

# Faith

As contemporary Christians and products of modern Western society, we tend to think of faith in narrow and not necessarily biblical terms. When people say, “You just have to have faith,” they usually mean having an unquestioning acceptance of a religious assertion or a spiritual interpretation of an event that is contrary to reason. For example, some people who hold the view that the creation stories in the Book of Genesis are historically and scientifically factual in every detail argue against scientific evidence. They say that God is the author of the Bible, and God cannot lie, so we simply must reject science and have faith in the Bible. Likewise, we often hear people talk about “the faith” when they mean a body of doctrine, that is, the official teachings of the Church. This is one meaning of the word *faith*, but it does not embrace the richness and complexity of the concept as Christians have understood it through the centuries and still understand it today.

This essay briefly investigates three meanings of the word *faith*—(1) as trust, (2) as a pattern of action or a life disposition, and (3) as adherence to a set of doctrines. As we explore these definitions, we will see the importance of context for grasping the full meaning of faith. We will also see that faith, at its core, is relational and communal. Finally, we will examine the relationships between faith and reason and between faith and religion. Though the values and priorities of modern societies have tempted us to think of the first pair as polar opposites and the second as indistinguishable from each other, we will see that the situation is much more complex.

## Some Definitions of *Faith*

The noun *faith* (*pistis* in Greek), the adjective *faithful* (*pistos* in Greek), and the verb *to believe* (*pisteuo* in Greek) appear frequently in the New Testament. In most cases these words describe a quality of relationship between humans and God or other divine beings. However, the sense in which they are used is not unlike the way we describe human relationships of *trust*, our first definition of *faith*—as found in statements like “I have faith in Joey” or “I trust Jane.” Thus the word groups associated with the noun *faith* carry connotations of confident assurance or trust in the reliability, consistency, and good intentions of the other. When referring to humans’ relationship to God, the word *faith* involves confident assurance that God is the provider of all good things and that God desires salvation for all God’s creatures.

A couple of examples will demonstrate the idea of faith as trust. In Mark 4:35–41, the evangelist tells the story of the disciples’ being caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. They rebuke Jesus for seeming not to care that they are about to perish in the storm. The verb *to perish* has eschatological overtones and is generally understood to be the antithesis of *to save*. Jesus responds by chastising them for their lack of faith, which is expressed as fear. Thus, in Mark’s story of the disciples caught in a storm, the literary context makes it clear that their lack of faith is characterized by an inability to trust in God’s capacity to save them (cf. Matt 8:23–27, Luke 8:22–25).

Contrast that story with the story of Jesus’ cure of a woman who had suffered for many years with hemorrhages (Mark 5:24b–34). The storyteller makes it clear that Jesus neither initiated the miracle nor said or did anything to make the miracle occur. In fact, he did not know that the miracle had taken place until after she had been healed. However, when Jesus realized what had happened to the woman, he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has saved you” (Mark 5:34). Thus, within the context of this story, the woman’s faith can best be described as trust: abandoning oneself to the tender mercy of God with confident assurance that God saves.

The Apostle Paul frequently mentions faith in his letters in the New Testament, often using the phrase “justification by faith.” This understanding of faith is not fundamentally different from our first definition of *faith* as trust—but, again, the context is important. Paul is writing to those of Jesus’ early



followers who wanted to live their calling as fully as possible. When Paul spent time with them, he probably taught them about sin, which he describes as not honoring God as God and as turning upside down the right (i.e., appropriate or intended) relationship between God and God's creatures (Rom 1:18–23). He probably also talked about righteousness, also translated as “justification.” However, when he left communities to continue his missionary activity elsewhere, disagreements arose within some of the communities about exactly what justification meant. Biblical scholars believe this is the social context for Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians, where we find his teachings on righteousness, or justification through faith.

Though other New Testament authors use the term *righteousness* differently, Paul seems to have understood it as meaning “acquittal.” In a courtroom setting, when a judge acquits someone, he or she dismisses the charges against the accused without regard for whether the accused is guilty. In ancient juridical settings, the judge could have been the accuser and even the executer of punishment. Paul had taught his newly developing Gentile Christian communities that, because of humanity's sin, everyone needs to be justified (i.e., acquitted) before God. Some probably thought they should become observant Jews, practicing Jewish Law, as a way to become justified, or righteous, before God. This is what Paul calls “justification through works of the Law.” Paul disagrees with this approach because his view is that only God can acquit humanity because it was God who was dishonored by humanity's sin. Further, he teaches that humans cannot earn their justification. Rather, God offers acquittal (justification) to all who receive this free gift (grace) in faith (trust). This acquittal was effected through the sacrificial offering of God's only Son, Jesus. This is what Paul means when he writes about justification, or righteousness, by faith.

This brings us to the second definition of *faith*—“a pattern of action or a life disposition.” Some modern readers of Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians sometimes mistakenly distill Paul's teaching on justification by faith to mean “justification by faith alone” versus “justification by faith and works.” Their thinking goes something like this: “If I only believe (and do so unwaveringly), then I will be saved; people who believe salvation requires both faith and good works do not really believe and therefore cannot be saved.”

There are at least two problems with this way of thinking. First, Paul does not equate salvation with justification. Rather, Paul understands *faith* to mean humble acceptance of God's gracious dismissal of the charges that were deservedly brought against humanity for its refusal to acknowledge God as God and reverence him as such. By contrast, *salvation* in the Pauline letters refers to the healing that humanity experiences once the damage caused by our sin has been repaired. Second, Paul's teaching on justification by faith has to be understood within its original context. Must these early Gentile Christians become Jews in order to be good followers of Jesus? (Remember that all of the earliest followers of Jesus—like Peter, Paul, and James—were Jews.) Paul says they do not. In fact, no one can earn justification. It comes to us as a free gift from an utterly gracious God.

If the first-century Gentile Christian was not obligated to adhere to Jewish Law, how then was he or she supposed to live the Christian life? Paul answers very simply: “The only thing that counts is faith working [or made effective] through love” (Galatians 5:6). This is the way of life to which the Christian believer is called. In faith we should be submissive to one another in love (see 5:13). We should not be self-indulgent, chasing after our own desires (see 5:17). Rather, we Christians should possess and live out the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see 5:22–23). We should not envy one another (see 5:26). Instead, we should love our neighbors as ourselves (see 5:14). Such is the context for our second definition of *faith*, as a pattern of life or a life disposition.



Our third definition of *faith*—a set of doctrines—can also be found in the New Testament, though it occurs much less frequently than the other two definitions. The recipients of the Letter of Jude, for example, are exhorted to “contend for the faith” (Jude 3) and build themselves up on their “most holy faith” (Jude 20)—suggesting adherence to established doctrine. Likewise, the first letter to Timothy warns that a time will come when some will “renounce the faith” by focusing their attention on false teachings (1 Timothy 4:1).

Nearly a century later, Irenaeus (c. AD 180) uses what comes to be called a “canon of faith” to argue against the Gnostics:

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one.” (*Against Heresies* I.X.5–6)<sup>1</sup>

The word *canon* means “rule” or “measure.” Therefore, a canon or rule of faith is a measuring stick, so to speak, for the faith. In this sense, faith is understood to be a set of doctrinal statements that are accepted as authoritative for the Church. For Irenaeus the authority of these statements, which today we call “creeds,” resided in the fact that their content could be traced back to the teachings of the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

Today when we talk about faith as a body of doctrine, we refer to the Christian creeds and the definitive conciliar statements of the Catholic Church. Perhaps the best-known Christian creeds are the Apostles’ Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Although the earliest recorded statement of the Apostles’ Creed as it is known today does not appear until approximately AD 710–714, earlier versions of this creed were already in use in the latter half of the second century. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was affirmed by the First Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in AD 381. Its earlier version, the Nicene Creed, was promulgated by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Both were developed to combat various forms of the Arian heresy, which held that Jesus Christ, as Son of God, was the highest of all God’s creatures and divine but that Jesus was not God. Today these creeds are less commonly used to combat heresies, but they are still used as professions of faith in liturgical settings (e.g., Baptism and the Eucharist) and in the catechesis of new and returning members of the Church.

## Faith and Reason

When we talk about faith as adherence to a set of doctrinal statements (i.e., creeds), the question of the relationship between faith and reason often comes to mind. Modern popular opinion believes that faith

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103110.htm>>.



and reason are diametrically opposed. In fact, however, the Catholic Church has a long tradition of arguing for the compatibility of faith and reason. Augustine (354–430), for example, describes the relationship between faith and reason this way: “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe” (St. Augustine, *Sermo* 43, 7, 9 as cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 158). Later, Anselm (c. 1033–1109), who is credited with defining *theology* as “faith seeking understanding,” writes of the relationship of believing and understanding:

I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand. (*Proslogion* 1)<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein, though in a very different type of work, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) writes:

But sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith (for thereby the merit of faith would come to an end), but to make clear other things that are put forward in this doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity. (*Summa Theologica* I.1.8)<sup>3</sup>

Finally, one of the Church’s most recent substantive works on faith and reason is Pope John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*. Because it references many great philosophers, theologians, and apologists of the Christian faith, it also serves as a wonderful compendium of the tradition on faith and reason.

## Faith and Religion

Our final consideration is the relationship between faith and religion. At first glance, these two concepts seem to be so closely linked that they are nearly identical, but they are not.

Religion is usually described in sociological, psychological, phenomenological, or anthropological terms. We will look at just two examples. Carl Jung, in *Psychology and Religion*, offered this definition of *religion*:

Religion appears to me to be a peculiar attitude of the human mind, which could be formulated in accordance with the original use of the term “religio,” that is, a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors, understood to be “powers,” spirits,

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<sup>2</sup> St. Anselm: *Proslogium; Monologium: An Appendix In Behalf Of The Fool By Gaunilo; And Cur Deus Homo*. Translated From the Latin By Sidney Norton Deane, B. A. With An Introduction, Bibliography, And Reprints Of The Opinions Of Leading Philosophers And Writers On The Ontological Argument, (Chicago, The Open Court Publishing Company, 1903, reprinted 1926). <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.html#CHAPTER%20I>>

<sup>3</sup> *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Second and Revised Edition, 1920. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Online Edition Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm#article8>>



demons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals or whatever name man has given to such factors as he has found in his world powerful, dangerous or helpful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful and meaningful enough to be devoutly adored and loved.<sup>4</sup>

Compare this definition with phenomenologist Ninian Smart's seven components of religion. Every religion, he says, has these observable components:

1. *Experiential / Emotional*. A life-altering experience such as the death of a loved one, a religious or visionary experience, or an encounter with someone who is a spiritual guide for those seeking answers to the fundamental questions of life like salvation, happiness, and one's destiny after death.
2. *Social / Institutional*. A structure or organization that brings together people who value these experiences in common and allows them to function as a social unit.
3. *Narrative / Mythic*. The stories or sacred texts through which the group passes on their religious experience to new members or to later generations within the community.
4. *Doctrinal / Philosophical*. Official teachings of the group; reasoned explanations for questions that the group might ask about the experiences and the stories.
5. *Practical / Ritual*. Participation in formalized activities involving sacred words and actions, which the group understands as making it possible for them to relate to the powers or beings that were the source of their religious experience.
6. *Ethical / Legal*. The rules that govern the group's behavior or way of life and bring it into conformity with their religious experience and the stories and teachings that inform that experience.
7. *Material / Artistic*. The material things (buildings, songs, art objects) that give expression to their religious experience and its interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

These modern definitions of *religion* can seem somewhat sterile and uninspiring when it comes to issues of faith. They are, after all, intended to approach the study of religion as objectively as possible so that it can be investigated, much as a botanist might study an interesting plant species. Scholars of religion inquire about what makes individuals identify themselves as a group and what behaviors are considered normative for the group. They reflect upon the core elements of the group's founding stories and teachings and analyze the cultural significance of their rituals. They map the organizational structure of the group and examine the interface of the group with the wider society to determine the impact that one has upon the other. They even speculate about what might be going on in the psyche of a woman who claims that God has answered her prayer or a man who claims that he has heard God's voice.

But scholars of religion are reluctant to judge things that they themselves cannot see, touch, or measure in some way. How does one measure the efficacy of prayer, the quality of a religious experience, or the level of a person's commitment to God? Understood in this way, religion describes the external dimensions of an unmeasurable and scientifically unverifiable experience that is, at the same time, life-defining for those who embrace and accept it as reliable and true. At the same time, scholars of religion cannot deny that religion lacks substance if participants' faith claims are not taken seriously. For example, how can one talk about the experiential / emotional dimension of religion, or about the spirits,

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<sup>4</sup> Jung, Carl. *Psychology and Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press; London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 5–7.

<sup>5</sup> Smart, Ninian. *The World's Religions*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989, pp. 10–21.



laws, and ideals that engender love and devotion, without speaking about faith as it is understood in our first definition—trust in a higher power or divine being who is able to provide salvation or wholeness for the believer?

By way of contrast, here is Albert Einstein’s definition of *religion*. Keep in mind that he was a theoretical physicist and a philosopher. A German-born Jew, he was able to escape Nazi oppression by immigrating to the United States in 1933.

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the unlimitable superior who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.

Notice that Einstein’s definition of *religion* is almost synonymous with *faith*, which he presumably understood as trust in a God who is accessible to creation through revelation and reason and yet is utterly transcendent. At the same time, his definition of religion lacks any hint of faith as personal relationship with an immanent deity. This is where his definition of religion departs from a Christian understanding of religion.

This essay began with a discussion of New Testament understandings of faith, so it is appropriate that it ends with a New Testament description of true or genuine religion. The Greek words that can be translated as “religion” do not appear very often in the New Testament, but where they do appear they often describe religious practice and, in particular, worship activity. What connections do New Testament writers make between faith and religion? An excerpt from the Letter of James is especially informative:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is vain. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world. . . . If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (1:26–27, 2:15–17)

Just before this passage, the letter writer was admonishing his audience to be doers of the Word of God and not just hearers (see James 1:22). It is not sufficient to participate in the rituals, regardless of intensity of devotion, and say “I believe” but not act on that faith with compassion for others and a preference for the poor. This is the “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6) that Paul talked about earlier in his Letter to the Galatians.

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