

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Related exam questions:

- “Religious belief is not concerned with the representation of a state of affairs. It is a matter, rather, of a *spirit* which pervades what the believer does.” Is this correct? If it is, does this help the cause for theism? (2001/11)
- What is it to believe in God? (2002/9)
- What is it that an atheist does not believe? (2003/1)
- What is the connection between believing in God, having faith in God, and worshipping God? (2003/4)
- Is it coherent to suppose that God transcends human comprehension? (2004/9)
- What kind of faith is rational? (2005/7)
- How much do you need to know about God in order to believe he exists? (2006/8)
- How can you tell whether two people believe in the same God? (2006/12)
- Might someone have faith in God without believing that God exists? (2008/2)
- Is faith a form of voluntary belief? (2009/4)
- “I believe in God, but I'm an atheist.” Is this consistent? (2010/5)
- Would possessing good evidence that God exists make it impossible to have faith in God? (2011/8)
- Was Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac an admirable display of faith? (2012/13)
- Can one choose to have faith? (2013/6)
- “Christians praise adherence to their belief after it has been formed... as if it were meritorious.” (CS LEWIS) Can faith be meritorious? Is it more or less so if someone maintains their faith in the face of contrary evidence? (2014/11)
- “Nor do I seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For this, too, I believe, that, unless I first believe, I shall not understand.” (ANSELM) Is this a reasonable approach? (2010/10)
- “Desire as a crucial element in the search for God cannot be ignored if such female mystics as Teresa of Avila are key examples of epistemic intimacy with the divine”. Discuss
- “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.” (JAMES) Would this be more than wishful thinking? (2006/9)
- I will search for you, Lord, by praying to you, and I will pray to you by faith in you; for you have been revealed to us.” (AUGUSTINE) Is this rational? (2007/11)

- Can understanding religion as a form of life help to meet the challenge that religious belief is irrational? (2007/12)

Ordinarily, we take our beliefs to be propositional attitudes, that is, as mental states that involve holding a proposition (e.g. “I have hands”) to be true. Moreover, our ordinary beliefs appear to be propositional attitudes of a *special sort*, namely ones that rest on some evidence. For example, I believe that I have hands because I can feel and see that I have hands. I believe that London exists because I remember visiting it. I believe that people landed on the Moon because I’ve seen photographs of it etc. (Some beliefs may rest on false or misleading evidence, of course, or may lack evidential support completely. But these sorts of beliefs deviate from the norm—the former are false and the latter are irrational.)

(Note that in ordinary language, “believe” does not always designate what I called ordinary beliefs. If I say that I believe in communism, I’m not talking about the way things are out there in the world; I’m expressing a moral attitude. But the attitude in question can also be expressed in the form of an ‘ordinary belief’, e.g. “I believe that communism is the best form of government”.)

The basic question about the nature of religious belief is whether it is belief in the ordinary sense. It can fail to be so in two ways:

- (1) by not being a propositional attitude
- (2) by being a propositional attitude that does not rest on evidence.

Option (1) is explored in the papers by Braithwaite, Phillips, and Mackie (ch 12). The basic idea is that religious belief (or perhaps one should call it just “faith” at this point) has no descriptive or semantic content; religious tenets do not really mean anything / don’t involve factual claims but express, or help foster, some sort of moral attitude or some way of life. They are parts of a “language-game” that has no relevant content over and above the way that members of relevant community behave, just as a game of chess does not “mean” anything (does not refer to or represent anything) beyond the interaction between the players. This way of thinking is typically associated with Wittgenstein’s later phase. Braithwaite defends it in an especially stark form, while Phillips is a bit more cautious (and somewhat mysterious). Mackie is heavily critical of this approach.

Option (2) is extensively discussed by Mackie (ch 11), who mentions three relevant paradigms: (i) Pascal’s idea that religious belief can (and should) rest on rational calculation and not on evidence; (ii) William James’ claim that religious belief involves passionate identification with moral ideals and hence it is wrong to apply ordinary evidential criteria to it; (iii) Kierkegaard’s thesis that faith is by its nature opposed to objectivity. The paper by Adams (“Kierkegaard’s arguments...”) provides a more nuanced analysis and critique of (iii).

Finally, “The virtue of faith” by Adams is an interesting exposition (from a theistic standpoint) of the claim that belief in God is a virtue and hence different from ordinary beliefs.