**The Problem of Faith and Reason**

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**Abstract.** Faith in God conflicts with reason—or so we’re told. We focus on two arguments for this conclusion. After evaluating three criticisms of them, we identify an assumption they share, namely that faith in God requires belief that God exists. Whether the assumption is true depends on what faith is. We sketch a theory of faith that allows for both faith in God without belief that God exists, and faith in God while in belief-cancelling doubt God’s existence. We then argue that our theory, unlike the theory of Thomas Aquinas, makes sense of four central items of faith-data: (i) *pístis* in the Synoptics, (ii) ʾ*emunāh* in the Hebrew scriptures, (iii) exemplars of faith in God, including Abraham, Jesus, and Mother Teresa, and (iv) the widespread experience of people of faith today. We close by assessing revisions of the two arguments we began with, revisions that align with our theory of faith, and find them dubious, at best.

**1. Faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments**

Any comprehensive textbook in the philosophy of religion contains a section on the problem of faith and reason, the contention that faith in God conflicts with reason. There are different ways to display the alleged conflict. Here’s one way:

*Argument 1*

1. Faith in God requires always, or at least sometimes, believing on insufficient evidence that God exists.

2. Reason requires never believing anything on insufficient evidence.

3. So, faith in God and reason require incompatible things—in which case they conflict.

Here’s another way:

*Argument 2*

1. Rational faith in God requires rational belief that God exists.

2. Belief that God exists is irrational.

3. So, faith in God is irrational—in which case it conflicts with reason.

 Call these and their kin *faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments*.

Such arguments have borne the brunt of extensive criticism. In what follows, we evaluate three criticisms of these two arguments before we zero-in on a crucial assumption, namely that you can’t have faith in God unless you believe that God exists. Whether that’s true depends on what faith is. We sketch a theory of faith that allows you to have faith in God even if you are in belief-cancelling doubt about the matter. We then explain why that’s a good thing about our theory, in contrast with Thomas Aquinas’s theory. We close by assessing revisions of Arguments 1 and 2 that are in line with our theory, and we find them to be dubious, at best.

**2. Fideism, natural theology, and Reformed epistemology**

The first criticism―a version of fideism―accepts the conclusion of each argument but observes that even if faith in God is at sword’s point with reason, nothing of interest follows. For even if faith in God conflicts with reason, *so what?* Must those with faith in God tremble in their boots? Not at all. Unless reason has authority over faith in God, faith in God has nothing to fear in the conflict. Indeed, quite the opposite is true: faith in God has authority over reason.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There are at least two problems with this fideistic criticism of the two faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments. The first problem is that, according to the first of the two great commandments―which is affirmed by the Abrahamic religions―we are to love God with all our heart, strength, soul, and mind (Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27; Matthew 22:37; cf. Qur’an 8:22). But we can’t love God with all our mind unless we allow reason to inform, influence, and regulate what we put our faith in, including faith in God. The second problem is that these traditions encourage the use of reason when it comes to relating to God by faith. For example, through the prophet Isaiah, God invites wayward Israel to “Come, let us reason together,” and the earliest Christians gave reasons to think Jesus was the Messiah, and Muslims are well-known for prizing reasoned theological argumentation. So, the fideistic criticism of Arguments 1 and 2 will not satisfy people who aim to love God with all their mind, and who use reason to inform, influence, and regulate their faith in God, out of love of God.

A second criticism of these two faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments―a version of natural theology―affirms reason’s role in relation to faith in God but denies that faith in God ever requires believing that God exists on insufficient evidence. After all, just as we can have faith in others while believing they exist on the basis of sufficient evidence, so we can have faith in God while believing that God exists on the basis of sufficient evidence. So, premise 1 of Argument 1 is false. More importantly, premise 2 of Argument 2 is false. That’s because the publicly available evidence―e.g., certain general features of our world, or the moral, modal, and historical facts―is sufficient for rational belief that God exists; rational faith in God remains an option.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A problem with this second criticism of Arguments 1 and 2 is that, even if faith in God never requires believing that God exists on insufficient evidence, the publicly available evidence is arguably insufficient for rational belief that God exists. In any case, when many people consider the publicly available evidence carefully—and when they give the best critical assessments of it their due weight—they judge that it is insufficient for rational belief that God exists.

Like our natural theologian’s criticism of the two faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments, a third criticism―a version of Reformed epistemology―affirms reason’s role in relation to faith in God but, unlike it, our Reformed epistemologist emphasizes private sources of belief in the existence of God, e.g., religious experiences, or the exercise of a dedicated capacity for forming beliefs that logically entail that God exists, e.g., a *sensus divinitatis*. And, just as the private sources of mundane belief in the existence of objects in our immediate environment render such belief rational, so the private sources of belief in God’s existence render it rational.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One problem with our Reformed epistemologist’s criticism of Arguments 1 and 2 is that, arguably, not only is there insufficient reason to believe that religious experience or the exercise of a dedicated God-belief-forming capacity *actually* renders belief in God’s existence rational, but there are also undefeated undercutting-defeaters available, e.g., not-implausible alternative explanations of these phenomena.

But a more important problem with both our natural theologian’s and our Reformed epistemologist’s criticism of the two faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments is that many people of faith identify with William Wainwright’s self-description, according to whom it is difficult for him “to embrace *any* controversial [proposition] without *some* hesitation”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nevertheless, he continues, theism seems “*more reasonable* to me, on the whole, *than its alternatives*”.[[5]](#footnote-5) He concludes with these words:

My attitude is in many ways similar to T. S. Eliot’s. Eliot appears to have combined a deeply serious faith with both irony and skepticism. (When asked why he accepted Christianity, he said he did so because it was *the least false of the options open to him*.) . . . I do not regard my stance as exemplary. If Christianity (or indeed any form of traditional theism) is true, a faith free from doubt is surely better. I suspect, however, that my religious life may be fairly representative of the lives of many intelligent, educated, and sincere Christians in the latter part of the twentieth century.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Wainwright and Eliot lack *belief* that *God exists*, as do many other intelligent, educated, and sincere people of faith in the twenty-first century. Some theists accuse Wainwright, Eliot, and their kin of excessive skepticism, or intellectual spinelessness. We protest. By our reckoning, they exhibit the virtue of intellectual humility, properly attending to and owning their intellectual limitations as they assess the grounds for believing that God exists.[[7]](#footnote-7) In any event, they cannot join our natural theologian or our Reformed epistemologist in their criticism of Arguments 1 and 2. For them, the problem of faith and reason remains.

How might those who identify with Wainwright and Eliot view that problem? They might begin by observing that each of the two faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments has a premise that entails

The Crucial Assumption. You have faith in God only if you believe that God exists.

But is the Crucial Assumption true? That depends on what faith is.

**3. Resilient Reliance: a theory of faith**

We propose that this is what faith is:

Resilient Reliance. For you to have faith in someone for something is for you to be disposed to rely on them to come through with respect to it, with resilience in the face of challenges to relying on them, because of your positive stance toward their coming through.

Several clarifications are in order.[[8]](#footnote-8)

At a first approximation, a *positive stance* toward someone coming through is any of a variety of combinations of both positive cognitive states and positive conative states toward them coming through. Here’s why we include it in our proposed theory.

Like fear, hope, anger and other complex psychological states, faith has built-in to it what’s needed to make sense of behavior. For example, all you need to know to understand why Christina behaves in certain ways—confessing her sins, expressing gratitude to God, petitioning God, studying the Bible, gathering with Christians, relying on the two Great Commandments to make moral, social, and political decisions, receiving the sacraments, and the like—is that she has faith in Jesus as her Lord. However, Christina’s faith can explain her relying-on-Jesus behavior only if it involves both cognitive and conative states. But we cannot explain her behavior by saying that she wants to follow Jesus as her Lord and she *believes* that he will *not* come through on that score, or by saying that she believes that Jesus will come through as her Lord and she *wants* him *not* to do so. Disbelief and disdesire are too “negative” to make sense of her behavior; more “positive” states are required.

At a first approximation, for Christina to be in a *positive cognitive state* toward Jesus coming through as her Lord is for her to be in some cognitive state or other that represents him as coming through and has three features: it has the content that Jesus will come through, it disposes her to take a stand on behalf of the truth of that content, and it is responsive to her evidence for its truth and/or it is produced by a cognitive process or skill that aims at true positive cognitive states. *Belief* that Jesus *will* come through counts but—crucially—there are other candidates, e.g., a high-enough credence or confidence that he will come through or, depending on the details, accepting, trusting, hoping, or belieflessly assuming that he will; propositional reliance and imaginative assent might also be candidates.[[9]](#footnote-9) One qualification. Just as you can put your hope in your spouse to remember your anniversary even though you lack belief of the “thick” proposition that they *will* remember, so Christina can have faith in Jesus as her Lord even though she lacks belief of the “thick” proposition that Jesus *will* come through, and instead believes a “thinner” proposition, e.g., *more likely than not he will come through*. We include belief of thinner propositions among positive cognitive states. Upshot: many states fall under the rubric of a positive cognitive state.

Note that the positivity involved in a positive cognitive state is a disposition to take a stand *on behalf of* its truth in contrast with taking a stand *against* its truth, or *no* stand at all. Nothing else. You can be in a positive cognitive state toward a proposition even when you regard its truth as bad or undesirable, as when you believe that you will be unjustly executed tomorrow.

For Christina to be in a *positive conative state* toward Jesus coming through as her Lord is for her to be in some conative state or other that motivates her to rely on Jesus to come through. Wanting him to do so counts but—crucially—there are other candidates. For example, imagine that, like the rich, young ruler, Christina does not want to follow Jesus because it’s too demanding but, unlike the rich, young ruler, she wants *to want* to follow Jesus because she sees how much better her life might be if she were to submit to his Lordship. She has a second-order desire for her first-order desire to be changed. Nevertheless, she might yet have faith in Jesus as her Lord. For, although she lacks a first-order desire to follow him, it still matters to her since she wants to change her first-order desire, i.e., she wants to want to follow Jesus. In addition to first- and second-order desires, other options include looking with favor on Jesus coming through as her Lord, being for it, a felt attraction to it, caring about it, being emotionally invested in it, and affection for him in that capacity, all of which the literature mentions.[[10]](#footnote-10) We include these among positive conative states. Upshot: many states fall under the rubric of a positive conative state.

Notice that, on Resilient Reliance, faith is a *role-functional psychological* *state*.[[11]](#footnote-11) For a psychological state to be an instance of faith in someone for something is for it to take as input any of a wide variety of combinations of both positive conative and positive cognitive states toward them coming through and to give as output a disposition to rely on them to come through with resilience in the face of challenges.

So then: Christina’s faith in Jesus as her Lord can make sense of her relying-on-Jesus behavior, and that’s because her faith involves both positive conative and positive cognitive states toward his coming through as her Lord. For convenience, we collect both states under the label of a *positive stance*, which appears in our theory.

Regarding *a disposition to rely*, on our view, it is a certain sort of non-basic action, one you perform by doing other things, e.g., relying on God by following his commands and praying regularly. But notice: you can have faith in someone for something even while you are not performing the act of relying on them for it—as when you are fast asleep—provided you have a *disposition* to perform the act of relying on them for it.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As for *resilience in the face of challenges*, on our view, it is an unspecific general dispositionto overcome―or to *try* to overcome―challenges to continuing to rely on those in whom we have placed our faith. It can be instantiated by many things psychologists distinguish and study, e.g., unperturbedness, bouncing-back, grit, fortitude, hardiness, persistence, perseverance, etc. Faith’s resilience does not need to dispose us to overcome all possible challenges. We can be more or less resilient depending on the range of possible challenges to which we would respond by overcoming them. This is one way in which we can have more or less faith.[[13]](#footnote-13)

We intend our theory to allow for belief of thin propositions, as well as non-doxastic states. Here we briefly call attention to one non-doxastic state, by way of illustration. Consider the following case.

It’s fourth down. The ball is on the two-yard line. There’s one minute left. The offense needs a touchdown to stay in the game. The defensive captain considers what play the opposing quarterback will call. From his prior experience, and given the current situation, it’s most plausible to him that the quarterback will call a fullback plunge. So, he assumes that’s the call. Then, he acts on his assumption, aligning the defense to stop it.

We can easily imagine that the captain is in doubt about whether the quarterback will call a plunge, and so he neither believes nor disbelieves that’s the call. Even so, we can easily imagine that he acts on the assumption that it is. That is, he *assumes* that a plunge was called, and thereby takes a stand on the truth of that proposition, packing the line instead aligning his men for any number of other running plays, e.g., a toss or a sweep, or for any number of passing plays, e.g., a corner or hook.

Notice that the captain does not assume that the call is a plunge in the way in which we assume something by *taking it for granted*, e.g., taking it for granted that we’ve existed for more than five minutes: that’s just belief. Nor does he assume that’s the call in the way in which we assume something by *simply considering* *it to see what follows*, e.g., simply considering whether a time can be earlier than itself, for reductio: simply-considering-something-to-see-what-follows would not have resulted in him taking a stand on the truth of the proposition that the call is a plunge. Rather, he exhibits something different: a way of assuming something that involves neither belief nor disbelief, one that involves being in doubt, one that, nevertheless, results in taking a stand on the truth of the proposition assumed―and so acting accordingly. That is, he *belieflessly assumes* the call is a plunge.[[14]](#footnote-14)

We submit that you can have faith in God for something even if you lack belief that God will come through, or belief that God exists. That’s because you can have faith in God for something if you belieflessly assume that God will come through, and belieflessly assume that God exists, provided that you satisfy faith’s other conditions.

**4. Faith and doubt**

Resilient Reliance allows you to have faith in God while being in doubt about whether God will come through, and even while being in doubt about whether God exists. This is a good thing. That’s because by allowing these things, Resilient Reliance can make sense of several items of secular and religious faith-data. Here we discuss four items of religious faith-data: (i) *pístis* in the Synoptics, (ii) ʾ*emunāh* in the Hebrew scriptures, (iii) exemplars of faith in God, and (iv) the experience of people of faith today.[[15]](#footnote-15)

But before we turn to these items of faith-data, we should say a brief word about doubt. We distinguish *having doubts* from *being in doubt*, and we distinguish both of them from *doubting that*. For you to have doubt*s* about something – note the ‘s’ – is for you to have what you regard as grounds for its negation and, as a result, for you to be at least somewhat less inclined to believe it, whereas for you to be in doubt about something is for you to regard your grounds for it as roughly on a par with your grounds for its negation and, as a result, for you neither to believe it nor disbelieve it. Having doubts about something and being in doubt about something are not to be identified with doubting that something is so. If one doubts that something is so, one disbelieves it, or is at least strongly inclined to disbelieve it; having doubts about something and being in doubt about something lack that implication. We will focus on being in doubt. One consequence of our view about doubt is that being in doubt about something is incompatible with believing it.

**4.1 *Pístis* in the Synoptic Gospels**

Early in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus arrives in Galilee, calling people to repentance and *faith in* (*pisteuó en*) the good news. Mark displays through his characters the nature of the faith to which Jesus calls people. In this connection, Mark has Jesus explicitly commend someone’s *pístis* three times, and on each occasion their most salient feature is relying on Jesus to heal despite challenges to relying on him, sometimes including doubt. Note well: in the world of the story, it was known that Jesus was *able* to heal, but it was up for grabs whether he *would* in any specific case. With this in mind, consider the story of Jairus, the synagogue leader.

After begging Jesus to come to his home to heal his sick daughter, Jesus eventually consents. As they walk together, Mark highlights counterevidence to the proposition that his daughter was alive and so a candidate for healing. First, the messengers inform him “Your daughter is dead”. Second, when they arrive at his home, they are met by “people weeping and wailing loudly,” a ritual mourning for the dead. Third, after Jesus says she is only sleeping, the mourners mock him. Fourth, Jairus then “went in where the child was” and sees her with his own eyes, still as stone. Perhaps his wife cradled her in her arms, gently weeping while she stroked her hair. Perhaps when Jairus met her eyes, she conveyed to him her hopelessness: it’s too late, she’s dead.

Mark calls our attention to this mounting counterevidence, underscoring Jairus’s grounds for doubt. To nonetheless attribute to Jairus the *belief* that his daughter *is* alive seems uncharitable, especially when there is another reading available, one that ascribes no irrationality to him and one that is well within the semantic range and first-century cultural understanding of *pístis*: Jairus retains his faith in Jesus to heal his daughter, from the beginning of the story to the end, even though, just prior to the vindication of his faith, he only, perhaps, belieflessly assumes Jesus will heal her, or maybe even assigns it a low credence.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Or consider the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew’s Gospel (15:21-28), who is arguably “not only an exemplar of faith in Matthew, but *the* exemplar”.[[17]](#footnote-17) She approaches Jesus: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon”. But he does not answer her, and his disciples urge him to send her away. Eventually, however, Jesus does answer: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Kneeling, she persists: “Lord, help me.” He answers again: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. But she continues: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” “Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your *pístis*! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly”.

As the Canaanite woman interacts with Jesus, Matthew underscores her mounting counterevidence to Jesus healing her daughter. First, she’s a Canaanite woman, and so a target of the historical hostility between Jews and Canaanites. Second, Jesus doesn’t answer her when she first speaks to him. Third, his disciples try to get rid of her. Fourth, when Jesus does answer her, he insists that God has sent him to the Jews alone, and not to her people. Fifth, when Jesus answers her the second time, he uses a racial slur to refer to her people. Sixth, Jesus further insists that it would be morally wrong for him to give to her what was intended by God to be given to the Jews.

All this counterevidence is reasonable grounds for the woman to be in belief-cancelling doubt about whether Jesus will heal her daughter. To nonetheless attribute to her the irrational *belief* that Jesus *will* heal her is uncharitable, especially when the semantic range and first-century cultural understanding of *pístis* permits an alternative reading: she retains her faith in Jesus, continuing to rely on him to heal her daughter, from beginning to end, even though, just before Jesus recognizes her “great faith,” she only, perhaps, belieflessly assumes that Jesus will heal her daughter, or has a low degree of confidence that he will.

The narrative structure in these two stories is typical of miracle-stories in the Synoptics: someone has a need, they or a proxy rely on Jesus to help, they continue to rely despite difficulty (including, sometimes, belief-cancelling counterevidence), Jesus recognizes their *pístis*, he performs a miracle, and they or others respond. Several of these stories can be read in a similar way, e.g., Bartimaeus, the father of the demon-possessed son, and the woman with a hemorrhage.

By allowing positive cognitive states that are compatible with being in doubt, Resilient Reliance makes sense of the combination of *pístis* and doubt exhibited by these characters in the Synoptics. It also makes sense of Jesus’ own disciples exhibiting “little faith,” which is indicative of doubt.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**4.2 *Emunāh* in the Hebrew scriptures**

The ʾ*emunāh* lexicon points to firmness in faithfulness *and* in faith, depending on how its verb form, *’aman*, is conjugated. The passive niphal verb form, *ne’ĕmān*, is most often glossed “to be faithful” or “to endure,” and when applied to persons, “stable, reliable”.[[19]](#footnote-19) In contrast, the active hiphil verb form, *he’emin*, expresses action, “to be firmly set in/on something, to hold firm,” and “is used especially of a person or his word: to build steadfastly on someone, or to rely on his word”.[[20]](#footnote-20) Interestingly, the active hiphil characterizes Abraham’s exemplary response to God: “And he *he’ĕmin* the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). If we attend to Abraham’s story, we can gain a better view of the nature of the ʾ*emunāh* for which “the father of faith” is well-known.

Abraham’s story begins when God visits him and commands him to leave his family and homeland, promising to make of him a great nation that will bless the world (Genesis 12). While the narrative arc of his story has him relying on God to keep the promise, he sometimes seems not to rely on God as much as he might have, which suggests that, lurking in the background, lies some doubt about whether God will come through. This tension between the reliance to which God calls Abraham and the doubt Abraham experiences in relying on God arguably drives the narrative. With striking frankness, it underscores the ways Abraham falters in his relying on God, ways connected with doubt about whether God will keep the promise, through the decades of waiting for God to make good on it.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Right from the start, when God calls Abraham, he—already 75 years old, well past his prime—hedges his bets. God says, “Go from your country *and your kindred* and your father’s house to the land that I will show you,” but Abraham brings some kindred along, notably his much younger nephew Lot, plausibly in the hope that Lot will produce an heir should the aging Abraham prove not up to the task (12:1, 4-5).

Moreover, both immediately before and immediately after Abraham is commended for “faithing” God (15:6), he expresses doubt. He complains, “You have given me no offspring,” and seeks reassurance of the promise: “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess [the land]?” (15:2-3, 8). The narrative explicitly ties Abraham’s taking of Eliezer as his heir to his continued childlessness and his lack of confidence in God’s reassurance that he will keep the promise (15:1-3). And, after Abraham’s faith is commended, “a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him,” prompting further reassurances from God (15:12-16). One without doubt needs no reassurance.

In addition, both Sarah and Abraham have difficulty believing that the heir will come through her womb, and difficulty relying on God to come through in this way. That’s why Abraham takes Hagar as a mistress, who bears Ishmael when, as the narrative emphasizes, Abraham is 86 years old (16:1-4, 15). Fathering Ishmael also bespeaks doubt.

Further, Abraham twice tells foreign leaders that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife, once before and once after God’s specific promise (Gen. 17) that Sarah will bear a son, Isaac, and that he will be the heir (2:10-20; 20:1-18). In each case, the extent to which Abraham’s relies on God to protect her is compromised somewhat by his wavering; he hatches his own plan of protection (20:11). As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “even this model figure of faith was tempted to form an immediate alternative future of his own making”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Making his own plans likewise bespeaks doubt.

Further still, Abraham’s laughter—in response to God’s promise that Sarah will bear their heir—expresses serious doubt, perhaps even bordering on disbelief: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (17:17). Sarah laughs too (18:11-15). After several detours which prolong the fulfillment of the promise, the heir is given a name which commemorates that laughter: “everyone who hears will laugh with me” (21:6). Isaac’s name reminds the narrative audience that nothing is “too wonderful for the Lord,” but not because doubt was uncalled for (18:14). After all, as Sarah eloquently puts it, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” (21:7). Yes, indeed; who would ever have said *that*? Again: the story displays doubt.

Finally, Abraham’s relying on God to keep the promise is put to a climatic test (Gen. 22). God issues a command that will apparently destroy the basis for any fulfillment of the promise: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (22:2). Whether Abraham’s confidence in God at this point is maximal given their history together—or whether it isn’t, and he is nonetheless resolved to obey God and to withhold nothing despite the apparent absurdity of the command—Abraham’s disposition to rely on God, despite numerous occasions of doubt, has made his faith in God complete. He raises the knife.

If the story of Abraham is any indication, ʾ*emunāh* enables people to continue to rely on God despite their doubt about whether God will come through, provided that they belieflessly assume that he will, among many other possibilities. Bernhard Anderson sums it up well: “In the Old Testament faith is *steadfast reliance* on God amid the uncertainties and insecurities of life”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Resilient Reliance makes sense of the combination of faith and doubt allowed by the ʾ*emunāh* lexicon in the Hebrew Scriptures, as illustrated by Abraham’s story.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**4.3 Exemplars of faith in God**

Exemplars of faith in God sometimes struggle with doubt. In this connection, consider Jesus and Mother Teresa.

Mark’s Gospel presents Jesus as a role-model, and so we should expect Jesus to model something as important as faith, especially struggling with doubt, a common human experience. This we find in his relationships with the Twelve, but especially in his relationship with God, in Gethsemane and on Golgotha.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In Gethsemane, Mark exhibits Jesus’ disposition to rely on God as he comes to terms with how his execution will serve the new way in which God’s rule will be established through him. Mark tells us that, after taking Peter, James, and John aside from the others in the garden, he became “distressed and agitated” at the prospect of the manner in which God’s purposes involved him, so much so that he was “deeply grieved, even to death” (14:34). Walking a bit away from them to pray, he throws himself on the ground, begging God to find another way, saying “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me”. To be sure, there is terror here but, plausibly, there is also doubt: doubt about the wisdom of God, doubt about what God’s purposes require, and doubt about his own role in their fulfillment. Even so, Jesus leans into his faith in God’s wisdom and purposes, thereby overcoming his terror and doubt, resolving to do God’s will no matter what: “yet, not what I want, but what you want” (14:36). Notably, he finds the sleeping disciples and, after rebuffing them, he returns to pray alone where he “said the same words”. Apparently, Jesus’ struggle to continue relying on God despite his terror and doubt was not only intense but also recurrent.

On Golgotha, as Jesus was crucified, Mark says that, near the end, “at three o’clock,” Jesus screamed, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34). In the world of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has an explicit, conscious relationship of mutual faith and faithfulness with God, his “Abba, Father” (14:36). And, here on the cross, Jesus expected God to be present to him in his hour of need—but his expectation is crushed. There is a sense of betrayal here, but there is also doubt, a “teetering on the edge between disillusionment and faith,” as Father John Neuhaus puts it, doubt about God’s care for and faithfulness to him.[[26]](#footnote-26) Yet, Mark presents Jesus as an exemplar of faith. In doing so, Mark seems to say, “Look. This is what faith in God looks like in such circumstances. You rely on God—to exercise wisdom, care, faithfulness, and love—and you continue to do so, despite your inability to understand, your feelings of betrayal, and the doubt induced by your situation”.

Now to Mother Teresa. In 1942, after what she took to be a calling from the Lord, she made a private vow to give herself and her life completely to him, no matter what, and to serve him in the poorest of the poor. What she didn’t expect at the time was that the “no matter what” clause of her vow would include five decades of relational emptiness and severe doubt. It appears from her private writings that she not only experienced the felt absence of God during that time, she also experienced doubt of a sort and degree that is incompatible with belief. “[T]here is no One to answer my prayers,” she wrote: “So many unanswered questions live within me―I am afraid to uncover them―because of the blasphemy. ―If there be God, please forgive me”.[[27]](#footnote-27) Later she wrote:

In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss―of God not wanting me―of God not being God―of God not really existing (Jesus, please forgive my blasphemies―I have been told to write everything). That darkness that surrounds me on all sides―I can’t lift my soul to God―no light or inspiration enters my soul.―I speak of love for souls―of tender love for God―words pass through my lips [sic, for “words”]―and I long with a deep longing to believe them. ―What do I labour for? If there be no God―there can be no soul.―If there is no soul then Jesus―You also are not true.[[28]](#footnote-28)

This was not a one-off occurrence. It was her “traveling companion” for nearly her entire adult life; nevertheless, “she carried on”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

How are we to understand this? In contrast with her earlier assessment of herself as having lost her faith, through sensitive, insightful spiritual direction, she later came to a different understanding, which she described with nine short words: “to live by faith and yet not to believe”.[[30]](#footnote-30) It is not difficult to see here someone experiencing belief-cancelling doubt―quite understandable given her intimacy with pain and disease, death and suffering―and yet we plausibly also see someone resolved to rely on Jesus to come through, as her Lord, someone perhaps acting on the beliefless assumption, or perhaps even a very low credence, that the basic Christian story is true, and so keeping her vow to serve him in the poorest of the poor.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Resilient Reliance makes sense of exemplars of faith in God who continue to rely on God despite belief-cancelling doubt about God’s love, purposes, and faithfulness―and even God’s existence.

**4.4 People of faith today**

People of faith today struggle with doubt, among other things. Three facts suggest as much.

First, there’s your own experience as a person of faith (if such you be), as well as the experience of those you know personally. Haven’t you, or someone you know, experienced doubt, even belief-cancelling doubt, at some point in your/their journey as people of faith? We have, as have many who have shared their stories with us. Yet here we are: continuing to rely on God in a variety of ways, despite our past and/or current doubt.

Second, there’s the experience of people of faith you don’t know personally but whose experience you have access to through other sources. For example, many religious leaders report that the people of faith they serve sometimes experience severe doubt. Just ask them. One pastor we know reported that, on average, throughout a twenty-year career at several churches, two people a week sought doubt-related counsel. On a 2018 trip to Jordan, we spoke about faith and doubt to sixty professors and students, wondering aloud whether people of Muslim faith experience severe doubt, as people of Christian faith sometimes do. The response was startling. The students estimated that a third of their peers experience belief-cancelling doubt about the existence of Allah, among other things.[[32]](#footnote-32) An orthodox rabbi recently spoke to us of many devout congregants who experience something similar.[[33]](#footnote-33) Or witness the scores of easily-googled self-help books that address doubting Christians, none of which would be written unless their intended audience experienced severe doubt. In an unscientific sampling, students in our recent university seminar interviewed 20 adult evangelical Protestants. 18 of 20 answered “Yes” to the question, “In the time that you have been a person of faith, have you ever been in doubt about whether God will come through with respect to what you put your faith in God for?,” while 17 of 20, answered “Yes” to “In the time that you have been a person of faith, have you ever questioned the goodness or faithfulness or even the existence of God?,” going on to describe their experiences in detail.

Third, beyond anecdotal evidence such as this, psychological research on religious struggle and spiritual formation reveals that people of faith sometimes struggle with doubt. Apparently, being a person of faith bears a significant positive correlation to experiencing doubt at some time—whether mild, moderate, or severe—about God’s love, justice, and existence, in addition to many other religious struggles.[[34]](#footnote-34) Kenneth Pargament and Julie Exline write:

If statistics are any guide, we continue to live in an age of doubt. In our large sample of adults (Exline, Pargament, & Grubbs, 2014), 45.4% experienced some level of religious or spiritual doubt-related struggles over the past few weeks…. Among patients with advanced cancer, 20.0% reported some level of doubt about their faith or belief in God (Winkelman *et al.*, 2011). A survey of Christian high school adolescents revealed that 77.0% were currently having some doubts about religion (Kooistra, 1990).[[35]](#footnote-35)

One study revealed that a staggering 90% of mothers who had given birth to a child with profound intellectual disability expressed some doubts about God’s existence (Childs, 1985). In an interview study of survivors of the suicide of a loved one, the majority (most of whom were religious believers at the time of the suicide) voiced deep questions about their faith (Dransart, 2018).[[36]](#footnote-36)

Moreover, the most influential theory in developmental psychology of religion, James Fowler’s theory of the stages of faith—which was initially based on interviews of 600 people of faith, and many more since then—recognizes continuing to rely on God in the face of challenges, including severe doubt, as a rite of passage for post-adolescent “mature” faith.[[37]](#footnote-37) Further, these bodies of research continue to grow, displaying similar results.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Resilient Reliance makes sense of the doubt experienced by people of faith today, including belief-cancelling doubt.

In light of the faith-data adduced here, it’s a good thing that our theory of faith allows for severe doubt. But what about other theories? Can they make sense of this faith-data? Here we focus on one influential theory of faith, that of Thomas Aquinas.

According to Aquinas, the object of faith is God, but since we have no immediate awareness of God, strictly speaking the object of faith is propositions about God, such as the proposition that God exists or the proposition that Jesus is God incarnate.[[39]](#footnote-39) Faith, then, is an act of intellectual assent to propositions about God.[[40]](#footnote-40) Many commentators call this act of intellectual assent “believing” (*credere*); we will follow suit. Notably, Aquinas says that faith shares important features with both (i) high-grade knowledge (*scientia*), such as a mathematician’s knowledge of first principles and their knowledge of theorems based on demonstrations from those principles, and (ii) mere opinion, suspicion, and doubt (*opinione, suspicione et dubitatione*), such as our mere opinion that Trump’s advisors colluded with conspiracy theorists and white nationalists to conduct the insurrection of January 6, 2021, and our suspicion that there is extra-terrestrial sentient life, and our being in doubt about whether the number of Douglas firs in Lake Padden State Park is even. Like high-grade knowledge, faith requires believing with psychological certainty, and so no doubt, a view echoed by, among others, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: “doubt cannot coexist with faith…; faith and doubt are mutually exclusive”.[[41]](#footnote-41) Like mere opinion, suspicion, and doubt, the evidence for faith is inadequate for believing with the certainty involved in high-grade knowledge, in two senses. First, it is *causally* inadequate to move someone’s intellect to believe with certainty since the evidence for faith is only enough to move their intellect to mere opinion, suspicion, or doubt.[[42]](#footnote-42) Second, it is *rationally* inadequate for believing with certainty since the evidence for faith is only enough to render rational mere opinion, suspicion, or doubt and not belief. Nevertheless, someone can have faith that a proposition about God is true since they might be so attracted to its being true that their will moves their intellect to believe it is true with certainty even though their intellect alone could not be moved by the evidence to believe it.[[43]](#footnote-43) And that is what faith is, says Aquinas: believing a proposition about God with certainty, on inadequate evidence, by an act of will, due to an attraction to its being true.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Obviously enough, due to its certainty-requirement, Aquinas’s theory of faith cannot make sense of the faith-data we have adduced here: (i) *pístis* in the Synoptics, (ii) ʾ*emunāh* in the Hebrew scriptures, (iii) exemplars of faith in God, and (iv) the experience of people of faith today.

**6. The revised faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments**

On Resilient Reliance, the Crucial Assumption is false: faith in God does not require belief that God exists. Even so, both of the faith-conflicts-with-reason arguments can be revised to remove that defect. We treat each in turn.

Here’s the first revision:

*Argument 1, revised*

1. Faith in God requires always, or at least sometimes, being in a positive cognitive state toward God’s existence on insufficient evidence.

2. Reasonrequires never being in a positive cognitive state toward anything on insufficient evidence.

3. So, faith in God and reason require incompatible things—in which case they conflict.

Two observations. First, on Resilient Reliance, a wide range of positive cognitive states—both nondoxastic states as well as belief of a wide range of thinner propositions regarding God’s existence—might partly constitute faith in God. Many of these require far less evidence than belief of the same content. Recognizing these possibilities gives us good reason to deny premise 1. At any rate, a proper defense of it would require decisive evidence against God’s existence. Second, some epistemologists deny premise 2 since, on their theory of rationality, you can be in a rational positive cognitive state toward some proposition even if you have insufficient evidence for it.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Here’s the second revision:

*Argument 2, revised*

1. Faith in God requires being in a positive cognitive state toward God’s existence.

2. Any positive cognitive state toward God’s existence is irrational.

3. So, faith in God is irrational—in which case faith in God conflicts with reason.

The difficulty here is clear: it’s a tall order to show that *every* positive cognitive state toward God’s existence that faith in God might involve is irrational. Here’s why.

Rational appraisal can apply to our thoughts, actions, and desires; epistemic, practical, and desiderative rationality, respectively. Clearly enough, epistemic rationality is at issue in these arguments. The epistemic rationality of someone’s positive cognitive states can be evaluated from their own first-person perspective or from a third-person perspective. Our positive cognitive states are epistemically rational from a third-person perspective roughly when they *in fact* fit our total evidence, including our experience, and/or they are *in fact* produced by reliable cognitive capacities. They are epistemically rational from a first-person perspective roughly when they *seem* to us, on reflection, to fit our evidence and/or they *seem* to us, on reflection, to have been produced by reliable cognitive capacities. Now, notice an ambiguity in premise 2 of the revised Argument 2. It might mean

(2a) Every positive cognitive state toward God’s existence had by anyone does *not seem* to them, on reflection, to fit their evidence and/or does *not* *seem* to them, on reflection, to have been produced by reliable God-dedicated positive-cognitive-state-forming capacities,

or it might mean

(2b) Every positive cognitive state toward God’s existence had by anyone *in fact* *fails* to fit their evidence and/or *in fact has* *not* been produced by reliable God-dedicated positive-cognitive-state-forming capacities.

(2a) is false. Many people of faith are in a positive cognitive state toward God’s existence, and it seems to them, on reflection, to fit their evidence and/or that it was produced by reliable God-dedicated positive-cognitive-state-forming capacities.

As for (2b), whether someone’s positive cognitive state toward God’s existence in fact fails to fit their evidence and/or in fact has not been produced by reliable God-dedicated positive-cognitive-state-forming capacities depends on (i) what the state is, (ii) whether their total evidence in fact fits the state, and/or (iii) whether that state was in fact produced by reliable God-dedicated positive-cognitive-state-forming capacities. Let’s set aside (iii) for brevity’s sake, although we expect that it will be no easy task to show that *in fact* no positive cognitive state of any person of faith was produced by reliable God-dedicated positive-cognitive-state-forming capacities. As for (i), let’s focus initially on belieflessly assuming that God exists, for the sake of illustration. As for (ii), note that (2b) implies that the total evidence of every person of faith in fact fails to fit belieflessly assuming that God exists. But is this implication true?

In this connection, recall our defensive captain. Just as the evidence required for him to be rational in belieflessly assuming the quarterback called a plunge is much less than the evidence required for him to rationally believe that was in fact the call, so the evidence required for a person of faith to be rational in belieflessly assuming that God exists is much less than the evidence required for them to rationally believe it. That’s because belieflessly assuming a proposition involves being in doubt about it, and the evidence required to rationally be in doubt about something is much less than the evidence required to rationally believe it. Therefore, those who would affirm (2b) must argue that the total evidence for God’s existence is in fact *worse* than what’s required for a person of faith to rationally be in doubt about it. Likewise for a person of faith believing thinner propositions, e.g., Wainwright’s *it seems “more reasonable to me, on the whole, than its alternatives*,” among other options. We know of no good arguments for these conclusions.

However, those who would argue for (2b) might need to argue for a more tendentious claim. For while Resilient Reliance disallows disbelief as a positive cognitive state, it allows credence. Moreover, it leaves open for discussion how low one’s credence must go before it brings disbelief along with it. By general agreement, credence zero brings with it disbelief. But, arguably, any non-zero credence on proposition p that you don’t regard as negligible need not bring with it disbelief, particularly if you are indisposed to assert not-p and you refuse to disavow p. *If* that’s right, as Lara Buchak’s, Jonathan Kvanvig’s, and Richard Swinburne’s theories of faith entail, then a person of faith might have faith in God while assigning a very-low-but-non-zero credence to God’s existence, and so those who would affirm (2b) must argue that the total evidence for God’s existence is in fact *worse* than what’s required for a person of faith to be epistemically rational in assigning a very-low-but-non-zero credence that God exists.[[46]](#footnote-46) No one we know of has succeeded on this score.

As we said at the outset, faith in God conflicts with reason—or so we’re told. But, so far as we can see, there’s nothing about the nature of faith or reason themselves that begets any special difficulty, a difficulty beyond that of discerning what grounds you have for a positive stance toward God’s existence. To speak frankly, we find it stunning how often discussions of the problem of faith and reason affirm mistaken assumptions about what faith in God requires, e.g., that it requires belief that God exists on insufficient evidence, or even that it requires belief that God exists at all. Perhaps all of us will be better positioned to appreciate the challenges involved in arguing convincingly that faith in God conflicts with reason once we have a better understanding of what faith in God is, and what it is not.[[47]](#footnote-47)

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1. The frame of mind characterized here resembles Tertullian’s *Prescriptions Against Heretics*, chapter 7, and its heirs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Swinburne 2004; Craig and Moreland 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alston 1991; Plantinga 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wainwright 1994, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.* Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.*, 87, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on intellectual humility, see Whitcomb *et al.* 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on faith and its relation to faithfulness, see McKaughan and Howard-Snyder 2021 and in press a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Alston 1996; Audi 2011; Howard-Snyder 2013, 2017b, and 2019; McKaughan 2013 and 2016; Pojman 1986; Rath 2017; Schellenberg 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Adams 1999, Alston 1996, Audi 2011, Howard-Snyder 2013, Kvanvig 2018, McKaughan 2016 and 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Levin 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on the act of relying, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan unpublished b. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For more on faith’s resilience, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan 2022b. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. To be clear: we are *not* saying the defensive captain has faith. We are saying he has a beliefless assumption. Further, we are saying that beliefless assumption is a nondoxastic positive cognitive state. Further still, we are saying that beliefless assumption could be the positive cognitive state of someone’s faith. Belief is not required. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On some secular data, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan 2022b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. According to Teresa Morgan (2015, *passim*), in the Greco-Roman and Hellenistic-Judaic worlds from which the early churches derived their understanding of *pístis*, it centrally involves relying on others—especially, she repeatedly notes—in the face of “risk, fear, doubt, and skepticism”. As such, *pístis* held people together in times of crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. O’Donnell 2021, 21, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For more on faith and doubt in the Synoptics and other biblical material, see Howard-Snyder 2017a, McKaughan and Howard-Snyder in press b, Morgan 2015, and Schliesser 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brown *et al.* 1977, 52–53; Moberly 1997, 427–433; Jepsen 1977, 322-323. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Healey 1992, 745; Jepsen 1977, 322-323; Barton unpublished, 4; cf. Brown *et al.* 1977; Clines 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Stump 2012; Pace and McKaughan 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Brueggemann 1986, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Anderson 1999, 3, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For more on this item of faith-data, see McKaughan and Howard-Snyder in press b. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Black 2011, 296; Rhoads 2004, 53-54. For a thorough treatment of Jesus as an exemplar of faith, see Tuggy 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Neuhaus 2000, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Mother Teresa 2007, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid.* 2007, 192-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid.* 2007, 157, 326, 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Ibid.* 2007, contrast 187 and 193 with 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For more on Mother Teresa as an exemplar of faith amidst doubt, see McKaughan 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For similar results, see Chouhoud 2018. On faith in God, and doubt, from a Muslim perspective, see Aijaz 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. On faith in God, and doubt, from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, see Lebens 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cf. Pargament and Exline 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid.*, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ibid.*, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Fowler 1981; Seel 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See works cited in Pargament and Exline 2022, chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Aquinas 1265–74/1981, II-II. q.1. a.1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Aquinas 1265–74/1981, II-II. q.2. a.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Sharpe 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Aquinas 1265–74/1981, II-II. q.4. a.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Aquinas 1265–74/1981, II-II q.1 a.4; cf. Aquinas 1256-59/1951-54, q.14, a.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For further assessment of Aquinas’ view of faith, see Howard-Snyder and McKaughan 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. E.g., see the essays by Jason Baehr, Michael Bergmann, Keith DeRose, Alvin Goldmann, and John Greco in Dougherty 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Buchak 2012, Kvanvig 2018, Swinburne 2005; cf. McKaughan 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
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