Is faith anything other than uncertain belief on incomplete evidence?”. Overall, I argued that the New Atheist’s assertion that true beliefs need to be justified by empirical evidence appeared less convincing. If we were to demand all our beliefs to be evaluated in such a manner, the pool of things which we can believe with certainty would be infinitesimal, shrunk down to solely analytic claims of mathematics and logic. Although fundamental, such claims serve little purpose beyond satisfying our most elementary needs – we believe these ideas but do not believe *in* them.

Human nature requires us to seek meaning beyond simple scientific explanations. Religious faith is thus essential for those who follow a religion as it provides aim, clarity and consolation. Only through believing in our faith with certainty will we be able to build a hopeful foundation on which the rest of our beliefs can burgeon and flourish (Guillen 2021). Rather than looking out on a world that is full of uncertainty, faith thus encourages us to navigate the spiritual world within, for “the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21, *New International Version*).

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