How Do You Define "Faith"? [1]

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This article describes an informal survey which was conducted to see if and how the definition of the word "faith" has changed over time. The survey is non-exhaustive and spans 14 dictionaries (including different editions) and 250 years. The impetus for this survey was continued disagreement between especially Christian theists and atheists on the former group's use of the word. The latter group generally insists that to have faith means to abandon all reason and logic. The former group contests that they are able to have faith exactly because of reason and logic. This article concludes that the "negative" view of faith developed gradually over time and was probably driven by growing apostasy and eventual anti-theism. However, the application of the word remains broad and a narrower, more precise term is available for the latter camp to use.

While the words "believe" and "belief" are strongly connected with "faith", only "faith" will be treated in this article. It is very probable that similar arguments can be made for "believe" and "belief" as which are made here for "faith".

This article is structured as follows. First an introduction is given which describes the conflict which was the impetus for this study, as well as describing the initial hypothesis of the author. Thereafter follows an informal survey of a wide range—al be it not complete—of general English dictionaries. The following section summarises the findings. Thereafter the findings are discussed. The article concludes with an evaluation of the survey and compares it with the original hypothesis.

Introduction

The Problem of Using the Word "Faith"

Many arguments have been had over the word "faith" recently. This debate has recently been fuelled by a debate [2] between Peter Boghossian and Tim McGrew. However, typically these arguments are small and informal. Two camps pit themselves against each other. On the one side are the (usually Christian) theists, for whom "faith" is very important. Many passages of the Bible speak of the necessity of faith for coming to salvation. The first step in Christian salvation, called justification [3], happens when a person places their real and sincere *faith* in Jesus Christ (that only He can offer redemption from sins and only He has sovereignty over the life of that person). The opposing view, usually from atheists or agnostics leaning towards atheism, challenges this as being intellectually deceitful and dishonest. They see the final "leap of faith" to embrace religion and God as an abandonment of human reasoning and development. It can be argued that such a person has reached the point where they know that God cannot be proved (or disproved), and therefore they arbitrarily choose to embrace God from fear that they might be wrong, despite there being no evidence. The theists then typically retort that their faith is not baseless. From here on it becomes a battle of definitions: which party uses the word more correctly?

The word "faith" has always had a religious connotation. The earliest uses of the word were regarding the Christian faith. This article explores how the word has developed over a quarter of a millennium. If the word has changed, has it changed consistently? In which direction has it changed? Were or are there external forces which drove this change?

The Evolution of Language

Languages *change* over time; they evolve. Indeed, any modern language can be given as an example, as each derived from something older and archaic. English itself is an incredibly complicated language, owed to a long history. While evolution is generally a slow process, a couple (there are many more) of examples can be given to show how words (which are in everyday use today) have changed their meaning completely in a hundred or so years:

- **Gay** use to mean "happy", "jolly" or "jovial". Today it commonly refers to homosexual persons, homosexuality, and ideas, mannerisms and habits typically associated with people who are homosexual. It can be used to express pride, or to deride and ridicule.
- **Nerd**, although often used inconsistently, refers to someone who is "a foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious"1. Previously, however, it referred to "a circus performer who specialised in biting the heads off live chickens and rats"2.

Like names, words come and go: they grow and shrink in popularity over decades and centuries, and sometimes completely fall out of use [4]. This has been how language worked for thousands of years. Now, however, it might possible that a couple of new forces could be exerting themselves on language. The first is that the evolution of language could soon be slowed down. This is because globalisation: Hollywood and the Internet makes it easier for a language to appear more homogeneous than it really is, which can lead to people starting to speak in the same way, and making it more difficult for colloquialisms to take root. That being said, slang remains popular and neologisms like "tweeting [5]" and "twerking" [6] keep expanding the language as technology and trends develop. However, the question remains open for whether well-established words will change their meaning. Whatever the case may be, there is a parallel to this in Darwinian evolution [7], at least for humans.

The other interesting thing is that people have discovered that they can drive an agenda by the language which they use. For example, the phrase "global warming" has fallen out of favour, with "climate change" being preferred as it is more vague, yet equally foreboding term. This is especially noticeable in cultures which are strongly politically correct: it is recognised that some words are powerful, and their use is either discouraged completely, or a deliberate effort is made to change the word.

In the next section, a survey is conducted of English dictionaries spanning 250 years in an attempt to ascertain whether the meaning of the word "Faith" has evolved.

Nomenclature

When considering the apparent "attitude" towards the word "faith", the following terminology will be used:

- **Neutral** The definition does not make a judgement on the validity of the beliefs held to as a "faith".
- **Weak Negative** The definition states that the beliefs held are *sometimes* or *usually* baseless, but the definition leaves it open to be valid beliefs.
- **Strong Negative** The definition precludes faith to be substantiated by evidence or reason (at least in a modern use of the word).

Survey of Dictionary Definitions of the Word "Faith"

First some modern, contemporary and easily-accessible sources (dictionary websites) will be considered. Thereafter some historical sources, and finally some sources which bridge the gap between historical and the age of the Internet.

Each subsection begins with the definition as found in the dictionary3, after which a brief discussion is given.

Dictionary.com

1. confidence or trust in a person or thing: faith in another's ability.
2. belief that is not based on proof: He had faith that the hypothesis would be substantiated by fact.
3. belief in God or in the doctrines or teachings of religion: the firm faith of the Pilgrims.
4. belief in anything, as a code of ethics, standards of merit, etc.: to be of the same faith with someone concerning honesty.
5. a system of religious belief: the Christian faith; the Jewish faith.

Dictionary.com [8] contains neutral (#1) and strong negative definition (#2).

TheFreeDictionary.com

- 1. Confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing.
  2. Belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence. See Synonyms at belief, trust.
  3. Loyalty to a person or thing; allegiance: keeping faith with one's supporters.
  4. often Faith Christianity The theological virtue defined as secure belief in God and a trusting acceptance of God's will.
  5. The body of dogma of a religion: the Muslim faith.
  6. A set of principles or beliefs.
- 1. strong or unshakeable belief in something, esp without proof or evidence
  2. a specific system of religious beliefs: the Jewish faith.
  3. (Theology) Christianity trust in God and in his actions and promises
  4. (Theology) a conviction of the truth of certain doctrines of religion, esp when this is not based on reason
  5. complete confidence or trust in a person, remedy, etc
  6. any set of firmly held principles or beliefs
  7. allegiance or loyalty, as to a person or cause (esp in the phrases keep faith, break faith)
  8. bad faith insincerity or dishonesty
  9. good faith honesty or sincerity, as of intention in business (esp in the phrase in good faith)
- 1. confidence or trust in a person or thing.
  2. belief that is not based on proof.
  3. belief in God or in the doctrines or teachings of religion.
  4. belief in anything, as a code of ethics or standards of merit.
  5. a system of religious belief: the Jewish faith.
  6. the obligation of loyalty or fidelity to a person, promise, engagement, etc.

7. the observance of this obligation; fidelity to one's promise, oath, allegiance, etc.

TheFreeDictionary.com [9] contains neutral (#1.1), weak negative (#2.1) and strong negative (#1.2, #3.2) definitions.

Wiktionary.org

1. A feeling, conviction, or belief that something is true or real, not contingent upon reason or justification.
2. A religious belief system.
3. An obligation of loyalty or fidelity and the observance of such an obligation.
4. A trust or confidence in the intentions or abilities of a person, object, or ideal.
5. (obsolete) Credibility or truth.

Wiktionary.org [10] primarily states a strong definition (#1) and gives a neutral definition only at the end (#4). Incredibly, it admits that the connotations between "faith" and "truth" and "credibility" are now "obsolete".

Of special note is the detailed etymology which the website provides for the word. It clearly shows the progression of the meaning of the word "faith" until it arrived in English:

> 12th century, from Middle English *feith*, from Old French *feid*, from Latin *fidēs* ("faith, belief, trust") (whence also English *fidelity*), from *fīdō* ("trust, confide in"), ultimately from Proto-Indo-European **bʰidʰ-*, zero-grade of Proto-Indo-European **bʰeydʰ-* ("to command, to persuade, to trust") (whence also English bide).

The three dictionaries which we have considered now are perhaps the most prevalent today in lay research, as it is easily accessible on the Internet. Meta-dictionaries (such as the Google search engine) typically makes use of these dictionaries. Next, a number of old and historically credible dictionaries will be considered.

A Dictionary of the English Language

1. Belief of the revealed truths of religion.
2. The system of revealed truths held by the Christian church; the *credenda*.
3. Trust in God.
4. Tenet held.
5. Trust in the honesty or veracity of another.
6. Fidelity; unshaken adherence.
7. Honour; social confidence.
8. Sincerity; honesty, veracity.
9. Promise given.

Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language *[11]*, first published in 1755, is really the grandfather of credible English dictionaries. Johnson's dictionary begins by connecting the word "faith" with religion and Christianity in particular. This was seen in the previous dictionaries in this survey as well, but being given as the primary definition, it stands out here. This is unsurprising for a number of reasons. First, "faith" was generally connected with religion at the time when Johnson wrote. Second, at this time England was still very strongly Christian: it was the time of John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and John Newton. Thirdly, while the Age of Enlightenment had by that time reigned for nearly a century4, its consequences had not yet reached its fullest and the

ideas of the Enlightenment not yet filtered down to the general population. And Johnson was compiling a dictionary, al be it comprehensive, of how the language was used in the everyday. Whatever Johnson's personal convictions may have been, he wrote an unbiased[5] entry containing only neutral definitions. However, his definition is not only religious, and from the fourth definition onwards it can be seen as secular. This "old" definition of Johnson's is far closer to the original etymology of "honesty", "veracity", "trust", "fidelity" (which come from the same root word as "faith") and "honour".

The Oxford English Dictionary (First Edition)

1. Confidence, reliance, trust (in the ability, goodness, etc., of a person; in the efficacy or worth of a thing; or in the truth of a statement or doctrine). In early use, only with reference to religious objects; this is still the prevalent application, and often colours the wider use.
2. Phrases. *To give faith*; to yield belief to. *To pin one's faith to* or upon; to believe implicitly.
3. *Theol*. in various specific applications
    1. Belief in the truths of religion; belief in the authenticity of divine revelation (whether viewed as contained in Holy Scripture or in the teaching of the Church), and acceptance of the revealed doctrines.
    2. That kind of faith (distinctively called *saving* or *justifying faith* by which, in the teaching of the N.T., a sinner is justified in the sight of God. This is very variously defined by theologians, but there is in general agreement in regarding it as a conviction practically operative on the character and will, and thus opposed to the mere intellectual assent to religious truth (sometimes called *speculative faith*).
    3. The spiritual apprehension of divine truths, or of realities beyond the reach of sensible experience or logical proof. By Christians writers often identified with the preceding; but not exclusively confined to Christian use. Often viewed as the exercise of a special faculty in the soul of man, or as the result of supernatural illumination.
4. That which is or should be believed.
    1. A system of religious belief, e.g. *The Christian, Jewish, Mohammedan,* etc., *faith*. Also, *Confession, Rule of Faith*, for which see those words.
    2. *The faith*: the true religion; usually = the Christian faith. Also, without article in certain phrases, as *contrary to faith*, etc. *Of faith*: part and parcel of the faith.
    3. What is believed, or required to be believed, on a particular subject. Also *pl.* points of faith, tenets.
5. *Act of (the) faith*: = Auto da fé. (Obsolete)
6. Power to produce belief, credit, convincing authority. (Obsolete)
7. Attestation, confirmation, assurance. (Obsolete)
8. Assurance given, formal declaration, pledge, promise. In phrases, *To do, make faith* (= L. *fidem facere*): to affirm, promise, give surety. *To give (one's) faith* (= L. *fidem dare*): to give assurance, pledge one's word. *On his faith*: on parole. (Obsolete)
9. The duty of fulfilling one's trust; allegiance owed to a superior, fealty; the obligation of a promise or engagement.
10. The quality of fulfilling one's trust; faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty.
11. *Good faith, bad faith*: = L. *bona, mala fides*, in which the primary notion seems to have been the objective aspect of confidence well or ill bestowed. The English uses closely follow those of L.
    1. *Good faith*: fidelity, loyalty; especially honesty of intention in entering into engagements, sincerity in professions.
    2. *Bad faith*: faithlessness, treachery; intent to deceive.
12. In asseverative phrases
    1. *In (good) faith*: in truth, really, 'sooth to say'.
    2. *In faith, i' faith, faith, good faith*: used interjectionally.
    3. Inquasi-oaths. *By or on my, thy,* etc., *faith, By the faith of (my body, love,*

etc.). *My faith* (= Fr. *ma foi!*).

13. An alleged designation for a company of merchants.
14. *Comb.* Chiefly objective, as *faith-breach, -breaker, -s/retcher; faith -definition, -reformation, -tradition, faith-breaking, -keeping* sb. and adj. ; *faith-confirming, -infringing, -workful* adj.; *faith-wise* adv.; faith-cure, a cure wrought by means of 'the prayer of faith (Jas. v. 15) whence faith-curer, -curist, one who believes in or practises faith-cure; faith-flre, *fig.* the flame of faith; faith-healer = *faith-curer*; faith-healing, healing by faith-cure; faith-mark, one of the leading tenets of religion; faith-press, the Inquisition.

If Johnson's dictionary was the grandfather, then the presiding father of the English dictionaries (and perhaps the language itself) is the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The fourth volume of its first edition [12] was published in 1900, containing all the words in the English language which begin with "F".

As could be expected, the OED gives the most comprehensive and exhaustive definition of the word "faith". Nowhere does it define faith as necessarily being completely without reason or justification. Definition 3c does exclude proof, so a very weak negativity is found here. (Aside: definition 3b is particularly interesting as it shows the best (Christian) theological understanding of the word which were found during the conduct of the entire survey.)

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary

Faith, n. Etym: [OE. feith, fayth, fay, OF. feid, feit, fei, F. foi, fr. L. fides; akin to fidere to trust, Gr. th is perhaps due to the influence of such words as truth, health, wealth. See Bid, Bide, and cf. Confide, Defy, Fealty.]

1. Belief; the assent of the mind to the truth of what is declared by another, resting solely and implicitly on his authority and veracity; reliance on testimony.
2. The assent of the mind to the statement or proposition of another, on the ground of the manifest truth of what he utters; firm and earnest belief, on probable evidence of any kind, especially in regard to important moral truth.
3. (Theol.)
    1. The belief in the historic truthfulness of the Scripture narrative, and the supernatural origin of its teachings, sometimes called historical and speculative faith.
    2. The belief in the facts and truth of the Scriptures, with a practical love of them; especially, that confiding and affectionate belief in the person and work of Christ, which affects the character and life, and makes a man a true Christian, — called a practical, evangelical, or saving faith.
4. That which is believed on any subject, whether in science, politics, or religion; especially (Theol.), a system of religious belief of any kind; as, the Jewish or Mohammedan faith; and especially, the system of truth taught by Christ; as, the Christian faith; also, the creed or belief of a Christian society or church.
5. Fidelity to one's promises, or allegiance to duty, or to a person honored and beloved; loyalty.
6. Word or honor pledged; promise given; fidelity; as, he violated his faith.
7. Credibility or truth. [R.]

    Act of faith. See Auto-da-fé.

    — Breach of faith, Confession of faith, etc. See under Breach, Confession, etc.

    — Faith cure, a method or practice of treating diseases by prayer and the exercise of faith in God.

> — In good faith, with perfect sincerity.

The above definition comes from Revised Webster's Unabridged Dictionary [13], which was published in 1913. While the OED is the definitive authority for the English language, it seems that in the USA Webster's has been an authority for it evolved the language for itself after the War of Independence.

This definition is neutral and every so slightly negative in that it stresses that the truth of the faith is dependant on the truthfulness of the testimony of another (#1 and #2). What is also particularly remarkable about this definition is that it states that faith can pertain to any subject (#4). This means that the application of this word is not limited to religion, but to science, politics, *et cetera* as well. This perhaps shows the effects of modernist thinking of the time, where the focus went away from the divine and onto man's capabilities and achievements. The same unwavering trust which was previously reserved for God could now be placed in humans and their advances; perhaps at that time in a way which could not previously have be justified. Science had become a stalwart companion of modernist: they could finally understand and predict the world around them as it was. But also perhaps the effects of the liberal German theologies of the previous century had begun to reach the everyday people and caused many to begin to seriously doubt the certainty of the Christian religion; indeed, any religion had become suspect.

The definition highlighted above shows an evolution of the word within Webster itself: #4 was not part of the original edition which came out nearly a century earlier. The two definitions of these two editions can be compared here [14].

Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language

> **Faith**, fāth, n. trust or confidence in any person: belief in the statement of another: belief in the truth of revealed religion: confidence and trust in God: the living reception by the heart of the truth as it is in Christ: that which is believed: any system of religious belief, esp. the religion one considers true—'the faith;' fidelity to promises: honesty: word or honour pledged.—adjs. Faithed (Shak.), credited; Faith'ful, full of faith, believing: firm in adherence to promises, duty, allegiance, &c.: loyal: conformable to truth: worthy of belief: true.—adv. Faith'fully, sincerely, truthfully, exactly.—ns. Faith'fulness; Faith'-heal'ing, a system of belief based on James, v. 14, that sickness may be treated without any medical advice or appliances, if the prayer of Christians be accompanied in the sufferer by true faith.—adj. Faith'less, without faith or belief: not believing, esp. in God or Christianity: not adhering to promises, allegiance, or duty: delusive.—adv. Faith'lessly.—ns. Faith'lessness; Faith'worthiness, trustworthiness.—adj. Faith'worthy, worthy of faith or belief.—Bad faith, treachery.—Father of the faithful, Abraham: the caliph.—In good faith, with sincerity.—The Faithful, believers. [M. E. feith, feyth—O. Fr. feid—L. fides—fidĕre, to trust.]

While other dictionaries of the time were beginning to define "faith" as something which could be baseless, Chamber's [15] remained steadfast and reads more like the first edition of Webster's, which was published a century earlier. Note that the conservative nature could possibly be attributed to the editor of this edition being a reverend.

The next definitions are all from the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond.

Chamber's 21st Century Dictionary

1. trust or confidence.
2. strong belief, eg in God.
3. a specific religion.
4. any set or system of beliefs.
5. loyalty to a promise, etc; trust

A century on Chamber's was modernised by dropping the written out ordinal for an abbreviated one, and cleaning up its definitions somewhat. However it did not update its definition of the word "faith" in essence and it remains neutral.

Chamber's 21st Century Dictionary[6].

The Reader's Digest Pocket Dictionary of Current English

> **faith** *n*. trust; belief in religious doctrine or divine truth; religion; loyalty, fidelity, confidence.

The Reader's Digest Pocket Dictionary of Current English[7] definition is concise and neutral.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

> **faith** *n*
>
> Strong belief; trust: *He will not steal my money: I have faith in him.*
> Word of honour; promise: *I kept/broke faith with them.*
> The condition of being sincere; loyal (in the phrases *good faith/bad faith*): *The unions think the government has acted in bad faith by reducing public spending.*
> Belief which is not based on reason or proof: *I have faith in his ability.*
> Belief and trust in and loyalty to God.
> Something that is believed in strongly, especially a system of religious belief; religion: *The Christian and Jewish faiths.*

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English[8] provides neutral (#1, #2, #3) and strong negative (#4) definitions, although the latter is qualified using a non-religious example.

Encarta World English Dictionary

> **Belief or trust** belief in, devotion to, or trust in somebody or something, especially without logical proof.
> Religion **Religion or religious group** a system of religious belief, or the group of people who adhere to it.
> Religion **Trust in God**
> belief in and devotion to God.
>
> **Set of beliefs** a strong held set of beliefs or principles.
> **Loyalty** allegiance or loyalty to somebody or something.

As the world was digitising in death throes of the twentieth century, Microsoft was leading the change with its Encarta encyclopedia software. The company decided to complement it with a published dictionary. The Encarta World English Dictionary[9] has neutral (#4, #5) and weak negative (#1) definitions.

Collins English Dictionary

> 1. strong or unshakeable belief in something, esp without proof or evidence
> 2. a specific system of religious beliefs
> 3. *Christianity* trust in God and in his actions and promises
> 4. a conviction of the truth of certain doctrines of religion, esp when this is not based on reason
> 5. complete confidence or trust in a person, remedy, etc.

6. any set of firmly held principles or beliefs
7. allegiance or loyalty, as to a person or cause (esp in the phrases **keep faith, break faith**
8. **bad faith** insincerity or dishonesty
9. **good faith** honesty or sincerity, as of intention in business (esp in the phrase *in good faith*
10. *archaic* indeed; really (also in the phrases **by my faith, in faith**

Collins English Dictionary[10] provides an interesting twist on the weak negative definition in connecting it with religious beliefs specifically (#4). It still has a "secular" weak definition (#1) and neutral definitions (#5, #6, #7).

Note that at the time of writing, the definition found in this edition agreed verbatim with the definition found at the official website www.collinsdictionary.com [16].

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

Lastly, a return to the OED; this time with a much revised and updated revision, al be it a shorter one.

fīd- in *fīdus* trustworthy
fīdere trust
Final *-th* may have been supported by *truth*

1. Confidence, reliance, trust. In early use, only with reference to religious objects.
2. Belief proceeding from reliance on testimony or authority 1551.

2. *Theol.*
    1. Belief in the truths of religion as contained in Holy Scripture or in the teaching of the Church.
    2. Saving or justifying faith, as a conviction operative on the character and will; opp. to *speculative faith*.
    3. Spiritual apprehension of divine truths. Often ascribed to the exercise of a special faculty of man, or to supernatural illumination. ME.
3. That which is or should be believed ME.

1. Power to produce belief, credit —1808.
2. Attestation, confirmation, assurance —1730.
3. Assurance given, formal declaration, pledge, promise. *Obs.* exc. in *on the f. of.* ME.

1. The duty of fulfilling one's trust; fealty; the obligation of a promise or engagement ME.
2. The quality of fulfilling one's trust; fidelity, loyalty ME.

While this is not the latest revision[11], and even though it is only a shorter version[12] of the authoritative one, it remains wholly neutral in its definition.

Survey Summary

Dictionary	Ed.	Year	Religious	Neutral	Weak Neg.	Strong Neg.
Samuel Johnson's *A*	1st	1755	✓	✓		

Dictionary of the English Language						
Webster's Unabridged Dictionary	1st	1828	✓	✓	∂	
Oxford Dictionary of English	1st	1900	✓	✓	∂	
Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary		1908	✓	✓		
Dictionary of the English Language						
Webster's Unabridged Dictionary		1913	✓	✓	∂	
The Reader's Digest Pocket Dictionary of Current English	4th	1969	✓	✓		
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English		1978	✓	✓		∂
The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary	3rd	1987	✓	✓		
Chamber's 21st Century Dictionary		1996	✓	✓		
Encarta Dictionary of World English	1st	1999	✓	✓	✓	
Collins English Dictionary[13]	11th	2011	✓	✓	✓	
http://www.dictionary.com/ *[17]*	N/A	2014	✓	✓		✓
http://www.thefreedictionary.com/ *[18]*	N/A	2014	✓	✓	✓	✓
http://en.wiktionary.org/ *[19]*	N/A	2014	✓	∂		✓

Discussion

Faith Apart from Religion

This subsection presents a thought experiment to show the non-religious uses of faith which is justified. Consider someone crossing a bridge:

1. A person with a rudimentary understanding of physics and architecture can cross a newly constructed bridge with the belief (in faith) that it will not collapse under his weight.

2. Such faith can turn out to be unfounded:
    - In 1940 the Tacoma Narrows bridge [20], which was newly built, collapsed because of unexpected natural weather phenomenon. The first people to cross the bridge had no reason to believe that the bridge would collapse due to anything short from a catastrophic natural disaster, such as an unprecedented earthquake. However, a particular kind of wind common to that area caused the collapse of this modern structure of steel and concrete.
    - A person's *perception* can be wrong: believing that the wooden planks which comprise the bridge to be new and solid could be false, and the old and rotten planks (but with a new coat of paint) can send someone crashing into the water.
3. Even *if* the person's faith is proven false at the end, it *was justified* in holding that faith based on their *previous experience* of bridges and bridge crossing.
4. An obese person considering an old, rotten wooden bridge might lack the faith that the bridge can support his weight. It might, but likely will not. Lacking empirical results or an arduous scientific study, the person needs to make a decision on whether to cross the bridge based on belief and past experience of who the world works.

Some things need to be taken at face value. For example, does Richard Dawkins believe that his wife loves him? Is that faith justified? Short of hooking her up to all sorts of lab machines (which can reasonably be assumed he has not subjected her to), it cannot be proven that she loves him other than through falsifiable observations. Even with her connected to lab machines, there can still be a cloud of scepticism which needs to be waded through: are the machines themselves reliable and accurate, and operating as they are expected? Is she so in control of her emotions as to fake her reactions, as some people can with polygraph tests? Are the findings consistently reproducible? Is what is being measured merely sexual arousal, or a deep, objective love? Can such a love be measured in the lab? Is love simply biological, or is it transcendent or metaphysical14? These questions are typical of the hyper-critical sceptic: someone whom many Christian apologists know all too well. Such a person can always push out where the (unfounded) "faith" boundary lies.

Faith and Religion

> **Faith**, the conviction of the truth of doctrine which is the result of a voluntary act of will.

This subsection begins with one final, succinct definition found in the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy15. Note that the word "doctrine" can be either religious in nature, or not. For example, communist doctrine, as laid out by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, is primarily socio-economic in nature. This definition emphasises the *conviction* while leaving open the question of *motivation*. In the above survey, it can be concluded that there are three general views on the motivation for faith:

1. Religious motivation.
2. Any belief based on some grounding, such as the authority of another person or a discipline such as science.
3. Any belief which is completely ungrounded.

In considering this survey, a couple of points stand out as interesting. The first is that the above order seems to have been the progression of the evolution of the word "faith": first used with religion, the used apart from religion, then to deride. This seems to correspond to a progression in the same period of time where people were generally religious, to when they became indifferent to religion until now when there is a marked hostility towards the religious, at least in the West. The second interesting point is how perhaps the two most authoritative dictionaries, the OED and Webster's, give very technical treatment of the word "faith". This shows an advanced understanding of the religious or theological teachings of the Church, which was pondered on and discussed over two millennia by some of the greatest intellectuals of the West in that time. The OED states that "saving faith" compels the Christian to action, "opposed to the *mere intellectual* assent to religious truth". Religious truth can therefore be assented to on an intellectual level. Where does this religious truth come from? "Holy Scripture or in the teaching of the Church". In other words, these things (the

Church, implying two thousand years of ecclesiastical thinking and teaching, and Scripture; that is, the Bible) need to be proven as false or fallacious before the Christian faith can be dismissed. This contrasts the practise of attacking the "faith" which a person holds itself, which could very well be built on solid foundations.

Clearer Terminology

> **Fideism**, a view that is pessimistic about th role of reason in achieving knowledge of things divine, and that emphasizes instead the merit of acts of faith.

The reality is that many people do have good reasons and arguments [21] to believe in Christian theism. But many atheists dismiss such people when they have faith "from evidence" as a contradiction in terms. However, as has been shown above, the word faith can be used in such a manner. It seems as if these critics are actually conflating the definition of "faith" with that of "fideism". The above quote is again from the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy.

Fideism more closely aligns itself with "blind faith". This is shown in two ways in the above definition: the use of the word "faith" in the definition of "fideism", and the dismissal of reason. Fideism is the concept which critics likely have in mind when trying to criticise religious people for their faith. However, Christian apologists typically will not describe themselves as fideists; rather they they would say that their faith is founded on good evidence.

Conclusion

Having reviewed fourteen dictionaries spanning 250 years it was found that:

1. Etymologically, the words "faith" and "fidelity" derive from words which mean "belief", "trust", "trustworthy", "to command", "to persuade" and "to trust". All of these are neutral words and do not necessarily refer to the validity, strength or source of the faith.
2. Over time the same word can have its meaning slightly evolved. This seems to correspond to changing mindset (and perhaps determination) of society.
3. The strong religious connotations of the word "faith" has remained from the beginning through to this day. However, from the earliest dictionaries it was also used in numerous ways outside of a religious context.
4. Eventually (possibly because of the Enlightenment and religious scepticism) religious connotations became secondary in the definition of the word "faith". However the word retained a neutral meaning.
5. Many contemporary and casual dictionaries today equate "faith" primarily or wholly with its religious connotations and/or defines it strongly negative terms. This could be because of presuppositions of the falseness of religion and anything connected with it, equating it with the rejection of science, reason and logic.
6. This blurs the line between "faith" and "fideism", whereas the former use to be more general and the latter more specific.

The author concludes that faith can legitimately be used to express a belief substantiated by reason, logic or evidence, even if used in a religious sense. The word can also be used when a belief or trust is not substantiated. However, when discussing religion, a better word exists to describe such "blind faith" which rejects reason: fideism. When religion and religious beliefs are being discussed, the parties involved would do well to first lay these words out on the table and agree on meanings, definitions and intentions. It is the author's sincere wish that this article can aid in clearing this semantical hurdle and that healthy, respectful dialogue will follow.

- 1. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2442364/Are-geek-nerd-Sci... [22]
- 2. https://twitter.com/qikipedia/status/464800251283767296 [23]

- 3. Efforts have been made to reproduce the definitions as faithfully as possible. However, etymologies and example uses have typically been omitted. Special mention will be made if it has been included and bears specific relevance to the discussion. Note that there may be some minor typographical errors in the transcribing, but the definitions are accurate.
- 4. David Hume had already begun to critique religion; across the Channel, Voltaire was critiquing religion and the religion establishment of the day; at this time there were still only murmurs of revolution in the Thirteen Colonies and in France.
- 5. This is evident from the fact that his definition is devoid of languages which makes religious beliefs out to be truth.
- 6. Robinson, Mairi, and George W. Davidson. Chamber's 21st Century Dictionary *[24]*. Chambers, 1996.
- 7. Ostler, George, and Jessie Coulson. The Reader's Digest Pocket Dictionary of Current English *[25]*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- 8. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English *[26]*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1978.
- 9. Encarta World English Dictionary *[27]*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1999.
- 10. Collins English Dictionary *[28]*. 11th ed. Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.
- 11. The author was unable to access the latest version of the full OED in a timely manner.
- 12. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles *[29]*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- 13. At the time of writing, the content for this entry agreed verbatim with that found at the corresponding online resource at www.collinsdictionary.com [16].
- 14. This question might not impress Dawkins in particular, but some people could ask it validly in some circumstances.
- 15. Blackburn, Simon. Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy *[30]*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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