

## Religious beliefs versus faith

*Two concepts often confused in debates involving religion*

Two basic concepts (as understood by Christians but also by others) present in public forum discussions involving religion, namely religious beliefs and religious faith, are often confused. This article is an attempt to explain the difference as it is seen by philosophers of religion. Its purpose is not - let me stress that explicitly - to justify (or disparage), defend (or condemn), beliefs, faith or religion in general.

The distinction is really subtle, so 'religious belief' and religious 'faith' are often used as synonyms, and that not only when viewed with condescension, but often also by well-meaning believers or unbelievers. After all, the very word 'believer' does not refer to somebody who merely *believes* (something to be true) but to a person of (religious) *faith*.

Of course, both belief and faith have their respective meanings also outside the religious context but that is not my concern here.

So what is this difference? *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* has these definitions that point to the distinction I have in mind:

belief:

*A tenet or body of tenets held by a group; conviction of the truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon, especially when based on an examination of the grounds for accepting it as true or real. The act of assenting intellectually to something proposed.*

faith:

*The act or state of wholeheartedly and steadfastly believing in the existence, power and benevolence of a supreme being, of having confidence in his providential care and of being loyal to his will as revealed or believed in. Complete assurance and certitude regarding the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something. Belief and trust in God.*

Thus, roughly speaking, religious belief refers to *statements* believed to be true by a person or community, whereas religious faith refers to a state of a person's mind, his/her *life orientation* based on a total trust in, and commitment to, what one believes. For example, the sentence "Credo *quod* Deus unus sit" [I believe *that* God (exists and) is one] would refer to a religious *belief*, whereas "Credo *in* unum Deum" [I believe *in* one God] is an expression of *faith*. And if a Christian becomes an atheist or agnostic he/she loses his/her faith, not merely beliefs.

In this sense religious faith presupposes religious beliefs - corresponding more to the rational, conceptualised side of faith (John H. Newman's [\*Grammar of Assent?\*](#)) but is not reducible to it. And, of course, the "quality" of such beliefs - the meaning (philosophical sophistication) of the concepts and relations involved - depends on the personal, educational, cultural etc background of the believer(s). Arguments can influence the quality of what one believes or disbelieves but are seldom the cause of one's faith or loss of it.

In spite of all this, in some languages - for instance German or Russian (and Slavic in general) - one cannot distinguish between the words *faith* and *belief* (they have the word *Glaube* or *vera* respectively to stand for both). This influences those who "think in these languages" (for instance, John Paul II and Benedict XVI), and can cause problems when translating religious

texts by such authors into English. For instance, the German book *Ueber den Glauben* was translated into [Belief and Faith](#) with the translator's remark that the German word Glaube can mean both belief and faith, so although he translates it as belief the reader should keep in mind the alternative faith should a sentence sound strange to him. [By the way, there is also a reciprocal ambiguity with the English word experience (for instance in William James' [The variety of religious experience](#)), which is translated into German as either *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*, which both have clear equivalents also in Slavic languages.]

So what is this aspect of faith that complements religious beliefs into a full-hearted faith? Following the Christian philosopher of religion [John Hick](#), I shall call it *fiducia* although Hick speaks not of aspects but of uses of the word faith (as a concession to languages that cannot distinguish between belief and faith?):

*“Faith” is employed both as an epistemological and as a nonepistemological term. The words fides and fiducia provide conveniently self-explanatory labels for the two uses. We speak, on the one hand, of faith (fides) that there is a God and such and such propositions about him are true. Here “faith” is used cognitively ... On the other hand we speak of faith (fiducia) as a trust maintained sometimes despite contrary indications, that the divine purpose toward us is wholly good and loving. ...*

*It is significant that in the Bible faith appears frequently as fiducia and hardly at all as fides. The reality of the divine Being is assumed throughout as a manifest fact. (p. 3)*

The Jewish philosopher [Martin Buber](#) uses the Greek *pistis* and the Hebrew *Emunah* for what Hick calls *fides* and *fiducia* respectively, to indicate the historical sources of these two aspects of faith.

Thus *fides* (belief) refers to world view presuppositions about the “structure of ultimate reality” with arguments for and against, but only the *fiducia* aspect (of a person's life experience) will convert more or less justified beliefs into a total world view orientation called (religious) faith.

In other words, the consequence of this difference is that you can argue for or against only the (rational) *fides* aspect of faith, and the jury is out until you take into account - those who can - the (subjective, cultural, emotional etc) *fiducia* aspect.

One can analyse, interpret, evaluate religious beliefs but not the *fiducia* aspect of faith - you either have it or don't have it.