Discussion Activity

Roles we give to faith

Gather your ideas on the following questions in advance of discussion with classmates, so that you have a chance to reflect personally and find words to convey your ideas. In discussion, refer to the seven images provided in this chapter to help communicate your ideas. If languages other than English are spoken by students in your class, you might consider how faith would be defined and discussed in other languages.

1 Faith as trust

Reflect on the people or organizations in your own life in which you most place your faith, in the sense that you feel you can trust them. You might find the following list useful in stirring your thoughts: a family member, a friend, a teacher, a political leader, a religious leader, a media figure. You may prefer to keep this part of your thinking private, or may want to draw on it selectively to provide examples as you discuss with classmates the following questions:

- How important is it to you to be able to trust others? How do you decide how much to trust them?
- Do any of the seven images in this chapter represent in your mind the kinds of faith you have in others, or in particular others?
- What does it mean to “have faith in yourself”?
- If you trust someone emotionally, are you more likely to accept knowledge claims that he or she makes? Does critical thinking feel uncomfortable or inappropriate in a personal relationship?

2 Faith as pledge and commitment

Pledges of loyalty can have a significant cultural and social role: Vikings “pledging their troth” to their leader, serfs pledging fealty to their lord, social groups forming sworn allegiances, citizens pledging allegiance to their monarch or country, marriage partners taking vows. People swearing loyalty (even if doing so is not a free choice) are expected to be “faithful” to their country or their spouses.

What do you have to believe first in order to make a pledge? What influence do you think a pledge of allegiance – such as to a flag – can have on what knowledge claims you are inclined to accept thereafter? Does any of the seven images in this chapter represent, for you, a pledge or commitment?

3 Faith as acceptance of assumptions

We sometimes accept knowledge claims pragmatically, when we cannot prove them, because they are useful – for example, accepting the world really exists outside our sense experience of it, or accepting within a scientific model “all things being equal and neglecting friction”, or accepting the axioms at the base of a mathematical system. (See chapter 3 on pragmatic truth.) Do you think that this pragmatic acceptance, which is open to change, is a kind of faith?

When we affirm basic assumptions – our foundational beliefs that we offer as the premises of further argument, as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – are we asserting principles of faith? From the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

“the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women…”
Can you pick out an assumption that you take on faith yourself? Does any of the seven images in this chapter represent, for you, this kind of faith?

4 Faith as subjective commitment of belief

a. Faith, in a first interpretation, is belief that rejects the need for justification. This subjective commitment to believing is sometimes called the “leap of (or to) faith”. Christian philosopher Kierkegaard, speaking of religious faith, insisted that objective uncertainty increased the significance and value of the personal commitment necessary for belief. From this point of view, to have indisputable evidence in the existence of God would destroy meaningful faith.

b. Faith, in a second interpretation, is a conclusion based on other justifications. For religious faith, those justifications might include mystic experience, revelation, sacred text, and the authority of religious leaders and institutions. Faith based on them, in a hierarchy of justification, then acts as justification for further beliefs.

If you have religious faith, which of these two interpretations better describes it? If the second, on what do you base your own faith? Do you have a different way of describing the relationship between faith, justification, and belief? Use this opportunity to put into words what you think yourself, phrasing it in terms of what kinds of justifications you find persuasive, or unpersuasive, and why. Does any of the seven images in this chapter represent, for you, a subjective commitment of belief? If you do not claim a religious faith, explore instead your thoughts on either patriotic faith (that is, commitment to your country) or secular humanism (a worldview focused on human beings, and reason, justice, and ethics).

Use this opportunity to learn about what others think, pushing aside any impulse to tell them that they are wrong and you are right. Are the justifications that others advance for their faith similar to what you advance for yours, even if you believe somewhat different things?

5 Faith and other ways of knowing

What would you say is the relationship between faith and other ways of knowing? Is a subjective commitment of belief primarily emotional? If so, what emotions are involved? Does it involve reason in evaluating other justifications? In what ways might sense perception, intuition, memory, and imagination be involved? Is language essential? What is the role of sacred text in informing or directing religious faith?

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Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty. If I can grasp God objectively, I do not believe, but because I cannot know God objectively, I must have faith, and if I will preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be determined to hold fast to the objective uncertainty...¹

Søren Kierkegaard

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