

Ditch the Term, “People of Faith!”

“A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need” (Martin Luther)¹

My problem with applying the term “*people of faith*” to adherents of Christianity is NOT based on any allegation that that affirmation is false. In truth, we Christians stand firmly **upon our faith** in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed for we who are Lutherans, one of our Four *Solas* (meaning “solitary”) is that salvation is by means of “**faith alone**” in Christ.² The problem is instead that whenever the aspect of faith’s *object* is omitted, its core point is blunted with respect to the Gospel. The erroneous assumption that Christians are **the** people of faith in **contrast** to our worldly society as a whole, perpetuates a conception of *faith* that is emphatically **not biblical**. Furthermore, the consequence of that error is not trivial but deeply damaging for the reason that it undermines receptivity to the Good News of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1, 16:15) for a sizeable sector of our increasingly *secularized* culture.

In the context that is relevant to this essay, the Bible never employs the term *faith* apart from connection to its object (e.g. faith in specifically *what?*) with respect to the party under consideration. Neither does it entertain the existence of “*people of non-faith.*” In other words, in the Bible the question **isn’t** whether or not people exercise faith in an abstract sense, but rather *who* (or *what*) is it particularly that they exercise their faith in? In terms of salvation, Scripture consistently holds that people **either** have faith in God the Maker and Redeemer of the world, **OR** they trust in imaginary gods (which the Bible calls idolatry). Furthermore, every person belongs among either those who are converted *to* Christ, or those who live *apart from* Christ.³ For example the Apostle Paul once wrote affectionately to members of the Church in Thessalonica, “*For [the Macedonians] report concerning...how **you turned to God from idols, to serve the true and living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come***” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 – boldface mine).

In summary, every person since Adam’s Fall into sin (Genesis 3:1a), whether consciously or **unconsciously**, exercises faith in one “god” or another (see Luther’s statement, above). Stated another way, in the context of God’s loving invitation, the Prophet Isaiah pleads, “*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? ... Incline your ear and **come to me that your soul may live***” (Is. 55:2f. – boldface mine). Notice that he wasn’t calling his audience into a life of faith *per se*, but rather he urges people to shift of our already existent faith **away from** the futility of *idolatry*, **to** instead trust in the blessing-ness of the true Lord, the God of Israel.

I am fully aware that ever since the time of the enlightenment, an increasing number of people (certainly in Western culture) reject the notion of exercising faith in a person’s daily life.⁴ In private friendly conversations over coffee that I have had with an atheist whom I have also debated in a public forum on several occasions,⁵ Thomas⁶ has adamantly dismissed the very notion of exercising faith in his personal life for the reason that his “*scientific* world-view admits to no validity for faith. Similarly, the then-president of the same organization that Thomas belonged to, “Humanists of North Puget Sound,” scathingly belittled my suggestion in a letter I wrote to the editor of the *Everett Herald* newspaper concerning an article he had written where I stated that atheism is a belief system. He objected to the contrary that atheists don’t believe in anything in a positive sense, but rather disqualify anything from being *truth-telling* knowledge if it cannot be ascertained “*scientifically.*”

¹ Theodore Tappert, ed. Martin Luther. *The Ten Commandments: The First Commandment*. Book of Concord. (Fortress), p. 365.

² The remaining three are “Word alone, Christ alone, and grace alone.”

³ This paper does not address the reality that even we Christians habitually fail to live up to the core tenets of our faith.

⁴ Lauded skeptical philosopher David Hume closed his *Inquiry on Human Understanding*

⁵ The debate question being, “Does God Exist? Where do the Facts of Science and History and the Insights of Human Experience Point?”

⁶ Not his real name.

Yet this degree of resistance to the concept of faith perplexes me for the reason that it would seem to border on paranoia. One core distinction that epistemologists⁷ make with respect to matters of proof is that it is never attainable **except** within the arenas of mathematics⁸ and, by extension, also logic. Investigations into the phenomenal realm that by definition can (or must) be either perceived or measured, for that reason cannot be proven in an exacting sense. In Courts of Law, lawyers seek verdicts that are based either on a *preponderance* of evidence or the weightier standard of *beyond a reasonable doubt*. The possibility of achieving a verdict based on *beyond a shadow of doubt* however is never sought in a Court of Law for the reason that it cannot be attained in the *sphere of actual* human affairs.⁹ It is this stark reality which, in and of itself, renders as irrational both their blanket objection to faith AND their faulty notion that science excludes faith.¹⁰ There is simply no conceptual intellectual reason that science can't coexist with Christian faith.

The atheistic posture of abhorring faith doesn't necessarily mean that its' practitioners are **conscious** of the unproven suppositions which they in fact stand upon. Very few, if any, people are fully aware of the extent of these assumptions which very profoundly shape our lives.¹¹ At an existential level, despite their vehement opposition to faith, atheists essentially structure their daily lives on a host of things that they at bottom unconsciously *trust* in. At a mundane level, in numerous ways they exercise personal faith from the time they get out of bed in the morning to when they turn their covers at bedtime.¹² For example, despite their materialistic view that matter is all that exists (to the exclusion of spirit) they assume (but cannot prove) both that their private perceptions of the external world agree with the external world around them, and that their conceptions of thought and expressions of personal opinion likewise correlate with the phenomena to which they refer. If this were not the case, their lives would come to a grinding halt. Nevertheless that reality does not *prove* the relationship to indeed be so. Neither can scientific *data prove* it to be since its methods would have to assume as valid what it seeks to prove. Secondly, despite their commitment to scientific data which points to a beginning of the universe out of nothing material in a manner that is entirely consistent with Genesis 1:1, they refuse to believe in a personal creator, but instead in a cosmos that brought itself into existence all by itself. The intellectual price for this contentious opposition to faith thereby entails a violation of the scientific *method* itself... all in the name of science!

It is long past time for our secularistic culture repent of its faith in a misconception of science, and receive both the Maker of the very things that our secular world enjoys, and Redeemer of sinners who forgives our sin of idolatry. Indeed He also transforms our thinking from that of worshipping as gods the things that have been made, to instead enjoying His creation as a gift from His hand in a manner that is in harmony with the will of the same God who also loves us (Gen. 1:29-30). He is indeed the *only* One who "restores our soul" (Ps. 23:3a) and renews our faith-laden minds (Romans 12:2).

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⁷ *Epistemology* is the study of the distinction between knowledge and opinion.

⁸ William Dembski. *Intelligent Design*. (Intervarsity, 2009), p. 91.

⁹ See my three papers, "Scientism is Not Science," "Truth is Never Less than One," and "Has the Skeptic Any Intellectual Obligations?" together with all of my essays at my website: www.christianityontheoffense.com.

¹⁰ See my paper, "Scientism is Not Science," *Ibid*.

¹¹ Tim Keller. *Counterfeit Gods*. (Penguin, 2011).

¹² Former atheist the late Antony Flew mocked philosopher David Hume's naiveté on this matter, stating, "*Hume's skepticism about cause and effect and his agnosticism about the external world are of course jettisoned the moment he leaves his study. Indeed Hume jettisons all of his most radical skepticism even before he leaves his study.*" Antony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese. *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. (Harper One, 2007), p. 58 – boldface mine.