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Is “Faith” Worth Believing?

By

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Atheist philosopher Peter Boghossian believes that **faith is pretending to know things you don't know** (May 6, 2012 public lecture – richarddawkins.net/). As a former atheist, I find that statement both challenging and strange. Let me explain why.

We need to first understand the use of terms for the purpose of enlightened dialog. According to one English dictionary, the word **faith** means “strong belief or trust in someone or something” (Merriam-Webster). Another English dictionary defines faith as “complete trust or confidence in someone or something” (Oxford Dictionaries). From those two well-established and recognized knowledge sources for the English language we understand that faith is strong or complete trust and confidence in a person or a thing.

Those English definitions fit well with the use of the word faith in the New Testament, written in Koine Greek (Common Greek). A primary Greek word for “faith” in the New Testament is *pistis*. It is the idea of a strong confidence in the truth of someone or something that leads to trust based on that strong confidence. It comes from the root word *peitho*, which means “to be persuaded.” A person who has “faith” in the New Testament sense has been persuaded to trust by a strong confidence based on truth. Truth is defined in English as “the real facts about something, the things that are true” (Merriam-Webster) and “that which is true or in accordance with fact or reality” (Oxford Dictionaries). The word **truth** in Koine Greek is *aletheia* and means “what is objectively true.”

Next, let’s look at the word “pretend.” It is defined in English dictionaries as “to act as if something is true when it is not true” (Merriam-Webster) and “speak and act so as to make it appear that something is the case when in fact it is not” (Oxford Dictionaries).

The word “know” means “to understand (something), to have a clear and complete idea of (something)” (Merriam-Webster) and “be aware of through observation, inquiry, or information” (Oxford Dictionaries). The primary Koine Greek word for “know” is *ginosko* and means “understand, perceive, have knowledge of.”

So, what is Professor Boghossian saying? That “faith” which is a strong or complete trust or confidence in someone or something is really just “pretending to know,” which is acting as if something is true when it is not true.” Does the professor’s use of the English language seem contradictory? (contradictory – “a proposition so related to another that if either of the two is true the other is false and if either is false the other must be true” Merriam-Webster)

Yes, I believe Dr. Boghossian, who is a teacher of philosophy (*philosophia* – friend/lover of wisdom), either misunderstands the usage of both the English and Koine Greek languages or may be purposely using contradictory terms for the purpose of misleading and misdirecting. I will assume that he lacks the understanding of the terms rather than suppose a purpose of misdirection.

I was an atheist more than four decades ago, so it may be that atheists have changed their view about people of “faith” since then. I thought religious people were ignorant and uninformed about truth, but I didn’t think they were pretending. I just thought they were putting their faith in the wrong thing. As an atheist I believed that God did not exist. That’s where I placed my “strong confidence” (faith). I trusted that what I believed was based on “truth.”

What happened to me, that has happened to many other atheists, was to investigate the truth claims of Christianity and find them true. What is a free-thinking truth-seeker to do with truth? Believe it or only pretend to believe it? To know that something is not true but pretend to believe it is true is at best unreasonable and at worst fraudulent.

I do not view my beliefs to be either unreasonable or fraudulent. I do not view the beliefs of other former atheists who now believe in God to be either unreasonable or fraudulent. We are not playing games nor are we pretending. We know what we believe and believe what we know. That is faith.

The strong confidence that I and other former atheists have in Christianity is based on evidence that we have investigated and determined to be true. If atheists investigate that same evidence and determine it to not be true, are either of us pretending? No, we have a difference of opinion about the credibility or factualness of the evidence. We both have “faith” in what we believe about the

evidence. I understand why people have differing views about evidence and accept that as part of the truth-determining process. However, for Dr. Boghossian to claim that what I and other former atheists have done is to pretend to know things that we don't know is naïve at best and dishonest at worst.

Dr. Boghossian published a book entitled *A Manual for Creating Atheists*. The book description on Amazon.com reads in part – “As an urgently needed counter to this tried-and-true tradition of religious evangelism, *A Manual for Creating Atheists* offers the first-ever guide not for talking people into faith—but for talking them out of it.”

The good professor is an “evangelist” for atheism. The English word is a transliteration of the Greek word *euaggelistēs*, which means “bearer of good tidings, one who brings good news.” What is that good news? The book's description continues – “Peter Boghossian draws on the tools he has developed and used for more than twenty years as a philosopher and educator to teach how to engage the faithful in conversations that will help them value reason and rationality, cast doubt on their religious beliefs, mistrust their faith, abandon superstition and irrationality, and ultimately embrace reason.”

So, the good news of atheism is to embrace reason. What does that mean? The word **reason** means “a statement or fact that explains why something is the way it is, why someone does, thinks, or says something, or why someone behaves a certain way, a statement

offered in explanation or justification, a sufficient ground of explanation or of logical defense” (Merriam-Webster) and “a cause, explanation, or justification for an action or event, the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgments by a process of logic” (Oxford Dictionaries).

The Greek word translated “reason” in the New Testament is *nous* and means “the mind, comprising alike the faculties of perceiving and understanding and those of feeling, judging, determining the intellectual faculty, the understanding reason in the narrower sense, as the capacity for spiritual truth.”

So, how does embracing reason as an atheist differ from embracing reason as a theist if both are using the power of their minds to think, understand, and form judgments by a process of logic during the search for causes, explanations or justifications for an action or event? Dr. Boghossian may have a low opinion of the power of a Christian’s mind to think, understand, and form judgments (I know I did when I was an atheist), but that low opinion does not logically lead to believing that Christians pretend to know what they do not know. To say that out loud is both unreasonable and embarrassing for the professor. He may have done better to emphasize his belief that faith is a “cognitive sickness” and that those who attempt to get to the truth using faith are delusional (philosophynews.com). Christians are used to being called names, so that’s fine if the professor wants to do that. However, to move from name calling to illogical and unreasonable claims about the meaning of faith seems beneath the position of an

instructor in knowledge and wisdom at the college level.

So, what is the Christian response to the ongoing discussion between atheist and theist? For one thing, we have a serious difference of opinion about evidence. I became a Christian based on evidence, the same evidence my atheist friends deny. We can't both be right, so someone is wrong. I believe that atheism is wrong and theism is right, therefore my decision to become a Christian. However, based on the Christian belief that God created the human race and deemed people important enough to send His Son to sacrifice Himself for them so that they could know the truth and be set free, I believe it's important to have and demonstrate God's love for all who disagree. That includes Dr. Boghossian and other atheists who have as their goal turning believers from faith in God to, as they say, embrace reason.

The publication of his “Manual for Creating Atheists” strengthens our determination to reach more people than ever with the truly good news that God is alive and offers salvation to all who will have “faith.”

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