

An Objection to Religious Faith?

Liz Jackson

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Some people, like the New Atheists, are skeptical of the attitude of faith. They argue that faith, especially religious faith, is irrational. One way to see their argument is as follows:

- (1) Those who have faith are irrational.
- (2) Theistic believers have faith.
- (3) Therefore, theistic believers are irrational.

The issue with this argument is that it is unclear what faith is such that both (1) and (2) come out to be true. Let's consider some possibilities.

One might think faith just is, by definition, and irrational attitude. But there are several problems with this. First, this amounts to just defining faith as unreasonable, but this seems like something that those advancing this objection to faith want to argue for, rather than stipulate. Further, it is unclear that this gives us good grounds to accept (2). It doesn't seem like we should simply think that religious believers are irrational without further story or argument. On the contrary, many philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, have argued that theistic belief/faith can be justified, even apart from a rigorous argument that God exists. Simply stipulating faith is an irrational attitude doesn't seem like a good way to go.

Instead, maybe faith is irrational because it isn't based on evidence. Whether evidence is required for an attitude to be rational is somewhat controversial, but this is plausible enough that we can accept it for now. Supposing we accept (1), what about (2)? On this definition, (2) seems false, because most religious believers base their faith on some kind of evidence, like historical testimony, testimony of religious leaders or others in their community, or experiences of God through nature, prayer, or liturgy. Further, it is possible that this provides them knowledge that God exists, even if they can't explain why. One reason for this is because it is possible to know something without knowing how you know that thing – like a child's knowledge of who his father is. Thus, even if evidence is required for an attitude to be rational, it seems like most religious believers wouldn't be irrational for this reason.

Even if religious believers' faith is based on evidence, maybe their faith is irrational because they don't inquire into their faith commitments – they don't look at the evidence for and against their worldview. However, evidence gathering isn't necessary for rationality. If you tell me you had eggs for breakfast and I believe you without looking for more evidence, that belief doesn't seem irrational. In fact, we rationally accept many things we perceive or are told, without looking into them more. It might be necessary to inquire into some matters – like the really important ones. But it's also not obvious that most religious believers don't inquire at all into their faith commitments – even if this involves merely seeking testimony from others or experiences of God. It's hard to put the bar for inquiry at a place where it is a plausible requirement of rationality, but also one that most religious believers don't meet. This doesn't seem like the best way to get (1) and (2) to both come out true, either.

Those suspicious of the rationality of faith might be skeptical of evidence like religious testimony or experiences of God. They might instead suggest that faith is irrational because it isn't based on a certain kind of evidence, like scientific or *empirical* evidence. Empirical evidence is similar to scientific evidence but a little broader – it is evidence we get by studying the world around us. Given this definition of faith, it does seem like (2) is true. Even if some theists base their faith on scientific

evidence, like the fine tuning argument, most do not; it is plausible that most religious faith is not primarily based on empirical evidence.

However, it is hard to see how (1) would be true on this understanding of faith. Many of our beliefs that seem to be rational – such as beliefs about math, logic, morality, and the past – aren't based primarily on empirical evidence. Further, many of the fundamental assumptions that are critical to scientific practice aren't based on empirical evidence. For example, belief in induction –that the laws of nature will continue to hold in the future – isn't based on empirical evidence. Additionally, beliefs about rationality aren't based on empirical evidence, and since presumably those putting forth the above argument believe their premises, they do so on a non-empirical basis.

Thus, empirical evidence doesn't seem to be required for an attitude to be rational. But the things we accept on the basis of non-empirical evidence seem to be, in some sense, accepted on faith. I suggest, then, that faith is an attitude that isn't based primarily on empirical evidence. This explains several facts about faith. First, when a truth is demonstrated before our eyes or scientifically proved, we don't need faith to accept it. Second, when we believe something on the basis of someone else's testimony, as opposed to empirical evidence, we are demonstrating faith in that person. This is why faith is important to personal relationships and communities, both religious and non-religious. Finally, it can explain why Scripture says faith is “evidence of things unseen” (Heb 11:1) and we “live by faith and not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). Nonetheless, on this understanding of faith, we have no reason to think that faith is irrational.

This is a summary of a longer paper, “The Nature and Rationality of Faith,” to be published in an anthology called *The New Theists*. You can download the longer version of this paper at this link: <https://philpapers.org/rec/JACTNA-2>.