

What do the terms  
“faith” and “belief” mean?

Faith Literacy Bitesize

Session 1

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- What does the word “belief” mean?
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# What does “belief” mean?

A belief could be understood to mean:

**“A conviction you hold that something is true, or that it exists”**

- e.g. God exists
- e.g. Humans are responsible for the majority of climate change
- e.g. Differences between men and women are mainly socially constructed

This might be on the basis of **your direct experience**, or as a result of putting your trust in **what you are told** by someone. It could be the result of an **experiment**, or a **theory**, or a **worldview**.

Many beliefs are true beliefs. But you **might not always have 100% proof** that your belief is true: For example, the belief that there are multiple universes. Proving that God exists is also tricky!

The right to hold or express certain beliefs is **protected in law**, including many religious beliefs – this is also the case for some wider philosophical beliefs.

# What does “faith” mean?

Faith could be understood to mean:

**“Putting your trust in someone or something  
– when there is something meaningful at stake”**

This might be a religious belief, like belief in God, **but it need not be.**

For example, you might **exercise faith** by putting your trust in:

- *The parachute instructor (when you jump from a plane)*
- *What doctors tell us about the treatment of disease (when you take toxic cancer drugs)*
- *The engineers / regulators that make sure bridges are safe (when you drive over one)*
- *Your colleagues (not to steal from your bag when you go to the toilet)*

# Is faith simply “belief without evidence”?

Usually, faith will be sustained on the basis of some type of evidence, even if this is not scientific evidence:

- Your experience of / trust in a person, or of people in general
- Philosophical, logical or mathematical proofs
- Eyewitness evidence or testimony
- Qualifications that someone possesses

The claim that “the only valid form of evidence is scientific evidence” is therefore not a universal truth, but rather a belief among some people that the only reliable method to establish the truth is scientific evidence.

# What was my experience?

I became a Christian at the age of 28:

- After having looked into the historical evidence and philosophical arguments for belief in God, and the resurrection
- Having read the Bible for myself, rather than having faith in other people's opinions of it



If I ever have doubts about my faith, I return to this evidence in order to sustain my wider belief system in the face of a doubt about a particular aspect of it.

Therefore I consider that my own faith in God is “belief on the basis of evidence”.

Of course I don't have 100% proof, but overall I think that it is the best explanation of a range of issues like: the existence of life and the universe, and the applicability of mathematics.

# What about the meaning of “religion”?

“Religion” could be thought of as a recognised system of beliefs or practices that relate to the worship of God / Gods, or an equivalent philosophy or morality for life (e.g. Buddhism).

Often this will involve following particular scriptural teachings, or ‘revealed truths’.

Emile Durkheim states that religious beliefs and practices relate to **sacred things**, which is to say things that are **set apart** or things that are **forbidden**. They **unite** members within a social community and provide an obligation to live by its **rules**.

# Questions for discussion

1. Do you agree with the definitions of “faith” and “belief”?
2. How did you form your beliefs (religious or otherwise)?
3. What sorts of evidence would you consider to be valid in informing your beliefs?