

## Faith and Fideism

**Faith** is a kind of believing (trust, commitment or loyalty).

Two types of faith may be distinguished

- 1) Believing-in .....
- 2) Believing-that .....

These types of believing occur in non-religious (secular) contexts as well as in religion (e.g., believing in the United Nations, believing *in* democracy, believing *in* one's friend *versus* believing *that* the United Nations generally treats its member nations fairly or believing *that* democracy is better than some other political systems; believing *that* your friend will not betray you.) In secular as well as religious contexts, *instances of believing-in seem to presuppose some believing-that*. Believing in the United Nations presupposes believing that the UN generally treats its member nations fairly. Believing in democracy presupposes believing that democracy is better than some other political systems. Believing in God presupposes believing that there is a supreme being.

In both secular and religious contexts, faith is a kind of believing that is maintained well beyond what the available evidence would support, perhaps in spite of evidence against the belief.

Here is some further explanation of the distinction. Because I believe in (trust or am loyal to) my friend, I may believe that he will not betray me. When I believe this *to be true of* my friend, this attitude toward my friend is present because it derives from that same attitude that is present in my believing *in* him. On the other hand, it would be impossible to believe in my friend unless I also believe *that* certain other things are true, such as *that* he still exists, knows who I am, etc. My believing that these *other* things are true about him doesn't necessarily involve attitudes like loyalty. They are just *logically implied* by my believing in him. The same can be said about religious beliefs. Believing in God may lead me to believe that God cares for His creatures. But what is also logically implied by *believing in* God is *believing that there is* a Supreme Being.

However, one can believe that there is a supreme being without having *faith* in such a Being. One could believe that there is such a being just as a result of some logical reasoning and not have any attitudes like trust or personal commitment any

more than one needs such attitudes to believe that  $2+2=4$ . Knowing that  $2+2=4$  or that the Earth is spherical doesn't necessarily require trust or commitment. One can figure out for oneself whether  $2+2=4$  or whether the Earth is spherical without having to just accept without question that these statements are true. Similarly, one might believe that there is a supreme being, having thought this matter through for oneself, but deny that this being has any importance for human life. One might, for example, believe that there is a supreme being but that it is totally impersonal and has no interest in human beings. It would be inconsistent with the meaning of believing in God or believing in the power of departed ancestors, etc. to think that they were of no significance or importance for one's life. Attitudes like trust and commitment always bring significance and importance to what one believes. This point shows the difference between believing-in and believing-that in religious life.

But there is a similar point to be made about the differences between these two attitudes in non-religious, secular, contexts, too. People can believe that their friends will not betray them without being loyal or trusting in their friends. They may simply calculate that the odds of their being betrayed by their friend is quite low, given the evidence of their friend's past behaviour. Such a calculation need not involve any attitudes like trust or loyalty and it is strongly determined by the objective evidence that is available to the one who calculates. Likewise, there are examples of believing in one's friend that are maintained in spite of evidence that one is being treated badly by one's friend. Loyalty to a friend may be maintained even when the evidence against one's friend is overwhelming. Such an attitude might even be considered admirable in some cases. This is a secular example of believing in something that is clearly different from what one believes to be true of that thing.

**Fideism** - The view that Faith is essential to religion and religious life.

**Extreme (strict) fideism** - faith is the whole core of religion and religious life. Nothing else is relevant. Religious belief systems are not subject to rational examination because religious beliefs are absolutely fundamental. *Nothing is more basic* than religious beliefs. So, there is no other kind of knowledge that could be used to support or prove religious beliefs.

**Moderate fideism** - faith is essential to religion but is open to and enriched by rational evidence and religious experience.

*All fideists (extreme or moderate) would say that:*

To require that religious beliefs be adequately supported by evidence or objectively good reasons would (at best) make religion simply a part of rational common sense or science. (This requirement reflects the stance of **Rationalism**).

Neither reasoning nor experience by themselves can constitute the core or foundation of religion, according to Fideism. At most, (for the *moderate* fideist *only*) reason and experience play incidental, subordinate roles. Only faith makes it possible to *correctly interpret* religious experience or to know that the premises of our reasoning are true or even relevant to our religious beliefs.

An **extreme (strict) fideist** maintains that both reason and experience must be seen as *weak and unreliable sources of any belief, even secular beliefs of common sense and science*. It is essential to the firmness and durability of faith that all pretense to put religion on a rational basis be exposed as hopeless and vain. All temptations to rationally support religion either by philosophical reasoning or by reasoning from the evidence of “religious” experience must be resisted and actively “weeded out”. A good way to do this is to practice humiliating our rational faculties by means of skeptical criticisms which expose the general weakness and unreliability of reason. Once this exercise is carried out, religious beliefs may be safely and firmly held, even though they have *no grounds or justification whatever*.

This humiliation of reason is an essential task for true believers, according to extreme fideism, because only by means of an extreme fideism will religion be safe from all possible forms of rational evidence or argument against religion.

**Soren Kierkegaard** (19th century Danish thinker) was an example of an extreme fideist. In his *Philosophical Fragments*, he says, belief in God, belief in the incarnation is a "scandal to the intellect". Faith requires a “leap in the dark, a leap into the absurd”. But this religious belief is our *only hope* of escape from despair and for a meaningful life.

**Martin Luther** was another example of an extreme fideist. Here are some quotes from Luther.

*“Reason is a whore. You must part with reason and not know anything of it and even kill it; else, one will not get into the kingdom of heaven.” “It is the quality of faith that it wrings the neck of reason .... Faith and reason mightily fell out (with*

*Abraham); yet at last did faith get the better and overcome and strangled reason, that all-cruellest and most fatal enemy of God.”*

Other examples of extreme fideists in the early modern period (16th - 17th Centuries) include Gential Hervet, Francois Veron, and Michelle de Montaigne. (For more information about these and other extreme fideists, see Richard Popkin's *The History of Scepticism From Erasmus to Spinoza*). Here is a sample quote from Montaigne's writings;

*The means I take to beat down this frenzy (of human arrogance) ... is to crush and trample (it) underfoot; to make them feel the inanity, the vanity and nothingness of Man; to wrest from their hands the puny weapons of reason; to make them bow their heads and bite the ground beneath the authority and reverence of divine majesty. It is to this alone that knowledge and wisdom belong; it alone that can have some self-esteem and from which we steal what we account and prize ourselves for.*

Compare also Paul's statement in First Corinthians, Chapter I

*For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe*

Examples of *moderate* fideists include the medieval Christian thinkers, **Augustine** and **Aquinas**. Both of these thinkers tried to show how reason and faith might form an *alliance or partnership*. It is unwarranted and even contrary to religious doctrine, they said, to suppose that human reason is hopelessly weak and unreliable in all areas. Reason, they held, is a gift of God, the noblest faculty given to any creature by God in his creation of human beings. If reason or experience clearly support a belief, then that belief ought to be held without reservation.

For this purpose, they considered it to be crucially important to show that faith is *not necessarily irrational*, i.e. that there is no reason to think that articles of religious faith are really *self-contradictory, incoherent or nonsensical*(even though, as Aquinas said, they may be "opaque" to our understanding in this life. In the life to come, he maintained, those who are saved will be able to understand the articles of faith as clearly as the simplest truths of mathematics). These moderate fideists also considered it to be crucially important to demonstrate that there is no reason to think that any area of *secular* knowledge contradicts articles of faith.

They maintained that, if any part of sacred scripture or holy doctrine *seems* to contradict some item of secular knowledge, then it must be the fault of *human interpretation* of scripture and doctrine . If there were such a case, it would be the interpretation, not the scripture or doctrine, that would need to be revised.

Consider some further points regarding extreme fideism. If assembling arguments and evidence in favor of a religious belief is useless, how does one *come to have* faith? Some, like Kierkegaard, speak of taking the leap of faith, of simply believing and committing oneself to something without having or wanting reasons or evidence that the belief is true. The idea that faith involves commitment and risk-taking makes sense to many religious people. But extreme fideism raises some questions. If faith involves taking a leap, how does one decide which faith to leap for? One who has *already* made a commitment may not find this to be a problem but what about someone who is searching for a faith and sees several alternative possibilities that seem about equally plausible? Should she carefully examine each one of them and compare them to see which one is most likely to be true? That is precisely what a fideist says cannot be done. Is there no way in which the claims of several competing belief-systems can be assessed?

When extreme fideists characterize religious beliefs as "fundamental" this can be taken in two ways:

(1) these beliefs provide *basic guidance* for those who hold them sincerely for the way they lead their lives, set goals, make choices, deal with events and give reasons for living.

(2) these beliefs are *more* evident and *more* obviously true than *anything else* one knows or believes.

There is no doubt that articles of religious faith perform a function that is fundamental in sense (1) above for people of many different religious traditions. But how does one who is still seeking decide which religious tradition to affiliate with? Consider meaning (2). Aren't there some facts of everyday life, things we directly perceive by our senses that are as obvious as anything could be? Aren't some of these facts not only obvious but not at all dependent on any religious belief-system? The statements of elementary arithmetic seem to be further examples of facts which are, or ought to be, obvious to anyone, regardless of their religious beliefs. Aren't facts like these fundamental to our general knowledge even though they have nothing to do with religion? Would one necessarily lose one's faith if one were to test it according to some rational standard? Martin Luther

thought that Copernican astronomy, with its idea that the Earth moves and is not at the center of the universe, was incompatible with Christian faith. Yet Christians and others who decided to accept the scientific evidence for Copernican astronomy have found that this decision did not destroy their faith. Rather, it became the occasion for them to re-examine some parts of their religious belief system and to modify their understanding of it in certain ways.

In practice, even the most extreme of fideists do try to explain how their beliefs are not logically contradictory and they try to explain how their beliefs do not conflict with well-known facts. Usually, what they will do is to question the alleged secular facts and try to cast doubt upon the claims for these by presenting (what they say are) equally plausible counter-claims or by arguing that the so-called facts are really false statements when considered in light of superior evidence, etc. But, insofar as extreme fideists do argue that their religious beliefs don't really conflict with any known facts, aren't they admitting that it is relevant to use logic and evidence to test the soundness of religious beliefs?

When one discusses religion with extreme fideists, they seem quite happy to use arguments as long as they have arguments they think support their own religious views. It often seems that it is only when they think an argument is beginning to go against them that they begin to appeal to "pure faith". Also, whether they try to prove their own religious beliefs to be true or not, fideists *quite often point out flaws, inadequacies and inconsistencies in other, competing religious belief-systems*. Yet, when it comes to rationally answering objections to some of their own religious beliefs, the extreme fideist insists that this cannot, and need not, be done.