

Is Faith Good, Bad, or Both?

A talk by Mark Sharlow

Note: This is an edited version of a transcript of an impromptu talk.

I'd like to talk about the subject of faith.

There's a big controversy in intellectual circles nowadays about faith. A number of atheists, especially the so-called New Atheists, are calling for the abolition of faith. They think faith is always a bad thing, and that once you allow faith into your thinking you have let something irrational into your thinking and you are contributing to religious fanaticism. According to these atheists, once you admit the possibility of believing something without evidence, you are making room for the kinds of beliefs that are not only lacking in evidence, but also downright bad. They claim that once you embrace faith, it's a slippery slope to embracing some kind of faith that would make you do something evil. So they want to get rid of faith altogether and replace it with reason. They usually consider reason to be science; they usually equate reason and science – which is an inaccurate equation, because science is only one form of rational inquiry. But that's a separate topic.

What I want to say about faith is this: many religious believers don't fully understand what faith is, and the current wave of atheists don't fully understand it either. There are several kinds of faith, very different from each other. It's almost impossible to generalize about these different kinds of faith. It's almost impossible to generalize about what these different kinds of faith do to people, what effects they have on the world, and how rational or irrational they are. It's practically impossible to make these general judgments about faith in any useful way.

Here's what I mean by different kinds of faith.

The first kind of faith I'll talk about is blind faith. With this kind of faith, you are told something – in church or from a religious leader or a guru or whatever – and you simply believe it. You believe it because you believe that person has the truth, or you believe that the tradition or teaching they represent has the truth – and that's that. You believe it no matter what. That

kind of faith sometimes is called blind faith or uninformed faith. It's a type of faith that doesn't give way to reason or science on anything, and that doesn't hold other alternative ideas in any real regard. It doesn't allow the possibility of error – the possibility that you might be wrong in what you believe and you might have to change your mind later. That kind of blind, absolute faith is one kind of faith. And that's the kind of faith that can easily lead to religious excesses – to fanaticism and extremism and so forth. New Atheists sometimes talk as though this were the only possible kind of faith. In reality, it is only one kind of faith.

Then there's another kind of faith, which sometimes is called informed faith or educated faith. In that kind of faith, you believe something, but you don't believe things that contradict what we know. If there is some knowledge, like scientific findings or the rules of logic, that we know is true or probably true, then you don't believe things that contradict that knowledge – that contradict what we already know is true. And also, you don't believe things that contradict the dictates of decent morality. I know the expression “decent morality” is slippery because different people have different ideas of what morality will allow or command. But educated faith takes into account the moral principles that most thoughtful people feel are right. Most reasonable people feel, for example, that unnecessary cruelty is wrong, or that killing is, all else being equal, wrong. Most people agree that killing is a bad thing. They may allow certain exceptions, like self-defense or some wars, but they generally agree that killing is something that should be avoided if possible. Most thoughtful people have these moral ideas and others. And there are some well-publicized studies that suggest that there's more commonality among people's moral intuitions than we usually realize. Educated faith or informed faith takes into account this kind of ordinary decent morality, as well as science and reason, and refuses to violate them. People with this kind of faith might believe something on faith – perhaps because a source of authority tells them to, or perhaps for some better reason – but they won't believe something unless it is consistent with what we know and with ordinary decent morality. That's educated faith.

Now educated faith has several subsets – it comes in several different kinds. One kind is where people accept something because a source of authority says to accept it – an authority figure, or a supposedly authoritative tradition or book. People who have this kind of faith believe things on authority, perhaps without thinking much about whether there are other reasons to believe or disbelieve those things. However, they still refuse to believe things that contradict what we know or that contradict decent morality. They still hold their beliefs on the basis of authority, but they reject certain beliefs or at least don't take those beliefs at face value. They reject outright the beliefs that contradict knowledge or morality – or at least they don't quite accept those beliefs. But with other beliefs, where they don't have these reasons to reject a belief, they believe what they're told.

That's one kind of faith. I said that it was a type of informed faith, but it isn't completely informed because it still gives authority a rather high place. However, it's light-years beyond uninformed or blind faith. If everyone would just give up blind faith, and move over to a kind of faith that doesn't have room for things that are either outright unreasonable or conspicuously

immoral, then all the religious fanaticism in the world would vanish! There would be no room left for harming other people, either physically or through excessive guilt, in the name of religion. I do not believe there is a slippery slope between that kind of faith and religious extremism. The New Atheists might argue that there is a slippery slope, but clearly there can't be one – because as long as a person makes a firm commitment to stick to fact, logic, and ordinary decent morality, and takes a firm stand not to accept less reasonable kinds of faith, then they *cannot* get into the problems of religious extremism. They will not become extremists as long as they stick to that commitment. New Atheists can talk all they want to about liberal and moderate religion encouraging extremist religion, but the kind of faith that I just discussed simply doesn't spill over into dangerous kinds of faith, as long as the believer takes a firm stand not to let it; a firm stand to accept what's reasonable and what's prescribed by ordinary decent morality.

Now, that doesn't mean that this kind of believer can't accept something that seems improbable. They can do that as long as their assumption doesn't contradict factual knowledge or morality. They could accept something that some people would regard as improbable, as long as it isn't something that flatly contradicts what we know – that can't be reconciled with what we know – or that contradicts ordinary decent morality.

That is one kind of faith that's not blind faith. There are other kinds of faith too, that are even farther from blind faith, and even more informed and educated. For example, there's a type of faith in which a person doesn't believe anything that contradicts fact, logic, or ordinary decent morality, and when they do believe something unproven it's *not* just because a source of authority tells them to believe it. Instead, they believe it for other reasons. These reasons may actually have rational support.

This gets us into the area of William James's ideas about pragmatism. William James, the great pragmatist philosopher, thought that faith sometimes is rationally acceptable and sometimes even is practically unavoidable. He thought there were certain questions on which we can sensibly take a stand even if we don't have proof on either side of the debate. He argued that under certain conditions, it can be reasonable to take a stand on a question for reasons other than having proof or confirmatory evidence. James even argued that in some cases we practically *have* to take a stand on certain questions – because in those particular cases, not taking a stand actually amounts to taking a stand. You can read James' famous essay "The Will to Believe" to find out more. I won't bother here to replicate his whole line of argument. The main point is this: James suggested that it may sometimes be intellectually legitimate to take a stand that's based on a belief that hasn't been rationally confirmed by evidence. According to James, it's not only possible to take a position like that; in certain instances it can actually be reasonable to do so, even in the absence of rational confirmation for the belief itself. In other words, we might sometimes be justified in believing something without actually having confirmation that what we believe is true or probably true. That's another kind of faith, different from the kinds we discussed earlier.

Please note right now that I am *not* talking about believing something just to fool yourself and make yourself feel better. I am not talking about wishful thinking. Don't confuse what I'm describing, or what William James said, with that kind of thinking. I'm not advocating self-deception, and William James wasn't advocating it either. I'm talking about believing something that you can't prove or disprove, knowing that you don't have a factual answer, but taking a stand on an unanswerable question for some other good reason. For all we know, that kind of belief might make sense, and might even be reasonable, even if it doesn't rest on real proof. Rational philosophers have thought seriously about this question – the question of whether a belief that seems rationally unsupported could be rational in a larger sense. It's a nontrivial question, and it's an open question. There's no settled answer that's the "only" possible thoughtful and rational answer.

I have been talking about a type of faith in which there are other reasons besides mere authority for accepting beliefs, and in which beliefs are rejected if they contradict fact or morality, but in which beliefs are accepted for reasons that fall short of proof. It's important to notice that there may be more than one type of reason that falls short of proof. Perhaps certain beliefs form a more sensible basis for action than do other beliefs. This is what James's line of argument would indicate. Or perhaps some beliefs make more sense out of what we know than do other beliefs. One might argue that we should accept those beliefs, at least to the extent of living as though they were true, even if we know that we don't have proof of them – as long as they don't contradict established fact, decent morality, or anything else we know. That's one type of informed faith.

A little while ago, when I said "living as though they were true," I was hinting at another possibility for different kinds of faith. There are two possible attitudes toward an idea that you accept on faith. First, you can believe the idea really is true, in the same way that a proven fact is true. Or, second, you can admit that you don't know whether the idea is true, but still you choose to live as though it were true. You can believe an idea to the extent of living as though it were true. You can choose to stick your neck out and live as though some belief were true, even if you realize that you don't know the belief is true. Some religious thinkers recognize this fact when they speak of faith being different from knowledge. Most of the kinds of informed faith that I am discussing here can involve either of these attitudes toward beliefs. The believer can consider the beliefs to be true, or can simply consider them to be possibly true though unproven, but worth committing to and living by. Either of these attitudes is a kind of faith.

So far, I have discussed blind faith and at least two kinds of informed faith, with some different possible attitudes toward each type of informed faith. There is another kind of faith I should mention. This is where you believe something just because it makes sense to you personally. For example, maybe someone just feels or suspects that there's a God – that there is a supreme being of some kind. Maybe this belief just makes sense to them as an individual. Maybe the God they're thinking of is not the God that backward sectarians teach in Sunday school, with the thunder and lightning and the cruelty. It could be an all-loving good God instead. Or maybe it's

just an impersonal absolute being of some sort. Maybe they don't claim to know exactly what this God is like – but maybe they just believe that there's some kind of a supreme spiritual reality, and that makes sense to them. And they might believe that because it integrates well with their life and their feelings.

So far I have talked about three main kinds of faith. There's blind, uninformed faith. There's another type of faith that is informed, but that still is authoritarian in its choice of what to accept. And then there's a type of faith that is informed and is not authoritarian – a faith that accepts things on the basis of reasons short of proof, perhaps on a Jamesian type of argument that acting according to a certain belief has better consequences than acting according to the opposite belief. All these ideas are worth considering. They are philosophical ideas – perhaps not scientifically testable, but still subject to rational evaluation and discussion.

The second kind of informed faith – informed and non-authoritarian – comes in several flavors. I've already mentioned some of those flavors. Besides the Jamesian or pragmatic kind of faith, there is the kind of informed faith in which you believe something because it makes sense to you personally, and you don't necessarily have pragmatic reasons in the strong sense that James talks about. Maybe it just makes sense to you. Of course, belief in God is not the only belief that might be held in this very personal way. Somebody might embrace atheism on those grounds instead. That would be a very honest kind of atheism – where somebody just feels that there is no God, and this makes sense to them, so that's the belief they live by. They don't pretend that they have any scientific or rational proof of atheism, but atheism is what they believe; it makes sense to them. And they realize it's a belief, not an established fact. I have no problem with that kind of atheism. And also I have no problem if someone believes in God just because it makes sense to them, or is agnostic about whether there is a God just because that makes sense to them. None of those three positions is stupid. Intelligent people can hold any one of them, or none of them.

Those are a few of the kinds of informed faith. Now let's look at another kind of religious outlook – a kind which is not based on faith at all, but is based on seeking rational answers to religious questions through philosophical reasoning. By “religious questions” I mean questions that religion typically tries to address: questions of whether there is a supreme being or a supreme spiritual reality, whether there is any kind of afterlife, and so forth. It's possible to try to answer these questions using reason instead of faith. Some of the world's best thinkers in the West and in the East have tried this. Some of these thinkers have come up with answers that say yes, there is a God of some kind and perhaps even an afterlife. Reason does not lead automatically to disbelief in these things.

Just now I mentioned the word “afterlife.” I want to wander away from my subject for a moment and say a few words about the idea of the afterlife. No matter what you might have heard, the question of whether the human self is capable of surviving death is not a scientific question. Science indicates that the mind is a process in the brain, but the question of the afterlife still is not a scientific question. Science doesn't rule out an afterlife, because even if the mind is a

process in the brain, the same process could continue in another brain later. This could even happen merely by chance, if a process in a later brain happens to resemble the process in an earlier brain in ways that make the two processes stages in the story of the same self. This other brain could be here on Earth, which would make the afterlife a kind of reincarnation, or it could be in some kind of other world if one believes there is such a world. The existence of an afterlife and the nonexistence of an afterlife both are compatible with the view that the mind is a process in the brain. This is just a digression from my main subject. I want to point out that science hasn't settled the question of the afterlife. It's a question that still is worth asking. Of course, if there is an afterlife, that doesn't automatically imply that the afterlife is the way the religions claim it to be. It could be very different, for all we know.

Now let's get back to our topic. You can take a position on religious questions based on philosophy and reason, instead of on revelation and faith. That kind of belief may be about "religious" topics, but it is not faith. It is based on reason – a kind of reason different from scientific reason, but nevertheless fully rational. There are two possible ways to search for answers to religious questions using philosophic reasoning and analysis. One way is to accept an answer because it seems, on the basis of the available rational arguments, to be plausible. You don't necessarily need to have rigorous arguments or proofs; you rely on plausibility arguments instead, and you accept the results – at least to the extent of choosing to live as though they were true, even if you know you don't have a proven answer. And then there's another possible way, which is to try to establish rigorously, to your own satisfaction at least, the answers to the big questions. Neither of these ways is based on faith. Both of these ways fall within the province of reason. They are rational ways to hold religious beliefs. Of course, there are possibilities for error here; philosophers often have trouble agreeing on things, and all human knowledge is subject to mistakes. Nevertheless, these ways fall within the province of reason. They are rational methods for approaching religious questions. (In case any of you are wondering about my personal religious beliefs, I'll say for the record that I use this rational approach.)

In this talk I have examined a spectrum of different types of religious thought that range from the blatantly irrational to the increasingly rational. Now we are getting to types of belief that are on the reason end of the dial, so to speak. When we try to verify religious ideas rationally through philosophy, then we are in the area of reason instead of faith. There is a continuum of forms of religious belief, some of which fade into reason and even merge with reason. Religion need not be irrational. It can be rational instead.

What's my point in discussing all these different kinds of belief? Well, the main point is that *you can't generalize much about faith*. When one of the New Atheists claims that faith leads to disaster, that faith leads to a slippery slope to extremism, and so forth, so therefore all faith is bad – that atheist's argument is just no good. That argument is no good at all! There are many kinds of faith that cannot possibly lead to that kind of disaster. I know many religious people who hold those informed types of faith. Most of these believers admit that they are religious liberals. A few claim to be strict believers in the Bible, but in practice they don't really believe every word of the Bible; they believe in more rational and less absolute forms of faith. That's what they

actually practice.

In this talk I have discussed many different kinds of faith and many different ways to be religious. Another possibility that I should mention, that can be combined with most of the types of belief I discussed earlier, is the possibility of having faith in some source of authority – a scripture or a tradition or a teacher – but realizing that you may not understand what this source says, and realizing that you have to interpret the source. Someone might say, “I believe that the Bible is true, *but* I also believe it has to be interpreted in the light of scientific knowledge.” That is yet another way to believe, compatible with many of the other types of faith. If the believer is interpreting the source of authority in a way that doesn’t contradict fact or decent morality, then that’s a type of informed faith.

There are all these different possibilities for faith, and even possibilities for religious belief without faith. So how can we generalize and say that they are all bad or that they are all good? We cannot. Each type of religion has to be evaluated on its own merits.

Another lesson to be learned is that some forms of religious thought are rational instead of being faith-based at all. Even if there’s still some uncertainty in them because of the slipperiness of philosophical questions, they are still rational rather than faith-based. The great philosophers offer many examples of that kind of religious thinking. The possibility of a rational spirituality is one of the lessons you can draw from what I just said about many kinds of faith.

Now for another point. Personally, I don’t think that blind faith should be called faith at all. I think it should be called authoritarianism. Faith, what we normally mean by faith when talking about religion, is belief in something unproven – something that you can’t really prove. And people of faith, if they are conscious about their faith, realize that they are believing something unproven. They realize that their beliefs about these unproven matters are not “facts” in the sense of scientific or mathematical facts, or in the sense that a law of logic would be a fact. Often they think their beliefs are true, though some may think of their beliefs as something worth living by though not known to be true. But they can think their beliefs are true, or at least worth living by, without thinking those beliefs are proven facts. That is faith. When people accept an unprovable belief on authority alone, and think of it rigidly, as factual or as equivalent to proven fact, I wouldn’t call that real faith. I would call it authoritarianism. It seems to me that part of having faith is *knowing* that you are having faith – not just accepting beliefs as if they were ordinary facts, but realizing that they are not proven, that you are accepting them on faith. I mean, what is faith if not something that goes beyond proven fact? That’s what makes having faith different from just having an unjustified factual belief. Often what’s called “faith” today, especially in fundamentalist and similar religious sects, is authority rather than faith in the full sense of the word.

Now for the bottom line to this discussion. I’ve made a number of points here, but the main point is that there are many different types of faith, and there are no rational grounds to call all of

these types bad just because you find serious fault with some of them. If you don't believe in blind faith (and I certainly don't recommend believing in it), then there's the possibility of more informed types of faith which by their very nature rule out extremism. Some of these kinds of faith may even have some rational backing. Even if you don't accept any type of faith, there's still the option of a rational spirituality of some kind. Therefore, blanket arguments against faith are inadequate. These arguments don't hit the mark at all.

The main point I want to make is this: contrary to what some of the New Atheists are saying, faith by itself does not make room for religious extremism or other "bad" forms of religion. Faith does not have to do that! If somebody holds a faith that firmly embraces both established fact and ordinary decent morality, and refuses to compromise on those – that kind of faith, which many believers do have, cannot possibly lead to a downhill slide into extremism. Perhaps it can help you make sense out of existence, or enlighten you in some way, or make your life better. Maybe it will do those things for you, or maybe not – it's all a very individual matter. But in any case, it doesn't make you or your actions worse, because that kind of faith doesn't accept things that make human life worse. And there even are forms of spirituality and conceptions of a supreme being that don't depend on faith at all.

It's something to think about.

[End of talk]

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