

Three Meanings of Faith

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One of the basic strategies of the currently popular philosophic movement known as linguistic analysis is to refer key terms and key statements of philosophical (and theological) discourse back to the ordinary language of everyday life. If an utterance has some basis in common experience, it is presumed to have meaning; if not, it is judged incoherent or nonsensical — or, what is worse, the artificial creation of philosophers or theologians.

I make this observation as a preface to undertaking briefly to analyze the term *faith* as it occurs in common language and common experience. I propose to identify three meanings, or clusters of meanings, all of which occur widely in common English and all of which have important philosophical and theological implications. The identification of these meanings and their relation to each other may help to clear the ground of some age-long misconceptions and may also identify some significant issues for subsequent reflection.

I

Of the three clusters of meanings, the first (let us call it *faith*₁) may be characterized most generally as *a state of conviction, allegiance, or trust leading to action*. William James defined *faith*, behaviorally as "a tendency to action." We refer to this meaning when we speak of men of little *faith* or of great *faith*. Bob Gibson is said to have professed great *faith* in his fast ball. With reference to the more subjective aspects of *faith*, we speak of acting in good *faith* or in bad *faith*, referring to the kind of motive or intention that underlies action.

One need not go beyond any good Hebrew or Greek lexicon to discover

that faith₁ is the basic meaning of the Old Testament Hebrew term *emunah* and the Greek *pistis*. Both have to do basically with the state of the heart, will, or intention that leads to action. Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith*¹ argues this for the Hebrew *emunah* but mistakes the New Testament Greek *pistis* for what we shall call faith₃. To correct this mistake one need only go to a Greek lexicon and from there to the text of the New Testament.

It is of very considerable importance for religious experience generally to understand the distinction between faith₁, on the one hand, and what we shall call faith₂ and faith₃, on the other hand, and then to realize that at the foundation of religious experience lies faith₁. This is a distinction often blurred by both friends and critics of religious experience.

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Concerning faith₁ as the most basic and most general meaning of the term, several implications follow. Because all men are active, functioning selves, all may be said to have faith in this sense, though not necessarily in other senses. Equally, it must immediately be added that not all faith₁ is religious faith. Bob Gibson's attitude toward his fast ball has no obvious relation to religion — at least in the institutional sense of the word.

Perhaps it may be said that underlying any personal action lies some assumption of faith₁, some axiom or postulate that motivates and guides the action. If, then, one digs into the structure of such assumptions (for either a person or a culture), one comes at bottom to the deepest level of such assumptions, which may be judged religious faith.

II

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A second common use of the term *faith* (let us call it faith₂) occurs frequently as a synonym for *traditional religion*. Men speak of the Christian religion or of the Christian faith, and analogously of the Jewish faith or the Buddhist or Hindu faith. Sometimes the analogy is pushed even further to the Marxist faith or the Humanist faith. Although this use of the term may stir up a whole host of serious issues for the student of the world's religions, it is nonetheless a widely recurring usage. For example, the Supreme Court of the United States appears to give its sanction to this wide use of the term faith in its decision in *United States versus Seeger*.²

Both words, faith and religion, have been subjected to extensive critical analysis in recent and current writing. For example, against faith₂ it is often charged that it is a Judeo-Christian term with no proper extension to Hinduism or Buddhism, that one ought rather to speak of the Buddhist or Hindu vision. This extension of the term faith continues, it is charged, the age-old practice of reading our experience into other men. Yet, it may be replied, if

we limit the term faith to faith₁, it is surely less objectionable than the term religion.

The term *religion* has been attacked by theologians from Karl Barth to Reinhold Niebuhr, who have seen with great realism how often the word has been a vehicle of human arrogance — “the working capital of sin,” as Barth puts it, or “egotism,” as Niebuhr charges. This attack has been extended and generalized by such writers as Bonhoeffer and the death-of-God theologians. It has been supplemented by historians of religion, who point out that most of the world’s languages, from classical Greek and Hebrew to Sanskrit and Chinese, have no word which may fairly be translated as religion. In his *Meaning and End of Religion*, W. C. Smith argues persuasively for the abolition of the term as inherently pejorative.³ Other men have “religion,” but we or I have “faith”! Religion, then, is a highly problematic word in danger of distorting the forms of experience it seeks to express. Yet presently I shall argue that, problematic as it is, the word is unavoidable.

On the surface, faith₁ contrasts sharply with faith₂; yet let us explore possible relations. If we begin with faith₁ as the set of convictions by which a man lives and acts, we may observe several important features. For this form of human experience Tillich coined the celebrated and much disputed phrase *ultimate concern*.

The word *concern* designates the active, volitional, or motor-affective region of human experience. Other terms suggested range from interest to loyalty, allegiance, value, or conviction. (I would prefer the term *value*, for the reason that it establishes useful relations with the value theory in philosophy and also in the social sciences. Hence my paraphrase for “ultimate concern” as a definition of religious experience is “ultimate valuation.”) But whatever the term, we find here in interest or valuation the human raw material out of which all faiths or religions are made.

But what of the vexing term *ultimate*? Tillich has assured us that his use of it is adjectival or adverbial rather than substantive. It is a synonym for “unqualified” or “absolute” as a quality of human concern. We speak of a person as unqualifiedly committed to a cause, or we say that so-and-so is absolutely honest. Thus “ultimate” has no primary reference to an object or a realm of being.

Ultimate concerns exhibit several observable properties that will help greatly in understanding their nature. First is what may be termed a claim to top priority in the system of concerns constituting a self. It is a concern to which in a pinch I would sacrifice every other concern — even life itself.

More affirmatively stated, it is that master concern which establishes order among all my other concerns.

A second property is that an ultimate concern is deployed in all of experience rather than in just part of it. The readiest illustration of this phenomenon is political allegiance, as construed respectively by totalitarian and free societies. Members of Communist parties are required to pledge themselves to guide *all* their activities by the directives of the party. The word *all* is the key to the often observed but seldom understood religious quality of Communism. So it is, too, for other forms of totalitarianism. In sharpest contrast, members of free political parties have at least some non-political interests. In a word, ultimate concerns are total, embracing the whole lives of their adherents; nonultimate concerns lack this total reference.

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A third important feature of ultimate concern is its affective or emotive accompaniment, namely, the unique emotion we call the holy. Like all unique entities, the holy cannot be defined but only indicated or pointed to. So Rudolph Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* points to the holy by saying it is like fear, awe, wonder, mystery, and the like.⁴ However, perhaps an even better way of getting at the holy is to show its correlation with ultimate concern. Wherever men commit themselves ultimately or absolutely, there this emotion shows itself. This correlation is also reversible; thus wherever the holy occurs, we may presume that a response of ultimate concern and commitment has taken place.

out of
with

For students of religion this is an extremely useful correlation, for, like the mercury column of a barometer or a thermometer, it is an excellent indicator of the presence or absence of ultimate concern or religious response. For example, Zeus appears no longer to elicit this response; therefore the religion of which Zeus is an element may be presumed dead. On the other hand, the American flag and the rites of Memorial Day and July Fourth do evoke an observably holy response. Hence we may conclude that there is a genuinely religious quality in these activities, even though they are not officially labeled religion. Other examples of such officially non-religious allegiances, which nonetheless elicit religious response, ranging from alma mater to science of humanity, come readily to mind.

A fourth and final feature of ultimate concern may be approached by means of a distinction in language. To this whole region of experience two approaches are possible, that of the observer and that of the participant. Each approach has its uses and its limits. Each has a contribution — in understanding the game that takes place and the respective viewpoints of

the playing field and the grandstand — that the other cannot make. The point that is pertinent here is: for the understanding of faith or ultimate concern, the languages of observer and participant differ fundamentally.

Thus, for example, the language of this article is that of the observer and student. If I become a participant in faith, I cease to use such terms as ultimate concern and use the language of powerful expressive symbols of the community in which I participate. From the participant's viewpoint, an all-important feature of ultimate concern is that it demands and receives symbolic expression. Men do not say, "Let us experience the holy," or "Let us have an ultimate concern." Rather they speak a language of powerful symbols. It has been sagely observed that men do not live and die for "values" but rather "for God, for country, and for Yale."

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So it is that the holy identifies itself with the symbolic forms through which the holy is expressed. From this relation several conclusions follow. One is a simple definition of a religion as an existing system of holy forms. Each religion has its own particular system of symbolic forms, unique and different from every other religion. But it is the presence of the holy, as characterized in previous paragraphs, which distinguishes the religious from nonreligious areas of human experience. These symbolic forms that serve as the vehicle of ultimate concern are forms of feeling, thought, and practice, or all three combined. They embrace both individual and social experience. In the wide world and the long course of history, they exhibit infinite variety. No object or activity, no thought or feeling, is so strange or so commonplace but that somewhere and "somewhen" men have made of it a holy symbol through which religious experience is expressed.

In passing, I note that this definition of a religion as a system of holy forms is strictly descriptive, making no claims to validity or invalidity. It simply points to religion as an aspect of human experience.

The distinctions made also point to a distinction between faith and religion. Faith, or ultimate concern, generates and sustains religion. It is at once the heart and the growing point of religion. But once a religion comes into being, it is a larger and more variegated phenomenon than faith. Many human interests — artistic, political, philosophical, and even at times scientific — have found expression within historical religions. Also, without exception, all historical religions have cast a dark shadow of magic and superstition. Viewed objectively, religions are houses of many rooms, only one of which is the chapel.

With the emergence of holy forms, faith₁ is successfully linked to faith₂. Beginning with faith₁ as an attitude of ultimate concern, I have pointed

successively to the holy as the emotive accompaniment of ultimate concern, then to symbolic expression as a feature of the whole experience. Once such a system of holy forms has emerged, the adjective *religious* has become the noun *religion*.

One consequence of this line of thought is that the historical religions of the world may be approached fruitfully as so many symbolic systems for the expression of ultimate concern. Although here I cannot undertake the project of showing that this is so, I have tried to do so in my book *Paths of Faith*.⁵ Thus faiths₂ are mankind's historical vehicles for the expression of faith₁.

III

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But there is still a third use of the term faith (let us call it faith₃) which may be characterized as belief, or faith become propositional. Often it is added that it is belief beyond or against factual or rational evidence. The Sunday school boy who defined faith as "believing what you know isn't so" gave accurate expression to precisely this combination of elements. No less a figure than Thomas Aquinas offered his basic definition of faith as (propositional) belief on the basis of good authority, i.e., the church. Examples of the interpretation of faith as belief beyond or against reasonable evidence abound in every religious tradition of which records exist. Taken together they go far in explaining the view many have of polar opposition between faith and reason, with the accompanying characterization of faith as inherently irrational or antirational.

In the light of our analyses of faith here, what can we say to this view? First, let us say plainly of faith₃ that it is frequently irrational (though, we shall presently argue, not necessarily so). Faith₁ and faith₂ are forms of experience that vary independently with rationality, combining in a wide variety of ways with reason and/or unreason. Hence, it is clear that there can be reasonable and unreasonable expressions both of ultimate concern and of its symbolic expression in historical religions.

The central question concerning faith₃ is how it comes to be. How is it and why is it that faith₁ and faith₂ become propositional? What necessity of their nature requires expression in the form of statements claiming to be true? In most general form the answer to these questions is that the man who commits himself in allegiance and action is also the same man who is forever exploring the nature of his actions and commitments. Man as such not only has faith but seeks to understand it. *Fides quaerens intellectum* describes a general human direction of experience. This is so, I believe, be-

cause of the reciprocal nature of the human mind and the self. In a word, the mind is the self in reflection or cognition; the self is the mind in action. So it is that faith₁ and faith₂ become faith₃ — the content of which is a series of statements seeking to characterize and to justify the contents of faith₁ and faith₂.

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When faith₃ is thus generally stated, there is nothing inherently irrational about it. However, the historical fact is that it has often been and is so characterized. The reasons for this are several. First, faith₁ and faith₂ constitute a very intense form of experience. Although they do not necessarily involve fanaticism and intolerance, these vices readily spring from faith₁ and faith₂. Such attitudes easily generate conflict and controversy. So it is that the kind of cognitive quest involved in faith₃ very frequently takes place in an atmosphere of wrangling controversy. Some individual of bold and original view propagates his findings concerning the nature of faith. Others rise to contend against him. Making their views normative for the community, they declare him a heretic and seek to impose their views by fiat on the community. It is not hard to see how obscurantism, anathemas, and persecution follow close behind.

I have no desire to question these facts; indeed there is good reason to keep them continually in mind. But if this analysis is correct, there is nothing inherently irrational about the enterprise of faith₃, which is the rational exploration and testing of the two previous aspects of the total experience of faith. Quite the contrary, there is every good reason to pursue it unremittingly, for it is too important an area of experience to go unexamined. We may paraphrase the Socratic maxim that "the unexamined life is not worth living" to read "the unexamined faith is not worth holding."

If some men have reasoned badly, and failing in argument have resorted to anathema and then to fire, rack, and thumbscrew, how much more important it is to pursue this enterprise freely, openly, and reasonably. As we do so, let us underscore the postulate that the rules of argument and inquiry that prevail in other areas of the mind's life are the guide and standard for theological study — as we may well designate the activity of faith₃.

Historically, faith₃ has been an important source of philosophical thinking, particularly of metaphysics. It is precisely the ultimacy of ultimate concern which has generated those very general concepts that cover the whole of experience. Reflecting on ultimate concern, men have been led to push its implications to the widest circle of totality which their minds are capable of envisaging. At this moment metaphysics, or ontology, is

born. True, there are other sources of philosophy; and once philosophy is launched, it pursues its own varied concerns. Yet among these the critical appraisal of religious experience continues as a hardy perennial.

Much else might be added concerning the relation of the three meanings for faith. For example, the significance of faith₃ is to illuminate and guide faith₁ and faith₂. Taken in itself, apart from the other aspects of the whole experience of faith, faith₃ is powerless and empty of meaning. It is of this faith that the Letter of James in the New Testament says the devils also believe and tremble. In the language of traditional theology, it has no saving efficacy.

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We can summarize by saying that faith₁ and faith₂ without faith₃ are blind. But faith₃ without faith₁ and faith₂ is meaningless and ultimately trivial, because by itself it has no basis in the common experience of man.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (translated by Norman P. Goldhawk. London: Routledge and Paul, 1951).
- 2 United States versus Seeger, *United States Supreme Court Reports* 163, 380 (1965).
- 3 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion; a New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: New American Library, 1964).
- 4 Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (translated by John W. Harvey. London: Oxford University Press, 1958).
- 5 John A. Hutchison, *Paths of Faith* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969).