

Along the track

The Illusion of Faith

Faith is irrational and therefore delusional. Atheism, on the other hand, is rational, clear sighted and based on solid evidence. Or so the argument goes.

The idea that faith is inherently irrational is a fairly recent idea. It arose during what's called "the Enlightenment period" (17th and 18th centuries). Under the impact of science, a worldview arose that regarded faith and reason, and thus religion and science, as mutually exclusive. That is a very simplistic view.

Another such simplistic view is that either a person has faith or they don't. Either you're a "believer" or you're not. The truth is, *everybody has faith*. We all have imagination, curiosity, a desire to learn more (all elements of faith) and we trust things we can't prove all the time. We trust others, even people we don't know. We all live by faith in some way or other. Faith isn't irrational. Blind, unquestioning faith might be, but real faith isn't. After all, both science and religion, life and faith require something of a sense of adventure, an element of trust, a desire to know and do more. Christian faith, according to the Catechism, 'sets out to move a person from within to wonder, to question, to seek greater understanding.' (CCC #158).

Faith or belief doesn't require us to surrender our imagination, our curiosity, our desire to learn and to know more, to understand more, the things that 'move us from within.' As human beings, we are continually curious, we wonder about things all the time. We have a sense of wonder at the things that inspire us, the things that take our breath away. They are part of who we are as humans. These are also God-given gifts – God's Spirit works through them all!

Faith isn't a series of beliefs that we 'hold'. Rather it is an attitude of reverence, of openness to God and to each other, a desire to know more and appreciate more God's creation and God's interaction with us. Our understanding of that is always evolving.

Take Jesus' interactions with us as a model. His many stories and interactions with others, especially those leaders of the Jewish religion who came to test him, made them ask themselves much deeper questions. He invited those who were curious about him to 'come and see'. He invited those who came to hear him to learn more, to widen their knowledge and to look beyond the obvious, to deeper realities (his questions about the Lilies of the Fields, the Birds in the Sky, who is the greatest? what must I do to have life? to name but a few). Jesus used imagination often not just to describe his beliefs but to invite his listeners to look outside the square. He told stories that challenged them, to invite them into closer relationship with God and with each other. His stories challenged his listeners to make their world a better place, to reach out to others, especially the poor and those in need.

In doing this, Jesus showed them that faith makes a lot of sense – it calls us out of ourselves, as it were, away from ourselves as the centre of attention, to greater things, to the service of others, to the betterment of the world and of ourselves.

Faith requires evidence as well as a healthy degree of self-reflection and self-knowledge. It is certainly not a naïve acceptance of what someone else tells us, nor is it uncritical – it calls on us to critique the world we live in, its values, structures and practices, how they work for justice and fairness. Faith isn't something chiseled in stone, immovable, unresponsive to the world in which it lives. After all, what is faith for? Just like science, faith is about reverencing and exploring precisely what we do not fully understand—the mystery of Life. Science, faith and theology work together.

I read this recently:

Christian theology is rapidly developing in the light of contemporary cosmology. There is an emerging scientific understanding of the processes and evolution of our earth and of our solar system that holds astonishing implications for our faith. A fundamental concept in modern biology and genetics, for example, is that we all flow from one source, one relatively simple particle. Lovingly fashioned, sustained and empowered by a Single Creator, we are all cousins across the myriad life forms in the one universal family. Nothing can be itself without being in communion with everything else. It is only during these last few decades of the earth's 14-billion year history that this blessed awareness of the intimacy and interdependence of all strands of creation has begun to dawn on human hearts (Fr Daniel O'Leary, The Tablet 21 March 2015).

Extraordinary, isn't it – what science can reveal and what faith can see!

Jesus spoke about this vision when some Pharisees and Sadducees came to test him, asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He said to them 'when evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.'" You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. Mt 16 2-4

The signs the times were commonly understood to be the signs of God's presence and activity, God's purpose in our world. You can see what is obvious, but you are blind to those signs, he said, you simply do not have the eyes or the vision or the faith to see it.

Not much has changed, has it?

Regards
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