

The Logic of Love

Chapter 9: Why Spiritual Faith Look Like Secular Knowledge

Know what you believe, and believe what you know.

Similar to the word *love*, the word *faith* takes on different meaning depending on the contexts in which it appears. As the willingness to act on belief, faith finds expression in both secular and spiritual life. Unlike the word *love*, however, *faith* appears in contexts that do not enjoy as much consistency of interpretation. If I say that I love ice cream, our common appreciation for food is enough to avoid confusion. No one exchanges wedding vows with their favorite flavor of ice cream. On the other hand, not everyone relates to having faith in God. In fact, those with faith in God do not always recognize a commonality of experience with each other.

Generating an appreciation for the context of spiritual faith begins with an exploration of the attitudes associated with secular knowledge and belief. This will be used to lay a foundation for understanding why spiritual beliefs get treated like secular knowledge. This chapter will conclude by creating a distinction between religious beliefs and personal faith. This provides a framework for looking at the relationship between spiritual faith with the Freewill Love Factor.

"Why did you put water in your gas tank instead of gasoline?" asks R. U. Alrite.

"I don't know. If it wasn't temporary insanity, then there's something else terribly wrong with me," responds I. M. Knutz.

Act against *knowledge* and you are on your way to the loony bin.

"You always said that you didn't believe capital punishment was justifiable. So, why did you just vote in favor of it on the referendum?" inquiries Ima Shaut.

"I don't know. I guess I changed my mind. But there's no denying one thing: actions speak louder than words. I guess I really do believe in capital punishment after all," explains Joy S. Freedom.

Act against *belief* and you simply changed your mind.

In the secular world, whatever passes for knowledge has reached a requisite level of consensus. The line that separates knowledge from belief is not an absolute, though; people do not always agree on what should pass for knowledge. But when there is agreement, then the attitudes that come into play are those associated with claims of knowledge. These attitudes must not be taken lightly; they define the boundaries between sanity and insanity. If we keep doing things like putting water in our gas tank, eventually the men in white suits show up with a straightjacket, offering a room right next to Mr. I. M. Knutz.

The foundation for this attitude regarding sanity is created by the consensus that exists not only at the level of the object of knowledge, but more importantly, at the level of what it takes to validate knowledge. It is at this deeper level that our "reality buttons" get pushed. Knowing what is real is

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important to us, and it should be. It is hard enough to work together when we don't agree on what is real, but when we cannot even agree on what *method* to use for deciding what is real, this can trigger major trust and intimacy issues. Although the “scientific method” may not be perfectly defined or universally agreed upon in every respect, it provides a high degree of stability in discovering what is real in secular contexts.

Questions of secular knowledge do not inquire into *who* we are, only *what* we are or what something else is. For this reason, issues of secular knowledge are safe for the psyche to enter. We can go marching bravely into the secular world of discovery, psychologically protected in the armor of social acceptance. The quest for secular knowledge does not threaten our sense of self, and it is a quest that can be directly shared with others. Consequently, one of the benefits of the quest for secular knowledge is that there is no shame in being wrong.

If, for instance, we want to know whether Mt. Everest really is the highest mountain, we can gather up our best instruments and go measure it against the other contenders. If our measurements say that it is, then this is easily accepted as knowledge. If better instruments later reveal that a different mountain is higher, no one is labeled a lunatic for having previously claimed to know that Mt. Everest was the highest mountain. In fact, what passes for knowledge on this subject could go back and forth several times during the course of investigation. If investigation repeatedly yields different results, then the worth of the measuring instruments may be called into question, but the methodology for acquiring knowledge will not be.

When it comes to the issue of sanity, secular beliefs receive completely different treatment than does secular knowledge. The realm of belief is marked by tolerance, by an appreciation that reasonable minds may differ. This liberal attitude diminishes only at the extreme ends of the spectrum—when there seems to be no basis for the belief or when consensus is being approached. As evidence accumulates and a pool of experience develops around on a certain subject, we think differently about unpopular positions. We begin applying the attitude associated with secular knowledge: that contrary positions are crazy.

In general, in the realm of belief, we are not disparaged for making use of anecdotal experience, having personal preferences, or offering subjective interpretations. Beliefs enjoy a far more liberal standard for acceptance than do claims of knowledge. This liberal standard is what creates the need for the word faith. Faith stands for the willingness to act upon belief. The difference between faith and “blind faith” is the degree to which our willingness to act on belief is supported by previous experience and logic.

If Faith, the mother of Hope, has picked up Hope after school for the last three months without incident, then her previous experience justifies her faith that Hope will be there when she goes to pick her up today. If an accident has landed Hope in the hospital, then Faith's hope would be dashed to pieces. But Faith's faith—her activated belief—would be no less wise. Faith's faith that Hope is waiting for her is justified because anomalous occurrences do not detract from the wisdom of secular faith. Therefore, Faith is not blind in her expectation that Hope will be waiting for her. (Fortunately, these morbid speculations about Hope being hurt never happened. Faith and Hope will be reunited today, just as they always have been.)

This understanding of faith is adequate for secular activities. In a spiritual context, however, faith takes on new dimensions of meaning and value because it is used not only to motivate our actions, but also to define who we are and the nature of our relationship to others.

Secular knowledge is largely a matter of consensus, whereas spiritual knowledge is a purely personal experience. In contrast with secular contexts, the transition from spiritual belief to spiritual knowledge is not a matter of more people supporting a given belief. Because the transition from spiritual belief to spiritual knowledge is self-defined, and because faith in God is supposed to be a lifelong decision, the attitudes associated with spiritual beliefs are generally similar to those associated with secular knowledge.

Let's say Mr. M. I. Shore decides to have faith in God. Then, a decade or so later, he rejects his faith. He will tend to look back on his faith as though he had been acting against knowledge. At best, he will think that stress caused him to need a crutch. At worst, he will think he must have been self-deluded, crazy. This type of hindsight occurs because spiritual faith is supposed to open the door to an experience of God—the supreme architect of reality. Even if Mr. M. I. Shore never

claimed to really “know” God exists, because spiritual faith is supposed to be whole-hearted and life-long, spiritual belief affects the psyche in a way similar to secular knowledge.

Generally, the experience of changing *faith-beliefs* is very stressful. Faith-beliefs are those beliefs that are a fundamental part of one's spiritual faith; they are the beliefs that define who we are and what our relationship is to others. Sometimes they take the form of personal affirmations such as “I am a child of God.” When religions specify faith-beliefs, they are sometimes referred to as essential doctrines or creeds. Examples include, “Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One,” “The Bible is the Word of God,” and “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.”

Faith-beliefs do not enjoy the liberal tolerance for change that are accorded secular beliefs. The secular world can withstand changes in what passes for knowledge because the methodology is not being brought into question. In contrast, changes in faith-beliefs call into question the quality of the methodology that was initially used in formulating them. This is destabilizing on a psychological level because the methodology for developing faith-beliefs is so extremely personal.

Although the world of secular discovery enjoys the benefit of a relaxed attitude toward changes in belief, this comes at the price of having to rely on others for what passes for knowledge, for what is secularly real. In the realm of spiritual life changes in faith-beliefs are psychologically disconcerting, but this realm also offers the hope of supreme knowledge—spiritual knowledge based on experience with God. The secular world offers safety in numbers because agreement determines what is secularly real. In contrast, the spiritual realm offers the freedom of self-empowerment for the purpose of determining what is spiritually real.

Relating to spiritual beliefs in a way that is similar to secular knowledge does not necessarily create problems on a personal level. Treating spiritual beliefs in a similar fashion as secular knowledge reflects a natural outgrowth of taking personal responsibility for one's whole-hearted decisions about spiritual life. This is consistent with the dynamic of the Freewill Love Factor because the personal experience of spiritual beliefs operates in a similar way to believing that our love is real and that we enjoy freewill. Faith, love, and freewill are all unprovable self-assertions about what is real.

No one else can prove to us that our love is real. The secular world of discovery cannot help us answer such a personal question. Those around us may offer comfort, but we can only look within ourselves for confirmation. Because of the personal challenge associated with taking complete responsibility for our faith-beliefs, and because of the consensus comfort associated with the acceptance of secular knowledge, there is a temptation to turn to religion as a source for faith-beliefs in order to enjoy the security of group association. This shifts the responsibility for spiritual knowledge away from the individual and onto the group. It obscures the distinction between the social qualities of religious experience and inner qualities of individual spiritual experience.

When *religious belief* is not sufficiently differentiated from *spiritual faith*, then spiritual experience stands in danger of losing its self-authenticating nature. This is the difference between bringing spirituality to the practice of religion and looking to religion for what can only come from within. Faith is always personal. It cannot be possessed by a group. The failure to appreciate this aspect of spiritual faith is what fuels the fire of religious conflict. Spiritual knowledge can never be established by consensus.

Religions are a poor crutch for trying to bring the comforts of consensus to personal spiritual experience. This is not to downplay the enriching experiences that religion—the socialization of spiritual experience—can provide. Trying to find God through religion, however, is very different from finding God personally and then bringing that relationship to one's religious experiences. Choosing to go where the supreme value of love leads is a personal journey. Exploring faith in God as a possible way to best live the value of love requires that we remain personally empowered when deciding which beliefs should attain the status of faith-beliefs. To do this, we need to have an understanding of spiritual faith that embraces a quest for spiritual knowledge through personal spiritual experience.

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