Affective Theism and People of Faith

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§1 Introduction

The belittlers, as I will call them, object to faith on multiple grounds, but the fundamental concern expressed is that faith cannot survive epistemic scrutiny. Some even go so far as to say that religious faith involves, by definition, beliefs that lack epistemic warrant. I hardly recognize this picture of religious faith and religious life, except in the sense that one can cease to be surprised or shocked by the neighbor who jumps naked on his trampoline after having seen it for years. But it remains alien to me, even if I've become accustomed to the characterization. This essay explains why. My goal is thus to describe an alternative perspective on faith and one particular way in which a life of faith can arise, and then consider the charges raised by the belittlers.

It is important here to note that the task is not to defend any and every response of faith, nor to claim that there aren't lives of faith built on beliefs that involve culpable failures of epistemic warrant. For the belittlers are not on a sorting mission. Instead, their goal is to reprimand religious faith of every sort. So what I seek here is not a defense of faith or a defense of religious belief as such, but something much weaker. We seek, that is, one version of a life of faith on which its importance and value is perspicacious and which falls outside the scope of the complaints of the belittlers.

1 Including the New Atheists—Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett—but also others, having in common perhaps only their conviction that a world without religion would be a much better place.

2 And not only Mark Twain here (“Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”); see, e.g., Leiter (2012), “religious belief in the post-Enlightenment era involves culpable failures of epistemic warrant” (p. 82) and “Religious beliefs, in virtue of being based on “faith,” are insulated from ordinary standards of evidence and rational justification, the ones we employ in both common sense and in science” (pp. 33-34). Such characterizations are far from exceptional, enjoying widespread endorsement both within philosophy and in general. See other references to endorsements of such in non-academic settings by Stephen Pinker, Alexander Rosenberg, and Richard Dawkins in Howard-Snyder (2013). It is worth pointing out, in defense of such secular critics, that they are agreeing with a long line of religious thinkers who endorse a similar position, contrasting faith with doubt and insisting that true faith often involves ignoring or rejecting grounds for doubt. See Howard-Snyder (2013) for discussion of this position, which he labels “the Common View.”
We can think of the criticisms in question, and the characterization of faith on which they rely, as inherently cognitive. Such a picture arises quite naturally from our use of the term 'faith' to stand for the particular truth claims made by a given religion. There is talk of the Christian faith, the Baptist Faith and Message; talk of knowing what “we” believe and why (a phrase communicating an unusual repudiation of first-person authority regarding our own mental states). From this use of the language of faith, it is easy to adopt a cognitive picture of what faith involves: to be a Christian is to endorse the Christian faith, it is to believe and have faith in (some vague but important subset) of the truths that constitute the Christian faith. And, as a matter of dominant sociological fact, much of religious belief is insulated from evidence and other forms of epistemic warrant, as many critics charge. Of course, religious belief is not unique in this regard—it is part of the attraction of any sort of fundamentalism, religious or not, that the foundations of a life never need revision. But given the ubiquity of religion, it is perhaps most obvious in this domain.

I said above that I hardly recognize this picture of religious faith and religious life. Here, I’ll try to say why, but a quick preview will help set the stage. Religious life is a matter of both head and heart, and the cognitive picture above has the head dominant, with the fitting image of the tail wagging the dog. I will here reverse the order of dependence.

§2 Lives of Faith

We can begin with the idea that there can be both unified approaches to life and approaches that involve disunity or disconnectedness. In the latter category are lives that instance the Humean view of causation: just one damn thing after another, with no attempt on the part of the individual in question to be doing anything beyond coping with whatever comes one’s way. Such patterns of life are difficult to sustain, but it is not uncommon to see lives that display it in significant temporal chunks. In contrast to such patterns of behavior are approaches that pursue unity, that aim at connecting the multiplicities in experience into some sort of plan or purpose, and the boundary of such a search involves plans, purposes, and goals that are all-encompassing. The development of plans and purposes typically arise out of conative or affective aspects of human life, such as negative emotional experiences and positive emotional experiences. Among the negative emotional experiences are fear, horror, regret, guilt, worry, sorrow, shame, anger, misery, meaninglessness, and despair; among positive affective states are joy, compassion, awe, wonder, and experiences.

3I will here use the terms 'conative' and 'affective' interchangeably, thinking of the mental life of a person as divided into two parts. Conation is sometimes defined as one of three parts of mental function, distinguished from both cognition and affection, but I am perplexed by attempts to sort the conative from the affective, so won’t abide by the strictures of this definition here.
of beauty and the sublime. Such aspects of human life can provoke an interest in finding meaning or in developing a plan or purpose or goal that reaches beyond merely coping with each particular episode in life as it comes. In some cases, the call of the goal is merely attractive, in other cases it takes on the guise of the mandatory. In either case, these features of human life need not prompt the kind of unification that interests me, but the possibility exists, and is often realized, of responding to such by adopting a pattern of life that involves longer-term projects, goals, and plans.

Such responses involve decisions, whether in the most self-conscious, deliberative sense, or in the hardly discernible way in which, for example, one chooses to follow one’s standard route from home to work. The point is that the response counts as human behavior, motivated by the affective states and experiences in question.

It is on these affective origins of the pursuit of ideals of one sort or another that I want to focus initially, for these unifying responses, I want to suggest, are responses that involve faith of one sort or another. To adopt a longer-term project or goal or plan involves a kind of hope that success may be possible, or at least a decision not to give in to feelings of hopelessness, and a kind of self-trust, and perhaps trust in the structure of the universe and the society in which one hopes to flourish, regarding the accomplishment of some plan. None of these underlying attitudes or dispositions need to be ones brought to consciousness in deliberate reflection on the experiences that prompt them, nor need they be part of any fully deliberate approach taken to the motivations for them. Ordinary human experience in response to the kinds of motivations I want to focus on range from the spontaneous to the fully deliberative. But what is important about the responses in question is that they involve a setting of a direction for the individual, one which a person may faithfully pursue.

Faith, in this sense, is an orientation of a person toward a longer-term goal, an orientation or disposition toward the retaining of the goal or plan or project in the face of difficulties in achieving it, one prompted by affections of various sorts and involving complex mental states that are fundamentally affective even if they involve cognitive dimensions as well. A plan, purpose, or goal is developed, and the culmination of this process involves a commitment by the individual to such a plan, and in following through on such a commitment the person displays the kind of faith that I am describing. People can be faithful to their commitments, or not, and

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4Some might think that the experiences of beauty and the sublime should be classified with the cognitive rather than the affective. Since nothing I say here turns on the issue, I’ll bypass extended discussion of the issue here by simply noting the attraction of views that treat normative and evaluative experiences and judgments as essentially involving a pro-attitude or con-attitude. So by classifying these experiences with on the conative and affective, my intention is to signal the way in these attitudes can function in the story of faith in much the same way as the emotions cited.
when faithful, they follow through in a way that displays an orientation or disposition toward retaining the goal or plan or project in the face of whatever difficulties are encountered.

I have avoided describing such faith in terms of the language of mental states or attitudes, since even though such faith may involve specific attitudes, it would be unwise to begin from that assumption. It is, to be sure, an orientation of the person, a disposition of the self, toward a certain ideal. The metaphysics of such is messy and interesting in its own right, but I will not pursue that topic here except to caution against any assumption that all such personal features must fall into the the category of intentionality, displaying a characteristic “aboutness” whether of the de re or de dicto sort. The caution I’m voicing is that we shouldn’t begin by insisting that the discussion be hered into the arena of intentionality. Perhaps some attitudes are not intentional in the required sense: perhaps a person can be angry without being angry about anything (and certainly not angry about everything), just as a person can have undirected anxiety, or moments of pure joy without there being any good answer to the question “Concerning what?”. More generally, however, it is clearly possible to have dispositions or orientations that don’t involve intentional aboutness at all: dispositions such as be loving or caring or miserly or mean. So too we should assume about the kind of faith I speak of: one can display it without it being about anything. It is an orientation of a person, a stance taken, that displays itself in a faithful pursuit of a goal or ideal. I do not rule out the possibility of some fancy story that reduces such to the level of the intentional, but we should not start there.

To return to the issue of the nature of this orientation of a person, the first lesson to note is that such faith is thoroughly mundane, and the reason for focusing on the affective features of it is that they are worn on its face, whereas whatever cognitive dimensions there might be are more variable and harder to discern. We can see these points more clearly by considering a specific example. Suppose a young Little League pitcher gives up a game-winning home run and experiences the typical despondency for having done so. One reaction is to adopt a goal of becoming a better pitcher and never having to feel that way again. Such a reaction can generate an orientation or disposition toward various efforts at becoming better, in hopes of doing so (or at least some aversion to the idea that any efforts of any sort are hopeless), and display a kind of self-trust or

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5 Thanks to Kris McDaniel for reminding me that defenders of Brentano’s thesis that intentionality is the mark of the mental, displaying a characteristic “aboutness”, have resources here. For example, undifferentiated anger can be treated in terms of being angry at the world. I won’t pursue this issue here, since there are plenty of other grounds for resisting a treatment of faith in terms of intentional attitudes of a de re or de dicto sort, but will merely note that I don’t find this story plausible. Being angry at the world (earth? universe?) is one thing, and simply being angry is another. I’ve experienced both. They aren’t the same. Or so I say.
self-reliance and perhaps some trust of others who may be recruited to help in the project. Our youngster makes a commitment to a certain kind of future. It might be intense commitment or more causal in its firmness, but when he carries through on this commitment, he will be properly characterized as being faithful to it, or pursuing his goal faithfully. Our question about such a mundane example is what kind of mental states, cognitive or affective, must all of this involve? We have already seen the affective source and sustenance of the faith; we might even characterize it as a kind of affective faith, involving an attraction toward a certain ideal and an aversion toward its alternative. These affective states not only cause the disposition or orientation toward the ideal of becoming a better pitcher, they are inherent in it. And what of cognition? What role can we find for it? Doesn’t he have to have certain types of belief here, and aren’t there beliefs that inhere in the faith in the same way that the affections inhere in the faith?

I doubt it. Let’s consider what particular beliefs might be involved in being faithful to the ideal of becoming a better pitcher. Certainly our youngster needn’t believe that he will succeed, nor that it is likely that he will succeed, or even that there is some chance that he will succeed—his commitment to the ideal and the way in which he follows through with his plan reveals some hope of success, and that is enough to make sense of the process in question. Nor need our young athlete believe that the ideal is worthy of pursuit or that achieving the ideal is a good thing.\textsuperscript{6} Such beliefs might be present, but it is equally possible that our young athlete either hasn’t formed any beliefs with such lofty axiological components and possible that the conceptual elements required of such beliefs are simply not present yet. Beliefs of the sort described may be present, but they are not constitutive of the faith in question nor necessary for it. Might we insist on a role for other beliefs, such as believing that there is such a thing as the game of baseball, that there are coaches, and teammates, and (obnoxious) parents involved in Little League?\textsuperscript{7}

A further possibility is to be in cognitive states that differ from belief. Perhaps, for example, our young pitcher only presupposes these claims, or assumes them in such a way that his belief box remains empty of the sought items. There is, of course, the reductive project of showing that presuppositions and assumptions are kinds of belief, but reductive projects do not have an impressive track record in philosophy. Among cognitive features of human persons are not only beliefs, but expectations,

\textsuperscript{6}Cf. Howard-Snyder (2013) on this point.

\textsuperscript{7}See Audi (1982, 1994).
assumptions, and presuppositions, as well as mental assents to certain claims without actually believing them, and a committing of the self to a viewpoint or cause, whether or not such commitment involves something like a mental state having a certain proposition as its content. One can, as it were, nail one’s theses to the wall, taking one’s stand on them, all the while knowing that one falls short of believing them. My point is that there is a lot of philosophical work required before we can say that, even if our Little Leaguer is properly characterized in some way or other in terms of the claims just cited, the proper characterization must be in terms of belief.

In any case, the relevant point is elsewhere. Even if there are beliefs or other cognitive elements present, they are merely background conditions for the faith in question and not constitutive of it nor doing the work that the affective elements are doing in sustaining it. The cognitive elements were already in place prior to the emergence of the affective faith in question, and form no part of the attraction of the ideal in question or the aversion to its central contrast. They are, at most, background conditions already in place that make possible the story, no more a part of the affective faith in question than his background beliefs that he exists and has hands.

On the idea here that there is a difference between explainers and background conditions, it is correct to note that the distinction between the two is hard to characterize. This difficulty leads some to claim that there is no such distinction: there is merely what we treat as background and then what appears in the foreground as a result. Vary what we hold fixed, vary what we treat as background, and any of the features involved in the story will turn out to be an explainer.

Such skepticism overreaches. In a theory of rationality, we distinguish between conferrers of rationality and enablers: the absence of defeaters of the confirming power that some piece of information provides for a given action or belief is an enabler but not a conferrer; a belief that entails that another belief is true or that an action must be done, all-things-considered, is a conferrer of rationality and not an enabler. A full account of rationality, however, has to include both the presence of conferrers and enablers, on pain of violating the defeasible nature of rationality. Since adequate explanations are subject to the same defeasibility feature (X can explain Y, whereas X&Z doesn’t), we need both the feature that is doing the explanatory work and the features that are enabling the work to be done. In the case of the faith in question, the story is told to make this clear: what is doing the work is the affective state in question. For it to do its work, various other conditions, some cognitive in nature are needed. None of the particular items mentioned is itself needed, perhaps—but at least one of a broad variety of enabling possibilities must be realized. But these enabling conditions are not doing the work here and do not enter into the nature of the faith in question. Only the feature present that is
doing the work partially define or partially constitute the nature of that faith.

Moreover the disposition or orientation of our young pitcher has a kind of deictic element to it, pointing to the affective element central to the example. The disposition in question is not merely one of becoming a better pitcher, it is, rather, a disposition to work to become a pitcher who doesn’t let *that* happen again. Of course, it is possible over time for all this to change, but that is not the kind of case we are presently considering. Our case is, instead, one where the source of the goal is embedded in, and active in sustaining, the motivation that leads to the faithful pursuit of that goal.

One last try to force a cognitive dimension here, based on the plausible idea that even affective faith involves a dimension we might characterize in terms of closure of inquiry regarding various claims surrounding the plan or goal in question. For example, consider the issue of the possibility of success. If one raises the question of what he thinks about the possibility of success, and he retains the plan and his faith in it in the presence of the question, the question will get shrugged off or met with an affirmation. The question is a closed one, and will remain so as long as the plan, and the faith that undergirds it, remains in place.8 His being closed to inquiry on the issue is a personal feature of the boy, an attitude or disposition toward the possibility of success. But we need not suppose that our young possessor of mundane faith takes some attitude toward this possibility in order to be closed to inquiry on the issue. We should thus abandon the search for cognitive dimensions of affective faith, and consider more directly what we can learn about faith from this particular kind of faith.

One thing leaps out about such faith: it is obvious that such mundane faith is often a good thing, and anyone who begrudges our youngster such faith and its effects deserves remonstrance. We owe people our full support in their pursuits of such hopes and dreams, or at least the hands-off stance of not working to undermine their efforts. Of course, if we change the example sufficiently, we get different assessments: if the goal is to become the greatest dragon-killer of all time, the unrealistic character of the goal calls for intervention of some sort. But such is not the case in our present example. Nor are the values implicit in trying to be a great pitcher sufficiently problematic to warrant concern, even for those dismissive of a culture that places inordinate value on athletic accomplishments. Even relatively unimportant projects, such as amassing the largest stamp collection in history, or surfing the largest wave on record, or growing the largest pumpkin, involve mundane faith to which opposition is generally inappropriate.

The point of this discussion, then, is to point to the tolerance and, yes, respect that such expressions of faith deserve. We should grant the

8For further exploration of this dimension of faith, see Buchak (forthcoming).
indefinite variety of ways of pursuing the good life, granting the usefulness and need of such mundane faith, and refraining from chastisement except in extreme cases. The mere fact that you place no value whatsoever on being a great pitcher is irrelevant. Now, of course, if you are convinced that the goals are repulsive and disgusting, then perhaps something must be done. About you. Not the young pitching prospect.

My point is not simply to insult, but to call attention to the extreme difficulty of life without such mundane faith. One might even say, though I will not try to defend it, that there is no such thing as a good life without it. But whether or not there can be good life without such affective faith, it would be deeply mistaken to suggest faith of this type is morally, practically, or epistemically deficient in all its instances. So, if the epistemic complaints of the belittlers is to be defensible at all, it must be on the basis of crucial and important contrasts between such mundane faith and religious faith. I turn, then, to the question of the relationship between the two.

§3 Mundane Faith and Religious Faith

We can move toward an account of the kind of religious faith that I find the most interesting philosophically by first enlarging the scope of the projects, plans, and purposes that might be adopted. For mundane faith can be exhibited about the most trivial of interests, and a person might clutter a life with a wide variety of such projects and plans. Such a person might do so with a metaplan in mind as well: that a life full of a variety of interests is what makes for a full and flourishing life.

So neither the presence of mundane faith, nor the presence of mundane faith attached to a metaplan is to be counted as religious faith. I will make no attempt here to give a full and complete characterization of religious faith, one that separates it from every other kind of faith, but it is important, in assessing the complaints of the belittlers, to move as close as we can toward what religious faith involves. I believe the key here is not to disallow a variety of projects and plans that might involve religious faith, but rather to see religious faith as involving an overall metaplan that structures and organizes whatever other plans one might have in terms of some ideal. Religious faith thus aims at the full integration of a life in relation to an all-encompassing ideal, even if the actual situation for a given individual falls short of that ideal (i.e., even if their faith is weak with respect to the ideal in question). The unification of the specific items of human behavior from one moment to the next in teleological terms counts as an expression of religious faith only when the ideal involved contains in its essence the goal of structuring all plans, purposes, and goals in terms of a single pursuit or ideal. It may also involve affective states under the guise of the mandatory, rendering the pursuit of the ideal
non-optional, though I suspect this is simply a quite common feature of religious faith of the affective sort under discussion here and not essential to it.

An advantage for an approach to faith that acknowledges the possibility of such affective faith⁹ is that there is a ready explanation of the connection between such affective faith and salvation. It makes sense for allegiance to a cause, for fidelity to a call, to be “credited as righteousness,” as in the case of Abram. Such credit, of course, is not required; but it makes sense to so credit it. But when the issue is the cognitive one, making sense of why one’s eternal destiny turns on the question of what specific beliefs one holds, we confront a head-scratcher: why that standard? I am not claiming, of course, that defenders of more cognitive kinds of faith will have nothing to say here, but whatever they say, they have a considerable hill to climb to get past the initial incredulity such a position generates. One might even feel some suspicion that the only way to do so is to make any other kind of faith be partially constituted by affective faith.

Whatever one might say in defense of other kinds of religious faith, however, we should note that the ideal unity involved in affective faith need not involve specifically religious faith. A purely moral faith can be of this sort, as well as the philosophical faith of the sort found in the Stoics and Epicureans, and the utopian faith of certain forms of Marxism. Nor should we fail to mention the possibilities of distortions of personhood that involve a fully integrated teleology aimed at trivialities, or the corrupted expression of faith in service of the horrific, such as the promotion of the Aryan race. So the varieties of faith that satisfy this important feature of religious faith is wide indeed. But I think this essential feature provides us with enough information about how to distinguish religious faith from more mundane varieties to be in a position to consider the features of such faith and what it would take for the epistemic criticisms of the belittlers to be appropriate concerning such faith.

So, begin with a fully integrated teleological structure for a person that is not religious. For example, consider a person whose entire life is organized for the purpose of achieving a utopian ideal, or a person facing all that life brings with a single-minded devotion to experiencing quietude or tranquility and the fulfillment it brings by achieving the Stoic’s apatheia. Such faith can arise in a multitude of ways: through the experience of sorrow and despair at the ways in which our social and political structures multiply suffering in the world, through an imaginative experience of the sublime character of no longer being at the whims of the turbulent sea.

⁹Stronger positions might not only acknowledge it, but insist on something stronger. Perhaps, it is fundamental, in the sense that any other kind of faith needs to be explained in terms of it. Or perhaps all other kinds of faith are false faiths, or bad faiths, or faux faiths. Though tempted toward these stronger claims, I here resist making them.
of emotions, or through the deep admiration and adoration of another person providing an ideal representative of the way of life in question.

Our question concerns what kinds of questions and complaints might be lodged against such a person, without impropriety. Well, not quite, since human beings have a nearly infinite capacity for generating new kinds of criticisms; we are, as Ernest Sosa has pointed out, “zestfully judgmental.”

So let’s distinguish between central and important criticisms of a way of life, and all the rest (never mind that there will be no agreement on which category a given criticism falls into—I’ll simply appeal to the reader’s good judgment on this score). So we might criticize the Stoic for lacking a proper interest in pizza, and the Marxist for lacking a proper love of scuba diving. And both criticisms might be exactly right. They are nonetheless irrelevant. Instead, the proper response on hearing such a criticism is an eyebrow raised toward the one bringing the criticism, or at least a soft chuckle at the distortion of values required to view such a lack as important.

We thus need to focus on criticisms that focus on what truly matters, and here it is worth noting the impropriety of criticism of the affective source in question and the values involved in the faith that results. Caring about ameliorating the amount of suffering in the world is noble and admirable, and working toward happiness and fulfillment by lessening the amount of distress caused by the proliferation of desires we are all subject to is also a good thing. Moreover, devoting one’s life to the pursuit of such goals is, from an affective point of view at least, hard to criticize. Such devotion to important things is itself a thing of beauty and inspiration.

Of course, there are other commitments to a way of life, prompted by the affections, that may produce a bit more consternation. One might aim at becoming the consummate Parisian upon being overwhelmed by the beauty of the place; one might, in more ancient times, become attached to Rome because of the ideals it embodies. One might also find the beauty of nature strong enough that one devotes one’s life to its preservation, or one might find science itself to be such an astounding human accomplishment that allegiances are formed with the enterprise of such strength and fervor that the life that results can only be properly characterized by the language of fidelity and faith. For each of us, some of these expressions of faith that involve the full integration of a personality with teleological purposes, both first-order and higher-order, will strike us as unseemly, perplexing, and difficult to understand. But at the same time, it is a smallness of spirit to insist that the desires of the heart have to match or overlap significantly with one’s own to make any sense, a failure with respect to magnanimity, and it is a failure of imagination to be unable to appreciate the vast variety within what counts as the good life (at least when we limit the topic of discussion to what happens from birth to death).

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10Sosa (2007, p. 70).
The commitment to the life of the samurai or shaman may be difficult to understand, but it is not to be classified with the commitment to a life devoted to the superiority of the Aryan race. And to have as the desire of one’s heart to be a great pitcher or the greatest expert on French literature of the 19th century may be similarly alien to most of us, but even in the middle of this experience of the alien we can recognize the diversity of the good life and show tolerance and respect for it and its affective source.

My point here is not meant to render free from criticism every way of life involving morally neutral passional elements. We may point out, for example, that some such lives are incomplete; that they are missing out on important goods, even if organized around desires of the heart that are either neutral or good in themselves; that the ideal human life involves aspects that are being ignored in lives of such truncated dimensionality.

Note, however, the category into which these critiques fall. They are not about the cognitive dimensions of such expressions of faith, but rather about the affective dimensions involved. As such, there is no room here for talk of epistemic impropriety or defect, for such talk is only appropriate when focusing on the cognitive dimensions of a way of life. So, if we are looking for ways in which epistemic impropriety or defect might be an appropriate charge to raise against certain types of faith, we will have to identify first which cognitive commitments are involved in a life of faith of the sort being described.

So, to return to the cases of utopians and Stoics, let us ask how to go about identifying the cognitive elements involved in such a life of faith, in order to determine whether any such elements are epistemically inappropriate or defective. But what exactly are those cognitive aspects? What cognitive dimensions are required of our Marxist or Stoic?

A natural answer here is this: you have to believe some version of Marxism or Stoicism. So tell us which version you believe and we’ll go from there.

But this response is inadequate in the present context. The goal here is to raise the possibility that the cognitive dimensions of a way of life and the faith it embodies might involve epistemic difficulties. For that purpose, it is not enough to find some expressions of such a way of life to be problematic. Instead, one must identify certain cognitive features as essential to that way of life, and then find these essential features to be epistemically troubling.

My hope is that the examples of pursuing ataraxia through apatheia, and pursuing the alleviation of human misery through a utopian construction make clear how difficult it is to say precisely which cognitive commitments such ways of life require. And to that extent, it is equally difficult to find criticisms of such ways of life that are appropriate. That is not to say that there are not appropriate criticisms of specific individuals who have embarked on such a way of life, but the issue is the way of life itself and not particular embodiments of it. Shall we say that a utopian must believe
that the achievement of the utopian ideal would usher in an era in which all misery has been eliminated? That would be a silly position: why would a utopian have to be so oblivious as to think that natural disasters such as tornados, forest fires, hurricanes, and the like would either disappear or have no negative consequences for human beings were the utopian ideal achieved? Must a Stoic believe that it is possible to no desires whatsoever? Surely not. The way of life is a path toward greater fulfillment, and the path involves the pursuit of apatheia, a pursuit that can lead to increasing levels of fulfillment even if it is impossible to achieve the absence of all desires of any sort (as well as any other affective states that might lead to the loss of tranquility).

Perhaps the criticism should be that the goals in question will not or cannot be achieved. Well, the modal claim is surely unsustainable, and the charge of the ways of life being unrealistic does not penetrate deeply. For no way of life needs to hang its respectability on likelihood of success: to insist otherwise is to miss the fundamental role that hopes and dreams play in the expressions of faith involved in the ways of life in question. Such hopes and dreams may be dashed in the end, but such is life, and it is a particular way of giving in to despair to insist on pursuing no goal that one is not likely to achieve.

§4 The Cognitive Dimensions of Religious Faith

Given this understanding of faith and what we have learned by considering non-religious expressions of it, let us now turn to the kind of religious faith I want to focus on in assessing the complaints of the belittlers. We begin, then, with the following: religious faith can be of the kind I am describing, a kind of faith that arises from the affections, as described above: perhaps it arises from the sublime and terrible experience of being thrown from a horse on road to Damascus; it may arise from the apparent majesty and greatness of spirit found in a prophet or shaman or holy man of a particular religious tradition; it could arise from experiencing the beauty of creation and the moments of pure joy at its wonders; or it might be the darker experiences of misery and despair and misery and injustice that cry out for a ray of hope and somehow receive it. Such affective sources are surely as immune from criticism as any similar source that gives rise to secular ways of life and the kind of faith they embody.

I'll focus here on Christian faith in order to make the discussion more focused, even though much of what I say here will have wider application to most if not all religious faith. My point here is to insist that it is a shallow understanding of faith that does not recognize the possibility of such fundamentally affective faith, both in terms of source and sustenance. In this regard, we can think of the inadequate philosophical theology about faith as having such wide-reaching scope that our ordinary language about
faith has come to identify it with a type of belief: people are counseled to just have faith, to just keep believing, to abandon their doubts and hold to the faith, and in countless other ways that presuppose a fundamentally cognitive picture of what faith involves.

Given what we have already seen, however, it should be obvious that even if there are kinds of faith that are fundamentally or predominantly cognitive, they are not the only kinds of faith. And I care very little for what we might glean by examining ordinary language, given how easy it is for ordinary practices of thought and talk to codify the results of prior theory. What I’m interested in is the phenomena of faith itself, and the prospects of the belittlers for faith of a particular type. So, we must consider, given that criticism of a life of faith that is fundamentally affective in source and sustenance can gain no decent foothold within the passional dimensions themselves, whether there are certain unavoidable cognitive accoutrements to such an affective faith that are worthy of criticism as the belittlers wish.

Moreover, as I’ve been insisting, it is not enough to find instances of such faith that are accompanied by, let us say, goofy beliefs. What is required is some account of which cognitive commitments are involved in the life of faith that is fundamentally affective in character.

By now, I’m sure many readers will be impatient: “Isn’t it obvious that to be a Christian, and thus to display Christian faith, one has to believe that God exists, 11 must believe that Jesus is God’s Son,12 must believe a host of other things in order for the faith in question to be saving faith; so even if there is an affective faith of the sort described, it is not the faith that is essential to being a Christian.” And not only belittlers will say such things—such language is ubiquitous among Christians themselves. So, it would seem, if the target of the belittlers is the particular doctrinal commitments that are standard fare here, the targets would seem to be fair game: they are precisely the sorts of things that are not merely typical accompaniments of Christian faith, but essential to it.

I intend here to avoid getting bogged down in philosophical minutiae, even if of such is the life of the philosopher composed. But I need to loosen the grip of this way of thinking a bit before returning to our painting of a fundamentally affective life of faith and its cognitive dimensions. First, included in the complaint is the central point: if we assume the truth of Christianity, what kind of faith is required for salvation? And the way to determine this is to ask what, from the Christian perspective, is required for presence in heaven? Here, an important second point: an appropriate

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11 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Heb. 11:6, New International Version)
12 “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:18, New International Version)
answer to the first question must not be an answer that will exclude from heaven the great saints of the Hebrew Bible: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6, New International Version).

So, the issue here is both about mental state and content, with the impatient reply above focusing on certain contents of traditional Christian doctrine, with the mental state in question being that of belief. Now, there is a strong element of a focus on belief in Christian Scriptures, and we can begin to loosen the grip of the above metanarrative about Christian salvation by noting some of the unavoidable difficulties in translating various terms in Hebrew and Greek with our modern concept of belief:

While belief now refers to a state of mind, a disposition to assent to a set of propositions, even within the early Christian intellectual tradition historically it had as much or more to do with love, loyalty, and commitments akin to pledging one’s allegiance to a person as Lord or to a cause or to entering into a covenant such as marriage. The Latin word credo (apparently a compound of cor, cordis ‘heart’ and -do, -dere, ‘to put’ derived from the proto Indo-European root for placing one’s heart upon something, *kred-dhē) means ‘I set my heart’ upon the entity or doctrines in question. Even for scholastics such as Aquinas . . . credo meant to pledge allegiance to, to give one’s self and one’s loyalty. The Latin terms most closely expressing today’s meaning of belief and opinion, opinio (‘opinion, belief, supposition’) and opinor (opinari, to be of the opinion, to believe) played an almost negligible role in Christian thought. (McKaughan 2013, pp. 107-8)

While there is some worth questioning here (e.g., belief is clearly a state of mind, but may not be a disposition to assent), I want to call attention to two important distinctions here that are useful for our discussion. The first is a distinction between intentional attitudes and kinds of actions, and the second is a distinction between cognitive attitudes and connative or affective ones. To place one’s heart upon something involves some kind of internal action involving commitment, as does pledging allegiance, and the source and sustenance of such commitments is fundamentally affective. Hence, to believe, in this more ancient sense, is thus primarily about attitudes of the heart and commitments made in light of them rather than attitudes of the mind. Understood in this way, talk about belief and saving faith isn’t primarily about cognitive attitudes but rather affective ones and their expression.

Given this point, we should be hesitant to endorse doxastic requirement in the impatient reply above, in spite of the fact that it is a quite common presupposition about what Christian faith involves. It is a theoretically
inelegant story to focus on belief in its modern sense when describing Christian faith and the life of the believer. Central to the message of Jesus is that true life is found in moving away from a central concern for self and following him. Though there is much more to the story of Christianity than the paradoxes of the Kingdom,¹³, these paradoxes cut to the heart of a central and basic point in the message of Jesus, and this ideal of selflessness simply isn’t about belief in the modern sense. If we begin with the idea that the central essential feature of being a follower of Jesus has to do with losing one’s life rather than seeking it and in terms of servanthood rather than a pursuit of power, fame, fortune, or even honor and glory, it is hard to see how to fit talk of belief in the modern sense into this picture. For the topic of discussion isn’t cognitive; instead, it is about one’s cares and concerns, desires and motivations. With respect to this feature of being among the faithful, even entrenched atheists can be included. For here we find, not concepts such as truth and falsity, evidence and its lack, but what we find attractive, what is beautiful, what we adore, and that for which we wish, hope, and long.

The critic will be impatient again, however, this time with the failure to address the central question of the content of various cognitive states, whether or not accurately characterized in terms of our modern notion of belief. The complaint still is that there are various cognitive commitments that cannot be avoided, if one is to be among the Christian redeemed. Among those contents are those listed above: that God exists, that Jesus is God’s Son, that he lived and died to secure our redemption, etc.

It is, of course, correct to point out that when someone is a follower of a certain person, they presuppose that the person being followed exists. But recall that the issue is more generic than the question of who self-identifies as a follower of Jesus. The question is rather, from the Christian point of view, when is saving faith present and when isn’t it, and it is clear that one can possess saving faith and never have heard about Jesus. That is precisely the point of giving the saints of old—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the rest—their due.

Don’t say here, “But central to the Christian story is that before Jesus existed there was one standard for salvation, and afterward, another.” While it is true that some Christians endorse such claims, they are, we might say, making it up as they go. Most decisive here is the Scriptural record itself: St. Paul is clear that both he and Abraham are saved in precisely the same way: by faith.¹⁴ To avoid misunderstanding, let me point out that affective faith and the way of life embodying it will always involve cognitive commitments of one sort or another—how could

¹³Included are claims such as these: the last shall be first and the first last, he who wishes to be great must be the servant of all, it is in dying that we live, those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their lives for Jesus’s sake will find it, etc.
¹⁴The argument of the letter to the Romans could not be more clear on this point. See especially Romans 4:17–21.
it not? The point, however, is that the precise nature of those cognitive commitments is quite indeterminate. There is no ready answer, in general, for the question, “What must a person believe or cognitively endorse in order to be saved?”

Moreover, my point here is not, nor does it rely on, the banal point that the range of adherents of the Christian religion runs from the most conservative fundamentalism to the most liberal theologies, or even atheologies. Even from the point of view of the most right-wing, inerrantist Evangelicalism, the case can be made that there is no ready answer here.

To get a sense of the grounds for hesitance about the precise cognitive elements involved in such affective faith, a couple of distinctions will help. First, notice the relatively strong Christian tradition of doubt and unbelief even among the faithful. Thomas doubts and won’t believe without empirical confirmation, but is neither reprimanded nor ostracized for his doubts. One might think otherwise, since his stance is contrasted with those who are blessed for believing without seeing, but viewing that remark as a reprimand overreaches. Students can be told that life will go better for them the earlier they start on end-of-semester projects without any negative attitude toward those who do not start until a week before the deadline. Blessed is the early bird for it will get the worm; but it is false that normal sleeper has done something wrong.

A second example of unbelief in the Christian Scriptures is when Jesus says to the father of the boy possessed, “All things are possible to him who believes,” and the father’s confession of unbelief is not treated as a deal-breaker. It is instead treated for what it is: an honest expression of an inability to embrace and commit to a particular level of confidence regarding the future for him and his son. So even when it is fully appropriate to treat the language of belief as involving or implying a particular mental state with particular content, there is no reason to adopt some blanket prohibition against lack of belief among those who are following Jesus.

Part of the attraction of this affective picture is that it can make sense of such. For even if it is in some sense required that one come at some point to believe certain things and to adopt a particular cognitive perspective on all there is and one’s place in it, it would be a strange gospel to impose this requirement in the backtracking fashion that insists that what must be true in the end in order to be saved must be true now in order to be being saved. It is, in a phrase, a confusion between process and product, between the path and the destination.

Furthermore, it is a more fitting picture of the Christian life to think of cognitive commitments as arising through the process of being saved, rather than being imposed by religious authority from the outset. At the

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15“Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29, NIV)
heart of Jesus’s message about following him is an emphasis on motivation and intention rather than on product, and his initial followers had no good idea what a commitment to him would involve, either in terms of practical consequences or cognitive commitments. Why initial commitments and faithful follow-through should have changed since this is beyond me to fathom. In particular, the idea that one must believe a certain set of doctrines, independent of coming to see them as true from a love of truth, is baffling.

Even the most theologically conservative must grant this point regarding the cognitive development that occurred with Jesus’s disciples during his lifetime and with the early church as it sought to sort out orthodox positions on central doctrines of the Christian faith. It shows a smallness of spirit to think that Nestorians, for example, are damned because of their beliefs. The most that could plausibly be claimed here is that there will be no Nestorians in heaven—by the time they get there, they will have seen the light. A simple version of such a point might appeal to a spiritual analogue of the slogan that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: one should expect the possibility of the individual maturation process to take the form of whatever process of doctrinal maturation occurred in the course of salvation history. But a more general point can be made, mirroring the failure of the slogan in question in the scientific context: the variability of individual maturation has no particular doctrinal or cognitive boundaries, whether or not tested in course of religious history.

Seen in this way, the process in question may involve the affective faith I am focusing on, and the cognitive aspects of such ways of life may vary considerably.\footnote{Perhaps something stronger can be affirmed, though I won’t defend it here. Perhaps religious faith, or the only religious faith worth respecting, is that which arises in the contrast between the faithful pursuit of the self, through seeking honor, or glory, or fame, or riches, and the faithful pursuit of the good. In ages and places where theism can be assumed, this distinction is that between faithful pursuit of a theism as talisman, hoping for more rain and better hunting, and the ethical monotheism of the Abrahamic tradition. When theism is no longer assumed, an adequate philosophical soteriology ought to begin from the fundamental distinction between seeking the talisman and seeking the good, often involving a commitment to ideals connected in some way with the feelings of being forgiven and accepted and belonging or of being one with or in accord with something unspecifiable, and being thankful (when no particular object can be cognitively identified as intentional object of such emotions). It is for that reason that one can think of nontheists as falling under the rubric I choose: affective theism. (But this point should not be confused with a closely related point, that religious faith worth respecting is nothing more than a purely moral faith: to draw that conclusion would confuse process and state just as much as what I’ve accused cognitive pictures of faith of doing.)} Is there anything within this variability that is suitable as a target for the attacks of the belittlers? I turn to this question in the next section.
§5 An Alternative Story about the Role of the Cogni-
tive in a Life of Affective Faith

Begin with a central example of truly admirable faith. Consider Abram,
who is told to leave Ur and go to a foreign land. He does so in commitment
to a certain way of life, and it counts as an expression of saving faith.
What propositional contents must he have believed in order for this story
to make sense? Did he have to believe that God exists? I suppose he
did so believe, but the same story could have been true if he had only
been disposed to believe such, or disposed not to believe the denial, or
if he had merely mentally assented to the claim and was determined to
behave in accord with the assumption or presupposition that God exists.
So I assume Abram was a theist, both before and after leaving Ur, but
it is hard to see why that is required for the story. After all, the story
is about being faithful to a perceived directive from God, and the credit
that ensues is a function of this faithfulness. The contrast to faith of this
type is not doubt or disbelief, but change of direction, loss of heart, and
weariness of spirit, a failing to follow through on what one sees in terms
of what is worth pursuing or, even stronger, what is required of one. And
it is obviously possible for a person to commit to a certain way of life,
fully and wholeheartedly, while finding belief beyond them—all they have
is hopes and dreams and possibilities.

We must grant, of course, that such lives of faith are not the norm.
The human drive of curiosity aims at systems of understanding of what
there is and our place in it, and the ordinary human experience is to
satisfy that drive by drinking deeply from one’s current culture and those
who have come before. So when one fully embraces an ideal, such as
becoming a follower of a certain person, and there is a long history of other
people who have taken the same path, the ordinary human experience will
involve adopting the traditional system of understanding developed by
one’s forefathers in the faith, and the human predilection for fixation of
belief typically results in an adoption that takes the form of belief rather
than mere assent or some lesser state of intellectual commitment.

But belief in such a system of understanding is never to be confused with
what is essential for a way of life expressing the kind of affective faith under
discussion here. Such is the nature of the human experience: to approach
life experimentally, sorting when to defer to one’s culture and associates
and when to demur. In this grand experiment to make sense of the world
and our place in it, we adjust across time on what weight to give to which
sources of information, and at every moment of decision regarding such,
the options are wide and broad—that is the lesson of the Quine/Duhem

17For defense and explanation of this view of curiosity and the fundamental role in
cognition of the goal of understanding, see Kvanvig (2013a).
thesis. This fundamentally pragmatic process results in various changes to total cognitive state, some of which involve belief formation and change, and others of which involve intellectual commitments that need not be doxastic in character. One might, in a thoroughly experimental fashion, engage in mental assents of a strong form, perhaps with the expectation that such engagement will likely result in doxastic commitments of some form in the future. One may think such non-doxastic commitments are rare among, say, conservative Christians, but I suspect that a nuanced psychology here will find this experience rather widespread. There is the Shakespearean suspicion here that protesting too much is a useful indication that we don’t have the whole story, and too much adamant bluster about various doctrinal points may be an indication of a commitment to a point of view that one doesn’t quite (or fully) believe.

This possibility ought to be taken even more seriously once we note the standard metanarrative concerning the nature of faith in such conservative circles. Faith is essential to the Christian story of salvation, and the standard metanarrative concerning faith is that it is, or involves, a form of belief. So if one self-identifies as a Christian, adopting or assuming this standard narrative, one will hold oneself to the standard of having to have certain beliefs. Thus, for any claim taken to be part of the Christian story, it will be presupposed by the individual in question that this claim is among the things this individual believes and must believe. The internal psychological pressure that such a presupposition imposes can easily be imagined to yield exaggerated overt behavior when talking about such matters, since failure of belief would be, by the metanarrative in question, lack of faith.

Regardless of how common it is for beliefs of particular kind to be present or absent, epistemic criticism of the cognitive dimension here cannot make any blanket assumptions about what the essential cognitive elements are concerning expressions of affective faith. In the process of finding ways of life compelling or attractive, it may be true that we express affective faith at least initially in ways that exemplify whatever systems of understanding are ready-to-hand, and it would be strange fruit of the tree of epistemology that found such reliance on testimony and community always and everywhere, or even typically, to be irrational.

Moreover, it is worth noting the essentially pragmatic role played by the drive for understanding as well as the interest in full integration of cognition with affection. We should expect a fundamentally affective origin to yield cognitive fruit and efforts at systematic understanding that cohere with such affective features. In the process, it can be fully rational to adopt points of view that fail to pass epistemic scrutiny, much as we might find among scientists committed to a certain research program, whether

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18See Quine (1953); I discuss and defend this Epistemic Optionalism in Kvanvig (2011, 2012, 2013b).
a dying one or one that merely shows some promise. And all of this, without mentioning the ways in which our typical philosophical views, and especially our epistemic views on what it takes to survive suitable epistemic scrutiny, fail to measure up to the standards of knowledge in more mundane contexts.

Given this background, it becomes easy to see what kinds of opposition by belittlers would be appropriate and what kinds would not. The moral offense taken by the belittlers at the much of the historical behavior of Christians is an offense all should share, religious or not, and the strongest expressions of contempt for such behavior is appropriate. If affective religious faith led inexorably to such, no further criticism would be needed.

Moreover, even some forms of belligerence are appropriate for the standard cognitive accouterments of typical expressions of faith, especially in the context of Christianity in America. Bobby Jindal claims that Republicans must cease being “the stupid party,” and similar advice is sorely needed among conservative Christians. The belittlers are not alone in experiencing consternation at the current state of religion in America, but it is equally true that it is not a criticism of the life of faith as such to point out the utter stupidity of certain beliefs held by vast swaths of contemporary Christians.

The central point, however, is this. The critiques raised by the belittlers are orthogonal to the way of life at which they are directed. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of the life of faith, at least when involving the affective faith I’m focusing on here, to draw conclusions about the propriety or rationality or justification of religion as such or Christianity in particular on the typical grounds given by critics such as Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. Written in the tradition of concern over the clash of faith and reason, all such approaches think of faith as something belief-like or at least requiring quite specific cognitive commitments, so that the central question about religious faith is whether the beliefs involved can be held rationally. And then the question of whether religious faith makes any kind of sense turns into the question of whether adequate grounds can be found for religious belief. But if my description of a life of faith is where we start the discussion, there will be no specific cognitive contents that can be identified as the ones that are both epistemically problematic and essential to affective faith as such. On the picture of faith developed here, people of this kind of (religious) faith might include various kinds of skeptics and agnostics regarding the existence of God and any or all of the central claims of the major world religions. That is, one can commit to a certain ideal, even to being an unconditional follower of Jesus or

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19 See in particular Hitchens (2007).
Mohammed or whatever, without any of the standard cognitive attitudes of ordinary folk on such paths, and still be a person of faith—on the straight and narrow—in spite of one’s cognitive uncertainties and confusions. The faith in question is a function of the depth of commitment to the chosen path and the disposition or orientation that leads to following through on such an unconditional commitment. As such, epistemic criticisms that attempt universal destruction of the rationality of people of faith cannot succeed. There will, instead, only be piecemeal criticisms to be raised about particular cognitive and affective combinations, and no such criticisms could possibly sustain such blanket judgments as that religion poisons everything.

§6 Conclusion

The view I have been characterizing and defending allows for a quite wide variety of cognitive stances compatible with Christian faith. One can almost say that the account here resists the cognitive picture by accusing it of a scope fallacy. The affective picture allows that for every instance of Christian faith, there will be, or come to be, beliefs or other cognitive commitments of some type and intensity present; but that it is false that there are some types of belief of some intensity which are present in every instance of Christian faith. Once this new picture of faith is in place, the belligerence of the belittlers is hard to fathom. Against particular lives of faith and the particular beliefs held, criticism, including epistemic criticism, is certainly warranted. Here I’m on the side of the belittlers. But in any kind of sweeping, general way, there could be no epistemic grounds for rejecting the very idea of religious faith, anymore than their could be for rejecting the very idea of mundane faith.
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