

## Faith, Hope and Doubt<sup>1</sup>

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For many religious people there is a problem of doubting various creedal statements contained in their religions. Often propositional beliefs are looked upon as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition, for salvation. This causes great anxiety in doubters and raises the question of the importance of belief in religion and in life in general. It is a question that has been neglected in philosophy of religion and Christian theology. In this paper I shall explore the question of the importance of belief as a religious attitude and suggest that there is at least one other attitude which may be adequate for religious faith even in the absence of belief, that attitude being hope. I shall develop a concept of faith as hope as an alternative to the usual notion that makes propositional belief that God exists a necessary condition for faith, as Plantinga implies in the quotation above. For simplicity's sake I shall concentrate on the most important proposition in Western religious creeds, that which states that God exists (defined broadly as a benevolent, supreme Being, who is responsible for the creation of the universe), but the analysis could be applied mutatis mutandis to many other important propositions in religion (e.g., the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity).

It is worth noting, by way of conclusion, that the mature believer, the mature theist, does not typically accept belief in God tentatively, or hypothetically, or until something better comes along. Nor, **I think, does** he accept it as a conclusion from other things he believes; he accepts it as basic, as a part of the foundations of his noetic structure. The mature theist commits himself to belief in God: this means that he accepts belief in God as basic (Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?").

Entombed in a secure prison, thinking our situation quite hopeless, we may find unutterable joy in the information that there is, after all, the slimmest possibility of escape. Hope provides comfort, and hope does not always require probability. But we must believe that what we hope for is at least possible (Gretchen Weirob in John Perry's *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*).

### Introduction

Traditionally, orthodox Christianity has claimed (1) that faith in God and Christ entails belief that God exists and that Christ is God incarnate, and (2) that without faith we are damned to eternal hell. So doubt is an unacceptable propositional attitude. I argue that this thesis is misguided. One may doubt, that is, lack propositional belief, and yet have faith in God and Christ.

Let me preface my remarks with a confession. I am a religious doubter. Doubt has haunted my life as long as I can remember. My mother was a devout Roman Catholic and my father an equally convinced rationalistic atheist. From an early age the metaphysical tension produced me wonderment about religion. In the process of seeking a solution to this conflict, at the age of seven, I became a Protestant. But doubts continued to haunt me. I recall coming home from my high school biology class, where we had studied naturalistic evolution and weeping over the Bible, trying to reconcile evolution with the creation account in Genesis 1 through 3. Finally, when I was about 15, I went to a minister and confessed my doubts about God and Christianity. He listened carefully, and said the situation was grave,

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indeed. My eternal soul was at stake. So I must will myself to believe the message of Christianity. He quoted Romans 14:23 “He that doubteth is damned...for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” I was thrown into paroxysms of despair, for the attempt to get myself to believe that God exists or that Christ is perfect God and perfect man failed. Yet, I wanted to believe with all my heart, and some days I would find myself believing - only to wake up the next day with doubts. Hence, this preoccupation with faith and doubt. Hence, this paper.

### I. Is Belief a Necessary Condition for Saving Faith?

According to traditional Christianity, belief is a necessary condition for salvation. Paul says in Romans 10:10, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” In Hebrews 11 we are told that he who would please God must believe that He exists and is a rewarder of them that seek Him. The Athanasian Creed, an official doctrine of orthodox Christianity states that salvation requires that one not only believe that God exists, but that God is triune and that Christ is perfect God and perfect man.<sup>1</sup> Most theologians and philosophers hold, at least, that Christian faith requires propositional belief.<sup>2</sup> You can be judged and condemned according to your beliefs. As Romans 14:23, “He that doubted is damned.”

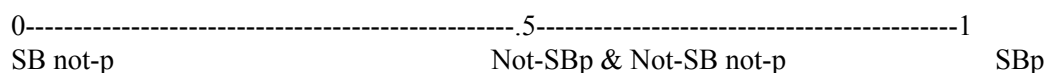
The basic argument goes like this:

- 1. Faith in God through Christ is a necessary and sufficient condition for eternal salvation.
- 2. Belief that God exists is a necessary condition for faith.
- 3. Therefore belief is a necessary condition for salvation.
- 4. Therefore, doubt, the absence of belief, is an unacceptable attitude for salvation. ~~Who~~ will be saved.

Let us begin with some definitions:

1. Belief =df an involuntary assenting of the mind to a proposition (a “yessing” to a proposition), a feeling of conviction about p - a *nonvolitional event*.

Consider this Belief Line, defined in terms of subjective probability, the degree to which I think the proposition is probable. Let “S” stand for the believer or *subject*, “B” for *believe*, and “p” for the proposition in question. Then we can roughly locate our beliefs on the Belief Line. Above .5 equals various degrees of positive belief that p. Below .5 equals various degrees of unbelief (or belief that the complement, “not-p” is true). 0.5 equals agnosticism or suspension of judgment.



2. Acceptance=df deciding to include p in the set of propositions that you are willing to act on in certain contexts, a *volitional act* . For example., in a **legal** context, say a jury, where there is insufficient evidence to convict an accused criminal, I may believe the subject is guilty but accept the proposition that he is not because the high standards of criminal justice have not been met; or in a **scientific** context, say in testing the hypothesis that a formula will lead to the development of cold fusion, I may not believe the hypothesis I am testing is true, but accept it for purposes of the experiment). Acceptance is different from belief in that we do have some direct control over our acceptances, whereas we don't over our beliefs. We may or may not believe our acceptances and we may or may not accept our beliefs.

3. Faith =df a commitment to something X (e.g., a person, hypothesis, religion, or world view). Faith is a *deep* kind of acceptance. An acceptance can be tentative. For example, when I make the marriage vow, I will to be faithful until death to my beloved, whether or not I believe that I will succeed. If my marriage vow was merely an acceptance, I suppose, it would be “I promise to be faithful to you for at least three years or until I lose interest in you.” Faith involves commitment to its object. Under normal circumstances, it involves trusting and obeying the object of faith or doing what has the best chance of bringing its goals to fulfillment. It is a *volitional act* .

We may note at this point that the New Testament word *pistis* can be translated either belief or faith. The distinction is discernible only by the context.

## II. Phenomenology of Belief

First of all we must understand what is involved in direct volitionalism (or voliting/to volit - the act of acquiring a belief directly by willing to have it). The following features seem necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a minimal interesting thesis of volitionalism:

1. The acquisition is a basic act. That is, some of our beliefs are obtained by acts of will directly upon being willed. Believing itself need not be an action. It may be dispositional. The volitionalist need not assert that all belief acquisitions occur via the fiat of the will, only that some of them do.

2. The acquisition must be done in full consciousness of what one is doing. The paradigm cases of acts of will are those in which the agent deliberates over two courses of action and decides on one of them. However, acts of will may take place with greater or lesser awareness. Here our notion of will is ambiguous between two meanings: "desiring" and "deciding." Sometimes we mean by "act of will" simply a desire which manifests itself in action, such as my being hungry and finding myself going to the refrigerator or tired and finding myself heading for bed. We are not always aware of our desires or intentions. There is difference between this type of willing and the sort where we are fully aware of a decision to perform an act. If we obtain beliefs via the will in the weaker sense of desiring of which we are only dimly aware, how can we ever be sure that it was really an act of will that caused the belief directly rather than the will simply being an accompaniment of the belief? That is, there is a difference between willing to believe and believing willingly. The latter case is not an instance of acquiring a belief by fiat of the will, only the former is. In order for the volitionalist to make his case, he must assert that the acts of will which produce beliefs are decisions of which he is fully aware.

3. The belief must be acquired independently of evidential considerations. That is, the evidence is not what is decisive in forming the belief. Perhaps the belief may be influenced by evidence (testimony, memory, inductive experience, and the like), so that the leap of faith cannot occur just any time over any proposition, but only over propositions that have some evidence in their favor, though still inadequately supported by that evidence. They have an initial subjective probability of, or just under, 0.5. According to Descartes, we ought to withhold belief in such situations where the evidence is exactly equal, whereas with Kierkegaard religious and existential considerations may justify leaps of believing even when the evidence is weighted against the proposition in question. William James prescribes such leaps only when the option was forced, living and momentous. It may not be possible to volit in the way Kierkegaard prescribes without a miracle of grace, as he suggests, but the volitionalist would have to assert that volitional belief goes beyond all evidence at one's disposal and hence the believer must acquire the belief through an act of choice which goes beyond evidential considerations. It is as though we place our volitional finger on the mental scales of evidence assessment, tipping the scale one way or the other.

In sum, then, a volit must be an act of will whereby I acquire a belief directly upon willing to have the belief, and it is an act made in full consciousness and independently of evidential considerations. The act of acquiring a belief may itself not be a belief but a way of moving from mere entertainment of a proposition to the disposition of having the belief. There is much to be said in favor of volitionalism. It seems to extend the scope of human freedom to an important domain, and it seems to fit our experience of believing where we are conscious of having made a choice. The teacher who sees that the evidence against a pupil's honesty is great and yet decides to trust him, believing that somehow he is innocent in spite of the evidence, and the theist who believes in God in spite of insufficient evidence seem to be everyday examples confirming our inclination towards a volitional account of belief formation. We suspect, at times, that many of our beliefs, while not formed through fully conscious volits, have been formed through half aware desires, for on introspection we note that past beliefs have been acquired in ways that could not have taken the evidence seriously into consideration. Volitionalism seems a good explanatory theory to account for a great deal of our cognitive experience.

Nonetheless, there are considerations which may make us question whether on reflection volitionalism is the correct account of our situation. I will argue that it is not the natural way in which we acquire beliefs, and that while it may not be logically impossible that some people volit, it seems psychologically odd and, even conceptually incoherent.

### 1. Beliefs are not Chosen

Beliefs are not chosen but occur involuntarily - as responses to states of affairs in the world. Beliefs are, to use Frank Ramsey's metaphor, mappings in the mind by which we steer our lives. As such the states of affairs which beliefs represent exist independently of the mind; they exist independently of whether we want them to exist. Insofar as beliefs presume to represent the way the world is, and hence serve as effective guides to action, the will seems superfluous. Believing seems more like seeing than looking, falling than jumping, catching a cold than catching a ball, getting drunk than taking a drink, blushing than smiling, getting a headache than giving one to someone else. Indeed, this involuntary, passive aspect seems true on introspection of most propositional attitudes: anger, envy, fearing, suspecting, doubting, though not necessarily of imagining or entertaining a proposition, where an active element may often be present.

In acquiring a belief, the world forces itself upon one. Consider perceptual beliefs. If I am in a normal physiological condition and open my eyes, I cannot help but see certain things, for example, this piece of white paper in front of me. It seems intuitively obvious that I don't have to choose to have a belief that I see this piece of white paper before I believe I see it. Here "seeing is believing." This is not to deny a certain active element in perception. I can explore my environment, focus in on certain features, and turn from others. I can direct my perceptual mechanism, but once I do this the perceptions I obtain come of themselves whether or not I will to have them. I may even have an aversion to white paper and not want to have such a perception. Likewise, if I am in a normal physiological state and someone nearby turns on loud music, I hear it. I cannot help believing that I hear it. Belief is forced on me.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Logic of Belief Argument against Volitionalism

The notion of volitional believing involves a conceptual confusion, that it is broadly a logical mistake. It argues that there is something incoherent in stating that one can obtain or sustain a belief in full consciousness *simply* by a basic act of the will, that is, purposefully disregarding the evidence connection. This strategy does not altogether rule out the possibility of obtaining beliefs by voliting in less than full consciousness (not truly voliting), but asserts that when full consciousness enters, the "belief" will wither from one's noetic structure. One cannot believe in full consciousness "that  $p$  and I believe that  $p$  for other than truth considerations." If you understand that to believe that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is true and that *wishing never makes it so*, then there is simply no epistemic reason for believing  $p$ . Suppose I say that I believe I have \$1,000,000 in my checking account, and suppose that when you point out to me that there is no reason to believe this, I respond, "I know that there is not the slightest reason to suppose that there is \$1,000,000 in my checking account, but I believe it anyway, simply because I want to." If you were convinced that I was not joking, you would probably conclude that I was insane or didn't know what I was talking about.

If I said that I somehow find myself believing that I have \$1,000,000 but don't know why, we might suppose that there was a memory trace of having deposited \$1,000,000 into my account or evidence to that effect in the guise of an intuition that caused my belief. But if I denied that and said, "No, I don't have any memory trace regarding placing \$1,000,000 into my account. In fact, I'm sure that I never placed \$1,000,000 into the account. I just find it good to believe that it's there, so I have chosen to believe it," you would be stumped.

The point is that because beliefs just are about the way the world is and are made true (or false) depending on the way the world is, it is a confusion to believe that any given belief is true simply on the basis of being willed. As soon as the believer, assuming that he understands these basic concepts, discovers the basis of his belief\_\_as being caused by the will alone\_\_he must drop the belief. In this regard, saying "I believe that  $p$ , but I believe it only because I want to believe it," has the same

incoherence attached to it as G. E. Moore's paradoxical, "I believe  $p$  but it is false that  $p$ ." Structurally, neither are strictly logical contradictions, but both show an incoherence that might be called broadly contradictory.

If this reasoning is sound, then, since beliefs are not actions, we cannot be judged for our beliefs. That is, if ought implies can, and we cannot acquire beliefs directly by choosing them, we cannot be judged according to what beliefs we have. Of course, we can be judged by our actions, by how well we have investigated the evidence and paid attention to the arguments on the various sides of the issue. That leads to the matter of the ethics of belief.

### III. Ethics of Belief

Of course, we can indirectly obtain beliefs by willing to have them. I can desire to believe that I am innocent of an unjust act against my neighbor, say directing my drain pipes to drain onto his property, bring to mind all the nasty things my neighbor may have done, use autosuggestion to convince myself I was justified in redirecting the drain pipes towards his property, and, thus, bring the desired belief about. This manipulation of the mind is immoral. At least, there is a strong case against indirect volitionalism.

W. K. Clifford has given a classic absolutist injunction against voliting: "It is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence." This may have the sound of too "robustious pathos in the voice" as James notes, but it may sound hyperbolic only because we have not taken truth seriously enough. Nevertheless, I only defend the principle of an ethic of belief as a *prima facie* moral principle, one which can be overridden by other moral principles, but which has strong presumptive force.<sup>4</sup>

Why do we want true justified beliefs, beliefs based on the best evidence available?

Because beliefs make up our road map of life, which guide our desires. If I believe that I can fly and jump out of the top of the Empire State building in order to take a short cut to Columbia University, I'm likely to be disappointed. If I want to live a long life and believe that living on alcohol and poison ivy will enable me to do that, I will not attain my desire.

The importance of having well justified beliefs is connected with truth seeking in general. We believe that these two concepts are closely related, so that the best way to assure ourselves of having true beliefs is to seek to develop one's belief forming mechanisms in such ways as to become good judges of various types of evidence, attaining the best justification of our beliefs that is possible. The value of having the best justified beliefs possible can be defended on both deontological grounds with regard to the individual, and teleological or utilitarian grounds regarding the society as a whole. The deontological argument, is connected with our notion of autonomy. To be an autonomous person is to have a high degree of warranted beliefs at one's disposal upon which to base one's actions. There is a tendency to lower one's freedom of choice as one lowers the repertoire of well justified beliefs regarding a plan of action, and since it is a generally accepted moral principle that it is wrong to lessen one's autonomy or personhood, it is wrong to lessen the degree of justification of one's beliefs on important matters. Hence, there is a general presumption against beliefs by willing to have them. Cognitive\_voliting is a sort of lying or cheating in that it enjoins believing against what has the best guarantee of being the truth. When a friend or doctor lies to a terminally ill patient about her condition, the patient is deprived of the best evidence available for making decisions about her limited future. She is being treated less than fully autonomously. While a form of paternalism may sometimes be justified, there is always a presumption against it and in favor of truth telling. We even say that the patient has a right to know what the evidence points to. Cognitive voliting is a sort of lying to oneself, which, as such, decreases one's own freedom and personhood. It is a type of doxastic suicide which may only be justified in extreme circumstances. If there is something intrinsically wrong about lying (making it *prima facie* wrong), there is something intrinsically wrong with cognitive voliting, either by directly or indirectly. Whether it be Pascal, William James, John Henry Newman or Soren Kierkegaard, all prescriptive volitionalists (consciously or not) seem to undervalue the principle of truthfulness and its relationship to personal autonomy.

The utilitarian, or teleological, argument against cognitive volition is fairly straightforward. General truthfulness is a desideratum without which society cannot function. Without it language itself would not be possible, since it depends on faithful use of words and sentences to stand for appropriately similar objects and states of affairs. Communication depends on a general adherence to accurate reporting. More specifically, it is very important that a society have true beliefs with regard to important issues, so that actions which are based on beliefs have a firm basis.

The doctor who cheated her way through medical school and who, as a consequence, lacks appropriate beliefs about certain symptoms, may endanger a patient's health. A politician who fails to take into consideration the amount of pollutants being discharged into the air or water by large corporations which support his candidacy, may endanger the lives and health of his constituents. Even the passer by who gives wrong information to a stranger who asks directions may seriously inconvenience the stranger. Here Clifford's point about believing against the evidence is well taken, despite its all too robust tone: the ship owner who failed to make necessary repairs on his vessel and "chose" to believe that she was sea worthy, is guilty of the deaths of the passengers. "He had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him." It is because beliefs are action guiding, maps by which we steer, and, as such, tend to cause actions that society has a keen interest in our having the best justified beliefs possible regarding important matters.

Some people object to my model of the **verific** person, the truth seeker, as being neutral on the matter of religion. They point out that the issue is too important to permit neutrality as an appropriate attitude. Let me clear this up by making a distinction between *neutrality* and *impartiality*. The verific person is not neutral but impartial. For the proper model of the verific person, one seeking to proportion his or her beliefs to the strength of the evidence, consider the referee in an **Army vs Notre Dame** football game. The veterans of foreign wars and Army alumni will tend to be biased towards Army, considering close calls against their team by the referee as clear instances of poor officiating, even of injustice. Roman Catholics throughout the nation will tend to be biased towards Notre Dame, seeing close calls against their team by the referee as clear instances of poor officiating, even of injustice. The neutral person is the atheist pacifist in the crowd, who couldn't care less who wins. But the impartial person is the referee, who, knowing that his wife has just bet their family fortune on the underdog, Notre Dame, still manages to call a fair game. He is able to separate his concerns about his financial security from his ability to discern the right calls in appropriate situations. The verific person is one who can be trusted to reach sound judgments where others are driven by bias, prejudice and self-interest.

If we have a moral duty not to volit but to seek the Truth impartially and passionately, then we ought not obtain religious beliefs by willing to have them, but should follow the best evidence we can get.

#### **IV. Hope - as the Proper Religious Propositional Attitude for Doubters**

For those who find it impossible to believe directly that God exists and who follow an ethic of belief acquisition, hope may be a sufficient substitute for belief. I can hope that God exists without believing that He does. Let us first analyze the concept of hope in order to determine whether this is a viable option. Consider some examples of hope.

1. Ryan hopes that he will get an A in his Philosophy course.
2. Mary hopes that Tom will marry her.
3. Susan hopes that Happy Dancer will win the Kentucky Derby next week.
4. Steve hopes that the Cubs won their game yesterday.
5. Although Bill desires a cigarette, he hopes he will not give into his desire.
6. Christy hopes her saying "No" to Ron's proposal of marriage is the right decision.

If we look closely at these examples of hoping, we can pick out salient features of the concept. First of all, hope involves *belief in the possibility* of a state of affairs obtaining. We cannot hope for what we believe to be impossible. If Ryan hopes to get an A in philosophy, he must believe that it is possible to do so, and

if Mary hopes that Tom will marry her, she must deem it possible. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *hope* as an “expectation of something desired,” but this seems too strong. Expectation implies belief that something will occur, whereas we may hope even when we do not expect the object to obtain, as when Mary hopes that Tom will marry her or Steve hopes the languishing Cubs won their game against the awesome Atlanta Braves. Susan may hope that Happy Dancer wins the race, even though she doesn’t expect that to happen. So belief that the object of desire will obtain does not seem necessary for hope. It is enough that the hoper believe that the proposition in question is possible, though not necessarily probable (it has a subjective probability of greater than 0 but not necessarily more than 0.5).

Secondly, hope precludes certainty. Mary will not be certain that Tom will marry her, and Susan is uncertain whether Happy Dancer will win the race. There must be an apparent possibility of the state of affairs not obtaining. We would think it odd to say, “Steve knows that the Cubs won the game yesterday, for he was there, but he still hopes that the Cubs won the game.” As Paul wrote in Romans 8:24 “For hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man sees, why does he yet hope for?” Hope entails uncertainty, a subjective probability index of greater than 0 but less than 1.

Thirdly, hope entails desire (or a pro-attitude) for the state of affairs in question to obtain or the proposition to be true. In all of the above examples a propositional content can be seen as the object of desire. The states of affairs envisaged evokes a pro-attitude. The subject wants some proposition *p* to be true. It matters not whether the state of affairs is past (case 4) or present (cases 5 and 6) or future (cases 1 through 3), though it generally turns out, because of the role hope plays in goal orientation, that the state of affairs will be a future situation.

Fourthly, the desire involved in hoping must be motivational, greater than mere *wishing*. I may wish to live forever, but if I don’t think it is sufficiently probable or possible, it will not serve as a spring for action. I can wish, but not hope, for what I believe to be impossible - as when I wish I were twenty-years old again. If I hope for some state of affairs to occur, under appropriate circumstances I will do what I can to bring it about - as Ryan will study hard to earn his A in Philosophy. Bill’s hope that he will not give into his first order desire for a cigarette will lead him to strive to reject the weed now being offered him.

In this regard, hoping involves a willingness to run some risk because of the positive valuation of the object in question. Consider case 3 (Susan hopes Happy Dancer will win the Kentucky Derby). For this to be the case, Susan must be disposed to act in some way as to manifest trust in Happy Dancer. She may bet on the horse without believing he will win the race, and the degree to which she hopes Happy Dancer will win the race may be reflected in how much she is willing to bet.

Fifthly, hoping, unlike believing is typically under our direct control. I may decide to hope that the Cubs will win, but it doesn’t make sense to decide to believe that they will win. I hear that my enemy is suffering and find myself hoping that he will suffer great harm. Then I reflect that this *schadenfreude* is a loathsome attitude and decide to change it (to hoping he will suffer only as he deserves!). I may or may not be able to give up a hope, but, unlike beliefs, normally I am able to alter the degree to which I hope for something. I find that I am hoping that I will get an A too strongly, notice that it is preoccupying me to the point of distraction, and decide to invest less hope in that goal. It seems that the degree of hope has something to do with cost-benefit analysis about the pay-off involved in obtaining a goal. The greater the combination of the (perceived) probability of *p* obtaining and the value of its obtaining to me, the more I am likely to hope for *p*. So reflection on the cost-benefits of *p* will affect hope. Still, I can exercise some voluntary control over my hopes in a way I can’t over beliefs.

Sixth, hoping, like wanting, is evaluative in a way that believing is not. We may have morally unacceptable hopes, but not morally unacceptable beliefs. Consider the difference between:

i. “I believe that we are heading towards World War III in which nuclear weapons will destroy the world.”

and

- ii. "I hope that we are heading towards World War III in which nuclear weapons will destroy the world."

Beliefs may be formed through a culpable lack of attention and thus have a moral dimension, but the belief itself cannot be judged moral or immoral. This is applicable to beliefs about racial or gender difference. Sometimes being a "racist" or "sexist" is defined by holding that people of different races or genders have different native cognitive abilities. The inference is then made that since racism and sexism are immoral, anyone holding these beliefs is immoral. Such beliefs may be false, but, unless the believer has obtained the belief through immoral activities, there is nothing immoral in having such beliefs, as such. So either racism and sexism should be defined differently (as immoral actions) or the charge of immorality should be dropped (if it is simply the cognitive feature that is in question).

Finally, we must make a distinction between ordinary hope and a deep hope. Consider Susan's situation as she hopes in Happy Dancer. She may only believe that horse has a 1 in 10 chance to win the Kentucky Derby, but she may judge this to be significantly better than the official odds of 100 to 1 against him. Suppose that she has only \$10 but wants desperately to enter a professional program which costs \$1,000. She has no hope of getting the money elsewhere but sees that if she wins on Happy Dancer, she will get the required amount. Since she believes that the real odds are better than the official odds and that winning will enable her to get into the professional program, she bets her \$10 on the horse. She commits herself to Happy Dancer, though she never believes that he will win. We might call these cases where one is disposed to risk something significant on the possibility of the proposition's being true, *deep* or *profound* hope. When the risk involves something of enormous value, we might call it *desperate* hope.

We conclude, then, that hoping is distinguished from believing in that it may involve a strong volitional or affective aspect in a way that believing does not and that, as such, it is subject to moral assessment in a way that believing is not. Hoping is desiderative, but is more inclined to action than mere wishing. Hope may be ordinary or profound.

Let us apply this to religious faith. Can hope serve as a *type of faith* in a religion like Christianity without belief that the object of faith exists? Let me tell a story in order to focus our discussion. Suppose when Moses decides to launch a preemptive strike against the Amalekites in obedience to the command of Yahweh (in the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible) his brother Aaron doubts whether such a preemptive strike is morally right, let alone the command of God. He is inclined to make a treaty with the neighboring tribe. He doubts whether Yahweh has revealed such a command to Moses, doubts whether God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and wonders whether Moses is hallucinating. When Moses points out that God annihilated the Egyptian Pharaoh's army, Aaron is inclined to see that as an occurrence of getting caught in a flash flood. When Moses offers the fact that a pillar of cloud leads them by day and fire by night, Aaron entertains the supposition that the clouds are natural phenomena and the appearance of "fire" is simply the effect of the rays of the setting sun on the distant sands. Aaron is agnostic about both the existence of Yahweh and the "revelation" to Moses. Although he cannot bring himself to overcome his doubt, he plumbs for the better story. He decides to accept the proposition that Yahweh exists and has revealed himself to Moses, and so lives according to this hypothesis as an experimental faith. He assists Moses in every way in carrying out the campaign against the Amalekites. He proclaims the need for his people to fight against the enemy, helps hold up Moses's arms during the battle, and urges the warriors on to victory in the name of God.



True, Aaron may not act out of spontaneous abandon as Moses does. On the other hand, his scrupulous doubt may help him to notice problems and evidence which might otherwise be neglected, to which the true believer may be impervious. This awareness may signal danger which may be avoided, thus saving the tribe from disaster. Doubt may have as many virtues as belief, though they may be different virtues.

Moses is the true believer, whereas Aaron, the doubter, lives in hope, *profound* hope. He believes that it would be a good thing if Moses's convictions are true and that it is possible that they are true, and so he decides to throw in his lot with his brother, living as if God exists and has revealed his plan to Moses.

The point may be put more simply. Suppose you are fleeing a murderous gang of desperados, say the Mafia, who are bent on your annihilation. You come to the edge of a cliff which overlooks a yawning gorge. However, there is a rope spanning the gorge, tied to a tree on the cliff on the opposite side of the gorge. A man announces that he is a tight-rope walker who can carry you on the rope over the gorge. He doesn't look like he can do it, so you wonder whether he is insane or simply overconfident. He takes a few steps on the rope to assure you that he can balance himself. You agree that it's possible that he can navigate the rope across the gorge, but you have doubts whether he can carry you. But your options are limited. Soon your pursuers will be upon you. You must decide. While you still don't believe that the "tight-rope walker" can save you, you decide to trust him. You place your faith in his ability, climb on his back, close your eyes (so as not to look down into the yawning gorge) and do your best to relax and obey his commands in adjusting your body as he steps onto the rope. You have a profound, even desperate, hope that he will be successful.

This is how I see religious hope functioning in the midst of doubt. The verifical person recognizes the tragedy of existence, that unless there is a God and life after death, the meaning of life is less than glorious, but if there is a God and life after death, that meaning is glorious. There is just enough evidence to whet his or her appetite, to inspire hope, a decision to live according to Theism or Christianity as an experimental hypothesis, but not enough evidence to cause belief. So keeping one's mind open, the hoper plumbs for the better story, gets on the back of what may be the Divine Tight-Rope Walker and **commits** oneself to the pilgrimage. Perhaps the analogy is imperfect, for it may be possible to get off the tight-rope walker's back in actual existence and to get back to the cliff. Perhaps the Mafia will make a wrong turn or take their time searching for you. Still the alternative to the Tight Rope Walker is not exactly welcoming: death and the extinction of all life in a solar system that will one day be extinguished. We may still learn to enjoy the fruits of finite love and resign ourselves to a final, cold fate. As Russell wrote:

Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.<sup>5</sup>

But if there is some evidence for something better, something eternal, someone benevolent who rules the universe and will redeem the world from evil and despair, isn't it worth betting on this world view? Shouldn't we, at least, consider getting on the back of the Tight-Rope Walker and letting him guide us across the gorge?

### Conclusion:

1. What's so great about belief? Note, the Epistle of James tells us that belief is insufficient for salvation, for "the devils believe and also tremble" (James 2:19). Note, too that the verse quoted by the minister to me as a 15 year old (Rom. 14:23) was taken out of context. The passage reads: "For meat destroy not the work of God. All things are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eats, because he eateth not of faith, for

whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” The passage is not about one’s eternal salvation, but about eating meat previously offered to idols. Paul is saying, “Let your conscience be your guide here. If your conscience condemns you - if you have doubts about this act - refrain!”

2. Can we be judged (condemned) for our beliefs? No, not for our beliefs, as such, for they’re not things we choose, so we’re not (directly) responsible for them; we can only be judged according to what we have responsibly done (ought implies can).

1. We can only be judged for what we have control over.
2. We only have control over our actions.
3. Beliefs are not actions.
4. Therefore we cannot be judged for our beliefs, but only for our actions.

Although we have some *indirect* control over acquiring beliefs, we ought not violate the Ethics of Belief and get ourselves to believe more than the evidence warrants.

3. We can be judged by how faithful we have been to the light we have, to how well we have lived, including how well we have impartially sought the Truth. We may adopt theism and/or Christianity an experimental faith, living by hope in God, yet keeping our mind’s open to new evidence which may confirm or disconfirm our decision.

If this argument is sound, the people who truly have faith in God are those who live with moral integrity within their lights - some unbelievers will be in heaven and some religious, true believers, who never doubted, will be absent. However, my supposition is that they will be in purgatory - What is purgatory? It is a large philosophy department where people who compromised the truth and the good will be taught to think critically and morally, according to the ethics of belief. The faculty, God’s servants in truth seeking, will be David Hume, J. S. Mill, Voltaire, Kant, and Bertrand Russell.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Whoever desires to be saved must above all things hold the Catholic faith. Unless a man keeps it in its entirety inviolate, he will assuredly perish eternally. Now this is the Catholic faith, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance...So he who desires to be saved should think thus of the Trinity.

It is necessary, however, to eternal salvation that he should also faithfully believe in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now the right faith is that we should believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is equally both God and man.

This is the Catholic faith. Unless a man believes it faithfully and steadfastly, he will not be able to be saved. (Athanasian Creed)

<sup>2</sup> Most theologians and Christian philosophers hold that belief is a necessary condition for faith. For example, Alvin Plantinga writes, “The mature theist does not typically accept belief in God tentatively or hypothetically or until something better comes along. Nor, I think, does he accept it as a conclusion from other things he believes; he accepts it as basic, as a part of the foundations of his noetic structure. The mature theist commits himself to belief in God: this means that he accepts belief in God as basic.” (“Is Belief in God Rational” in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney, Notre Dame University Press, 1979, p. 27.)

<sup>3</sup> Much more needs to be said than can be said here. I have developed the fuller argument against direct volitionalism in my book *What Can We Know?* (Wadsworth Publishing Co., 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Many philosophers have criticized Clifford's advice as being self-referentially incoherent. It doesn't have sufficient evidence for itself. But, suitably modified, I think this problem can be overcome. We can give reasons why we ought generally to try to believe according to the evidence, and if these reasons are sound, then we do have sufficient evidence for accepting the principle. See W. K. Clifford "The Ethics of Belief" in L. Pojman, ed. *Philosophy of Religion* (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship" in L. Pojman, ed. *Classics of Philosophy*, p.1138.