

## ON THE MEANING OF FAITH

By Audu, Suyum

Religious individuals have frequently perceived faith as a form of virtue, equating a lack of it with unbelief, atheism, or agnosticism. For these individuals, including theologians and religious leaders, faith is considered the hallmark of true religiosity and the sole basis for one's relationship with God and salvation. If divine responses to prayers seem absent, the implication is often the individual's deficiency in faith. Similarly, if a divine figure prays for healing that does not manifest, the blame is placed on the sick person's lack of faith. Faith is frequently described as the force that motivates God to perform the extraordinary, with assertions that nothing is unattainable for a person of faith. According to Hebrews 11:6, it is stated that without faith, one cannot please God, regardless of its abundance or scarcity.

In this context, faith transforms into a measurable possession—something an individual can hold and showcase, often associated with miraculous displays. Those who claim to perform miracles—referred to as shamans within certain religious circles—are viewed as the true possessors of faith, capable of both pleasing God and achieving extraordinary feats. This notion has inspired congregations to form organizations with names like “Living Faith,” suggesting that faith is a dynamic entity, perhaps even capable of communication. This representation serves as a distinguishing myth for their group, setting them apart from others perceived as incapable of performing the same miraculous acts. Individuals may pride themselves on titles or identities created without a true understanding of their significance.

But what, then, is faith? Is it indeed the foundation of our relationship with God? Did we possess faith prior to our creation? The author of Hebrews offers insight by stating that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” (11:2). This definition appears straightforward yet is often difficult to grasp. Misunderstandings arise, largely due to our failure to appreciate a fundamental aspect of salvation as depicted in the New Testament: salvation is inherently individualistic, contrasting with the communal nature of the so-called Old Testament. The emphasis lies on personal actions rather than collective identity. Hence, individuality is indeed a biblical principle.

Faith, particularly as discussed in the New Testament, is an individual experience. No one's faith can substitute for another's. Thus, faith cannot be conflated with communal beliefs. The assurance integral to faith, as described in the New Testament, is also deeply personal—it reflects an individual's hopes and beliefs, which may diverge from the broader spiritual consensus of their community. Importantly, faith does not necessitate shared religious aspirations among group members.

Another crucial aspect of faith is that it transcends mere religious demonstrations or displays of miraculous power. Instead, it embodies the strength to persist and maintain one's convictions. Therefore, in reflecting on Hebrews 11 and the broader book of Hebrews, faith emerges as a form of nonconformity to societal religious and value systems. It signifies the affirmation of one's individuality and the courage to break free from communal pressures. Indeed, those who are entirely comfortable within their cultural frameworks lack genuine faith.

True faith often requires an act of disobedience, revolutionary spirit, and courage to defy cultural constraints. The heroes of faith depicted in Hebrews 11 exemplified this nonconformity. Abraham had to break from his cultural norms to fully trust in God. Moses defied Pharaoh in obedience to God, while Rahab rejected the prevailing religious traditions to remain faithful. The prophets too, embraced revolutionary ideas by challenging existing practices.

None of these figures were viewed as exemplary members of society or defenders of their cultural integrity; rather, they were labeled as nonconformists, rebels, heretics, or apostates. This mirrors the perspective of the Catholic Church towards figures like Luther and his fellow reformers, who challenged the established order in their quests for faith and truth.

Men of faith inherently possess the potential to be exceptional innovators—capable of creating new ideas, theories, interpretations, and even religions. However, society often struggles to embrace these novel concepts, viewing them as threats to established norms and beliefs. As Professor J. B. Bury insightfully remarked, the "average brain is naturally lazy," inclined to pursue the path of least resistance. For the typical individual, the mental landscape is shaped by beliefs that are seldom questioned and firmly held. Consequently, any new idea that challenges these beliefs can be perceived as a disruption to their established worldview.

Bury asserts that when a person's reasoning prompts them to challenge the prevailing customs and ideas that govern the behavior of those around them, it becomes nearly impossible for them to conceal their differences. Such individuals may inadvertently reveal their divergent views through their silence or subtle expressions, illustrating their disconnect with the majority's opinions. In truth, a person lacking reason is akin to an animal, while one blessed with reason but devoid of creativity is effectively lifeless.

Reason serves as a cornerstone of human dignity; it is the lens through which we comprehend God, ourselves, and the universe. Thus, faith necessitates the exercise of reason. It calls for rational and critical engagement, which represents our best hope for societal well-being, progress, and development. A life devoid of questioning, critique, and examination is a life not worth living.

Regrettably, many in our society can be seen as "fools"—blind conformists who accept the status quo without introspection. To align oneself with the majority often reflects a lack of faith and understanding. In contrast, individuals of faith display remarkable courage. They confront opposition head-on, willingly accepting the responsibility that accompanies their choices and actions. Their resilience empowers them to challenge authority and prevailing power structures until the very end; they are indefatigable in their pursuit of truth and justice.

In summary, the marriage of faith and reason is vital for fostering a society that values progress, innovation, and meaningful existence. Embracing this synergy allows individuals to become catalysts for positive change and creators of a better world.

## **REFERENCE**

Bury, J. B. *A History of Freedom of Thought*. London: Thomson Butterworth Limited, 1932.

Stauffer, Richard. *Luther as Seen by Catholics*. London: Lutherworth press, 1967.