

Faith is Inescapable

We get a lot of harsh critiques of religion from commenters on our Intellectual Takeout Facebook page. Present in many of these critiques is the idea that faith is opposed to reason.

In this piece, I don't wish to argue about the merits of our commenters' opposition to religion. Many (not all) identify some real problems with how religious beliefs have been expressed throughout history. Instead, I wish to merely make one point of clarification: that faith is not opposed to reason; in fact, faith is a form of reason.

At its most basic level, faith is typically understood by most as a belief in the existence of God, or more specifically, God as understood by a particular religion. Can we agree on this definition?

Okay, now I want to take a step back and examine this idea of belief. Think for a moment about how people typically come to believe that something is true... something non-religious.

As an example, let's take a hypothetical example of someone who has come to assent to the proposition that "it is true that gay marriage should be legal." It is highly unlikely that this person came to this belief through performing logical syllogisms. More likely, this belief is based upon a combination of different things over time, such as: a particular understanding of equality, parental and educational formation, experience with homosexual persons, experience of marriage in civil society, political party affiliation, the opinions of respected individuals, and numerous other factors.

Do all of those factors add up to a mathematical certainty that "it is true that gay marriage should be legal"? Absolutely not.

Does that therefore mean this belief is unreasonable? Of

course not! This is simply how the process of reasoning works. As John Henry Newman explained in his epistemological classic [*A Grammar of Assent*](#), we usually come to believe something is true not through some rigid process of logic, but through an “accumulation of probabilities.” Eventually, because it’s impossible to take into account everything, reason requires us to make a “leap of faith” based on these probabilities—to assent to something as true based on the evidence we have gathered, and to act on this assent.

The same process I described above is at work in the belief that the earth is round, or that someone cares about you, or that a certain political candidate can best govern America.

And it’s also at work for many people in the belief that God exists. Sure, there are those religious people who irrationally and stubbornly cling to certain elements in their faith. People do the same thing in the realms of politics, economics, and science. But many of those with religious faith have good reasons to believe in God, and have had this belief confirmed through life experience and the study of history, philosophy, and yes, even science.

So, it’s perfectly legitimate to critique people for the *objects* of their faith, such as God, and marshal evidence that you think proves the contrary. But you should be cautious about critiquing faith itself, for you may be undercutting the very process on which your reason depends.