

Does faith just compensate for lacking evidence of a divine Creator?

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Faith and evidence

While faith is important in multiple monotheistic religions, it meant everything to the orthodox Christianity of the first century. That is clear throughout its canonical documents. Consider these representative examples:

- Jesus of Nazareth could only perform miracles among those with faith.¹
- He said everything is possible for whoever has faith when praying.²
- A delay in answers to the prayers of the chosen is a test of their faith.³
- He reprimanded his disciples terrified by a life-threatening storm for their lack of faith.⁴
- Even more controversially, only those who had faith in Jesus as the prophesied Messiah and Son of God had eternal life.⁵

Why Christians put so much emphasis on faith is explained by the earliest catholic writings,⁶ the letters of Paul. The core teaching of Christianity was that Jesus, known as a shamefully executed criminal, atoned for the crimes all people have committed against their Creator, who signaled his acceptance of the atonement by physically raising Jesus from the dead.⁷

That message was astonishing enough to polarize people from the beginning. On one hand, Christians regarded that report as God's promise of forgiveness that has the power to eternally save everyone having faith in it.⁸ To everyone else, the message appeared so foolish as to refute itself. The governing monotheists were repulsed by the idea that someone so obviously cursed by God would be the Messiah prophesied in their holy writings. Those schooled in Greek philosophy viewed religious concepts like prophecy, atonement, and bodily resurrection as primitive superstitions worthy only of disdain. While the more religious opponents of Christianity demanded a sign from God and more philosophical opponents demanded convincing arguments, Christians were content to put faith in the testimony of ordinary people claiming to speak on behalf of Jesus.⁹

Thus, neither type of opponent could find the kind of evidence that would have made Christianity credible to them. Christians, believing God gave them the faith needed to properly evaluate the evidence for the messianic claims of Jesus,¹⁰ in turn regarded unbelief as the epitome of sin and folly.

The contempt that leading intellectuals had for faith against human conceptions of evidence has continued to modern times. It has become popularized by atheistic scientists arguing as authorities on philosophy and religion. A widely quoted example expresses the topic of this essay:

Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.¹¹

Christian faith in particular is considered not only an excuse for lacking evidence but also an unfair requirement:

How is it fair for God to have designed a world which gives such ambiguous testimony to his existence? How is it fair to have created a system where belief is the crucial piece, rather than being a good person? How is it fair to have created a world in which by mere accident of birth, someone who grew up Muslim can be confounded by the wrong religion?¹²

Objections against Christian faith appeal to emotion as well as to evidence. In the words of Charles Darwin,

I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.¹³

And why should that unpalatable teaching be entertained if faith is just a way to compensate for a lack of evidence? It will be argued that faith actually has another rationale, one that explains faith as a consequence of monotheism rather than a desperate attempt to defend it. In short, while faith does believe what would not be warranted by the evidence when it is weighed as if there were no Creator, faith in such a Creator would be needed if he in fact did exist.

Why the existence of a Creator would require faith in his words

According to traditional monotheism, the self-existent God created the universe from nothing. The Creator is completely distinct from the creation and yet loves it and sustains it.

If people are indeed created beings, then every ability they have is a free gift from their Creator. They cannot take credit for anything good, as if being created in a certain way were an earned wage.¹⁴ Rather, they received all their

abilities as undeserved gifts.

What if people, in spite of having received such undeserved gifts, were to claim them as deserved wages? That would require denying their status as beings owing their very existence to their divine Creator. Unlike other false beliefs, that particular false belief would prevent them from having any meaningful knowledge of their loving Creator. That state of self-isolation from his love would by its nature have to separate them from the happiness and security of knowing his limitless love. They cannot enjoy his unmerited love as long as they insist on their own worthiness.

How would people come to know their divine Creator and his care for them? Only by using their created senses and reason to receive and believe the promises of his unending love. According to the earliest recorded Christian teachings, those testimonies come not only in the form of created gifts such as food¹⁵ but also in the form of messages from God spoken through prophets and

through the witnesses Jesus sent to testify to all nations.¹⁶ Just as every divine command requires obedience, every divine promise requires faith, trust that God will keep the promises of his undeserved love and free gifts.¹⁷

If such a Creator exists, then to doubt one of his promises because it conflicts with human reasoning is to make the mistake of trusting fallible mental abilities more than the all-knowing Creator, who by his nature cannot lie. That is exactly how the beginning of the Hebrew Bible depicts the fall of humanity into error.¹⁸ Eve's Creator gave her the fruit of every tree in the garden, even the tree of eternal life. The only exception was a single tree distinguished by God's threat of death to whoever ate its fruit. Rather than receiving the tree of life as an undeserved gift, she took from the forbidden tree, seeing that its fruit was edible. Apart from her Creator's threat, it looked like any other fruit-bearing tree. Excluding that threat from consideration, experience and inductive logic would have led her to the conclusion that its fruit, too, was satisfying and nutritious. She trusted her own senses and judgment instead of the word of her Maker.¹⁹

The way of self-reliance would have been commendable were there no freely giving Creator and thus no promise of fellowship with him. But supposing the existence such a promise-making Creator, the only reasonable response would

be faith in his promises, irrespective of seemingly contrary evidence. For in that case, weighing *all* of the evidence would prohibit excluding the divine promises from consideration. When those promises are given weight in proportion to the truthfulness and power of the Creator, they become absolutely certain regardless of any finite amount of evidence pointing in another direction when considered alone.

Human inability to put faith solely in a Creator

Let's then grant that if a divine Creator existed, faith in his promises would be fitting. But how are we supposed to actually believe that? Eve in a garden with a tree of life? Prophecy? Atonement by the sacrificial death of a man claiming to be God's Son and the Savior of the world? The resurrection of his body a few days later? Not to mention that most of those believing in a divine Creator hope to earn rewards from him rather than to gratefully receive his gifts by faith

alone. We simply cannot bring ourselves to have faith in a generous Creator who owes us nothing and teaches us what we could not learn from our own observations and reasoning.²⁰ Not even if we, unlike Darwin, wanted to.

Whether or not we consider ourselves religious, our inability to abandon all reliance on our own wisdom or morality is not new. It was described by Paul in terms of humanity's fall with Eve.²¹ If his teaching is correct, then our inability to exercise faith reflects the darkening of our minds due to our replacing the Creator with created things such as our own wisdom.²² In that case, our refusal of his love is so deeply ingrained that it seems natural.

The fact that unbelief comes so natural does not excuse it but rather makes it that much more blameworthy. For immorality by nature and compulsion is far worse than an immoral act. For example, someone who by nature delights in murder after murder is even more reprehensible than someone who uncharacteristically commits a single murder in a fit of rage. In the same way, our habitually excluding the Creator would fly in the face of the reality of our status as lovingly created beings more than would any single lapse of judgment.

According to first-century Christianity, that ingrained unbelief is the foundational sin that requires atonement to restore our fellowship with the

Creator.²³ Our inability to free ourselves from the tyranny of unbelief is precisely why we would need faith to be created in us by the same power that created the universe—the same power that resurrected the victim sacrificed to offer atonement for who we have become.¹⁰

1. Mark 6:5
2. Mark 9:23; 11:24
3. Luke 18:1–8
4. Luke 8:22-25
5. John 3:16-21; 20:30-31
6. While the letter from James was written around the same time as Paul’s letters, its authority was not universally recognized until much later.
7. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Romans 4:24-25
8. Romans 1:16; 4:1-25
9. 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 (see [“If God exists, why doesn’t he prove it?” David R. Bickel, 2008 at absoluteparadox.com](#))
10. For a fuller explanation, see [“Scientific evidence and first-century reports of miracles surrounding Jesus,” David R. Bickel, 2020.](#) .
11. Richard Dawkins, as quoted by Alec Fisher, *The Logic of Real Arguments*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
12. Sam Harris, as quoted in [“NEWSWEEK Poll: 90% Believe in God”](#) (April 8, 2007)
13. *The autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882. With the original omissions restored. Edited and with appendix and notes by his grand-daughter Nora Barlow.* London: Collins, ed. Nora Barlow, 1958, p. 87
14. This argument of Paul (1 Corinthians 4:7) was revived by Martin Luther’s explanation of the first article of the Creed in his [Small Catechism](#). See *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, Bayer Oswald, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003.
15. Acts 14:14-18; 17:24-31; Romans 1:18-23
16. Luke 24:25-48
17. Like any promise, the promise of the Creator’s forgiveness implies an invitation to believe what is promised ([Apology of the Augsburg Confession](#) on Romans 4:16). For an analysis of that promise as a speech act, see *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, Bayer Oswald, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.
18. Genesis 3:1-19

19. That summarizes the exposition by Martin Luther. See *Luther's Outlaw God: Volume 2: Hidden in the Cross*, Steven D. Paulson, Fortress Press, 2019.
20. John 3:3; 6:44; Romans 8:8
21. Romans 5:12-21
22. Romans 1:18-23
23. John 1:29; 9:41