Can Atheists Have Faith?

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This paper examines whether atheists, who believe that God does not exist, can have faith. Of course, atheists have certain kinds of faith: faith in their friends, faith in certain ideals, and faith in themselves. However, the question we'll examine is whether atheists can have theistic faith: faith that God exists. Philosophers tend to fall on one of two extremes on this question: some, like Dan Howard-Snyder (2019) and Imran Aijaz (2023), say unequivocally no; others, like Robert Whitaker (2019) and Sam Lebens (2023), say unequivocally yes. Here, I take a middle position: I argue that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith (faith in how they act) but not attitude-focused theistic faith (faith in what attitudes they have).

1. Introduction

Recently, philosophers of religion have been thinking and writing about the nature, value, and rationality of faith.[1] When it comes to the nature of faith, much of the debate has involved the relationship between faith and belief. Specifically, some have argued that faith requires belief: if one has faith that p, one also believes that p.[2] Others have argued that faith is consistent with agnosticism, so one could have faith that p even if one is undecided about whether p is true.[3]

There's a further question, that's received less attention: can *atheists* have faith? This paper explores that question. Now, of course, atheists can have various kinds of non-religious faith, in family, friends, and ideals. But could an atheist have *theistic* faith,

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[1] For summaries of the recent faith literature, see Buchak (2017-a), Rettler (2018), and Jackson (2022-a, 2023-a).

[2] For arguments that faith entails belief, see Mugg (2016), Malcolm & Scott (2016), Malcolm (2018), Scott (2020), Mugg (2021).

[3] For arguments that one can have faith without belief, see Pojman (1986), Audi (1991), Alston (1996), Speak (2007), Howard-Snyder (2013, 2019), Whitaker (2019), Lougheed (2020), Lebens (2023), among others.

that is, faith that God exists? Those who have previously considered this question fall into two camps; some say unequivocally no (Howard-Snyder 2019; Aijaz 2023); others say unequivocally yes (Whitaker 2019; Lebens 2023). In this paper, I argue that the answer to this question is nuanced: in a sense, atheists can have theistic faith, but in another sense, they cannot. More specifically, I'll argue that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith (faith in how they act) but cannot have attitude-focused theistic faith (faith in the attitudes they have).

This paper proceeds as follows. In the remainder of this section, I provide some background on the nature of belief and the relationship between belief and confidence (**Section 1.1**) and consider what it means to be an atheist (**Section 1.2**). In **Section 2**, I further consider and clarify our main question about the relationship between atheism and faith. In **Section 3**, I explain the distinction between action-focused faith and attitude-focused faith. In **Section 4**, I argue that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith, but not attitude-focused theistic faith, and address some questions and objections. I conclude in **Section 5**.

1.1. Background on Belief and Confidence

We'll begin with a broader question: what is belief? First, note that we believe statements, which are expressed by declarative sentences that are true or false; these are what philosophers call *propositions*. 1+1=2, all apples are red, and I love basketball are all propositions. When it comes to a particular proposition, there are three attitudes you can take toward it: you can believe it, or regard it as true; you can withhold belief on it, or be undecided on whether it's true or false, or you can disbelieve it, and regard it as false. For example: I believe that 1+1=2 and that my car is parked outside my house. I withhold belief that there's an odd number of hairs on my head and that a fair coin will land heads. I disbelieve that Notre Dame will go undefeated in football next year and that 1+1=3.

To shed light on the nature of belief, Richard Feldman (2014: 45–6) provides a helpful analogy with voting. Suppose your state is voting on whether money should be given to restore a state park. You have three options: you can vote yes, money should be given (similar to believing), you can vote no, money should not be given (similar to disbelieving), or you can refrain from voting at all (similar to withholding belief). Note also that you have to do one of these three, and you cannot do more than one. In the same way,

once we've considered a proposition, most epistemologists think you must either believe, withhold, or disbelieve it, and you cannot take more than one of these attitudes to it.

That said, when we take a belief-attitude toward a proposition, we do so with varying levels of confidence. Returning to our examples, I'm 100% confident that 1+1=2, but closer to 99% sure my car is parked where I left it last night. I'm 50% sure that a fair coin will land heads, and I'm 33.33% sure a 3-sided die will land a 3, but I withhold belief on both of those propositions. I have very little confidence that Notre Dame football will go undefeated next year, and I'm 0% confident that 1+1=3 (or, put differently, I'm 100% sure that 1+1=3 is false). This again fits with the voting analogy. You might vote "yes" but do so enthusiastically (similar to believing with high confidence) or reluctantly (similar to believing with moderate confidence) (see Feldman 2014: 46).

In sum, there are three belief-attitudes we take toward a proposition (belief, withholding, and disbelief). When we consider a proposition, we take one and only one belief-attitude toward it. We hold these belief-attitudes with varying levels of confidence. With this background in mind, we can now turn to the question: what is an atheist?

1.2. What is an Atheist?

Recall we believe propositions. In this section, we're concerned with a specific proposition: that *at least one God exists*. Applying our three belief-attitudes to that proposition: if you believe that at least one God exists, you're a *theist*. If you withhold belief that at least one God exists, you're an *agnostic*. If you disbelieve that at least one God exists, you're an *atheist* (see Oppy 2021). So:

> **Atheists** disbelieve that at least one God exists.

Put another way, atheists believe that no gods exist. That said, this does not mean that all atheists believe this with certainty. Some atheists may be certain of God's non-existence, but this isn't a necessary part of being an atheist. By analogy, recall that I disbelieve that Notre Dame football will go undefeated next season, but I don't think the probability of this is 0%. Belief doesn't require certainty of truth, and disbelief doesn't require certainty of falsehood. Since atheists disbelieve at least one God exists, they will probably have little confidence that at least one God exists—they might

think it's 20% likely; others may put it closer to 10% or even closer to 1% likely. Still, many atheists won't be at 0%. Similarly, many theists may not be 100% sure that at least one God exists. In fact, highly-contested, widely disagreed upon, difficult questions like the existence of God aren't good candidates for assigning extreme probabilities like 100% or 0%.[4]

I'll close this section with a final note. One might wonder: what is the definition or concept of God (or gods) relevant for atheism (and theism/agnosticism)? God is difficult to define. In philosophy of religion, especially Abrahamic monotheistic strands, some define God as the "omni" God: God is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), omnipresent (exists everywhere), and omnibenevolent (all-good). However, this is a specific and controversial definition, and some even argue that this isn't the God described by the Bible/Torah/Qur'an.[5] I also don't think you have to be monotheistic or within an Abrahamic religious tradition to accept the view of atheism and faith I'm going to argue for here. I suggest the following as a rough conception of God(s).

God(s) is (are) a powerful, good creator(s).

This is a rough definition, but the basic idea is that God is powerful and good (although perhaps not *all* powerful or *all* good), and a creator (playing a key role in forming the universe). I know even this definition will be controversial, and some aspects of it might be dispensable, but I have doubts about whether what I'll say below will apply to, for example, an evil creator.

All of this to say, I am most familiar with, and tend to work within, the Abrahamic tradition involving the three major monotheisms (Christianity, Islam, Judaism). So while I want my argument to apply to as many religious traditions as possible, many of my examples will be from those traditions. Nonetheless, I hope that what I say can be applied more widely.

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[4] This can be true even if (a)theism is necessarily true. Compare: we shouldn't be 0% or 100% sure of Golbach's conjecture (an unproven mathematical theorem), even though it's either necessarily true or necessarily false. For discussion, see Hájek & Jackson (forthcoming: sec. 4.1).

[5] On the difference (if any) between the omni-God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, see Heschel (1976: ch. 7), Morris (1984), Stump (2016), O'Conner (2008: ch. 6).

2. Clarifying the Question

At this point, we have talked about belief, the three belief-attitudes, and belief and confidence. We've also talked about what atheism is, how atheists aren't necessarily certain there's no God, and a bit about the definition of God. Now we turn to our main question. First, it's worth getting clear on what question we are trying to answer exactly.

A straightforward reading of the title of this paper suggests our main question is:

Question (try 1): Can atheists have faith?

But, as we noted, of course atheists can have faith; there are lots of instances of non-religious faith. Faith is something that underlies our commitments in general, and it is not merely a religious thing (see Jackson 2023-a: 1.a.iii). Most of us, religious or not, have faith in (i.e. a trusting commitment to) our family and friends, so you might have faith in your marriage, or faith that your friend will win their basketball game. You also probably have faith in certain ideals, for example, faith in recycling or faith in democracy. You might also have faith in yourself, for example, faith that you'll finish a degree or come out healthy after surgery. Then, this isn't our question, because it is too easy—atheists can have non-religious faith. We might think, then, that this is the question:

Question (try 2): Can atheists have *religious* faith?

While this question might seem more plausible as our central question, here again, the answer is a clear yes. This is because there are many non-theistic religions, including (at least certain strands of) Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Jainism. God's existence is not a core teaching or doctrine of these religious traditions—they don't center around belief in or worship of a God or gods (they may nonetheless encourage believing other propositions, e.g. some strands of Buddhism emphasize believing the Four Noble Truths; see Siderits 2021). Then, it seems like an atheist could straightforwardly have religious faith in these non-theistic traditions, or in non-theistic religious propositions.[6] Here's another try at our main question:

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[6] This raises another hard question: how do you define *religion*? For a summary of some of the difficulties, see Schilbrack (2022). While I won't take a stand on how to define religion here, it should be uncontroversial enough that certain

Question (try 3): Can atheists have *theistic* faith?

Here, I understand theistic faith to be faith that theism is true, faith in a theistic religion, or faith in God (or gods). Put differently: theistic faith is faith that at least one God exists. Recall, though, that atheists disbelieve that at least one God exists. Then, the answer to this third question isn't an easy yes: it's hard to see how you could have faith that a proposition is true while actively disbelieving it. In fact, some might say this question is too easy in the opposite direction: the answer is obviously no!

However, I don't think the answer to this third question is obviously no. In fact, several philosophers have proposed various positive connections between atheism and theistic epistemic attitudes (e.g. knowledge, belief, faith). Some have suggested that atheists might believe in God *de re*, but not *de dicto*: for example, an atheist might believe in and dedicate their life to the good. But, in fact, God is the good. So there's a sense in which such an atheist believes in and has committed to God, but under a different guise. Sylwia Wilczewska (2022) defends the idea of partial faith, which isn't "full-blown" faith but also doesn't amount to a total lack of faith, and argues that those who encounter doubts and feel skeptical (perhaps even atheists) may have partial faith, even if not full-blown faith. Matthew Benton (2024) argues that one could have personal knowledge of God (know God qua a personal being) even if they do not know or believe that God exists. I will similarly argue that there's a sense in which atheists can have theistic faith, but for a different reason than these authors propose.

Before proceeding, I want to note two things. First, theistic faith can be understood as faith *in* God or faith *that* God exists (and throughout this paper, I use both faith-that and faith-in in various examples). I won't make much of this distinction; many instances of faith-in can be translated to faith-that, and vice versa. But one might perhaps think it's harder for atheists to have faith *that* God exists (given this is the proposition they disbelieve) than faith *in* God. Thus, while I don't think much hangs on this distinction, for those that do, I hope to show that an atheist could have *both* faith in God and faith that God exists.

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non-theistic traditions (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism) count as religions.

Second, our question—whether atheists can have theistic faith—is primarily a descriptive one: whether atheists can have faith, rational or irrational. However, it would be a bit disappointing if atheists could only have *irrational* theistic faith. Thus, I'll aim to not only show that atheists can, in some sense, have theistic faith, but also sketch a view on which this "atheistic theistic faith" is potentially rational.

To better understand our question, and further explain why the answer isn't obviously no, a bit more background on the relationship between faith and belief will be helpful. As we noted in the introduction, several authors have argued that agnostics can have theistic faith (see footnote 3 for a list). Howard-Snyder (2013) provides several arguments that agnostics can have theistic faith. First, if one can have faith without belief, this makes sense of the idea that faith is compatible with doubt. Doubting might cause you to give up a belief, but Howard-Snyder argues that you can maintain your faith even in the face of serious doubts. Second, other belief-like attitudes can play belief's role: for example, you could think God's existence is likely, be confident that God exists, take God's existence to be more likely than not, etc. If you do not flat-out believe that God exists, but are confident enough that God exists, Howard-Snyder argues that you can still have faith that God exists. A final argument that you can have faith without belief involves real-life examples of faith without belief. Consider the case of Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa went through a "dark night of the soul" in her later life. During this dark time, in her journals, she confessed that her doubts were very serious, and at times, she appears to be agnostic regarding God's existence. Nonetheless, she maintained her commitment and dedication to God. Many wouldn't merely say she had faith; Mother Theresa was a paradigm example of a person of faith. This again supports the idea that you can have theistic faith even if you're agnostic about theism. In general, Howard-Snyder and others argue that we don't want to exclude agnostics who experience severe, belief-prohibiting doubts from having religious faith. On the contrary, one of the functions of faith is to help you keep your commitments in the face of such doubts. Imran Aijaz (2023) provides related arguments that theistic faith is compatible with agnosticism in an Islamic context. Part of what Aijaz argues is that on the correct understanding of *iman* (the term for faith in the Qur'an) belief isn't necessary for *iman*; one can be rightfully called a Muslim even if one is agnostic regarding central, religiously significant propositions in the Islamic tradition.

Both of these authors, however, reject that atheists could have faith that God exists; in other words, theistic faith precludes disbelief that God exists. Howard-Snyder (2019: 4) says that faith requires a "positive belief-like (cognitive) attitude" which precludes disbelief. He maintains that you cannot have faith that p if you take a stand against p's truth or have a tendency to deny that p is true. Aijaz (2023: 496) notes specifically that while a faithful Muslim can doubt significant religious propositions, even to the point of agnosticism, they cannot disbelieve them; he later suggests that atheism would take someone "out of the fold of Islam" (499). While ultimately, I don't want to categorically exclude atheists, I see the plausibility of this position; it's odd to think that someone who disbelieves that God exists (i.e. represents the world such that there's no God) could, at the same time, have faith *that* God exists.

Other authors have, however, taken the opposite stance: unequivocally, atheists can have theistic faith. Of course, perhaps this isn't incredibly common, but it's at least possible for atheists to have faith that God exists, full-stop. Lebens (2023) argues that, in the Jewish tradition, having faith that p is similar to saying "Amen to p!" There are three uses of the word "amen": taking an oath, accepting p, or expressing a hope that p (2023: 467). Lebens (2021) argues that there's a contextualist threshold for faith, and in some contexts, the confidence required for faith can be very low (although it is greater than zero), and low enough not to automatically exclude atheists. Furthermore, insofar as some atheists can rightfully say "amen" to God's existence by, say, accepting that (acting as if) God exists or hoping that God exists, atheists can have faith.

Whitaker argues that generally, you can have faith if you act as if something is true, even if you actively disbelieve it. His paper has an extended example about someone named Sarah (pp. 158–160) who is a Christian. Earlier in her life, she believes the core claims of Christianity. But throughout grad school, she loses that belief, and she finds that she disbelieves the claims of Christianity:

> She no longer found the notions of a Trinity or an Incarnation coherent; she saw no reason to attribute anything in nature to God's involvement; and she found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the picture of God that she had once had with the amount of human and animal suffering she saw around her…. [nonetheless], she had no desire whatsoever to leave the Christian community. In

> fact, the thought of leaving startled her, and she found herself instead desiring to recommit to her involvement in her church. She volunteered for childcare on odd Sundays, became involved in a program to help the homeless, and continued giving to her church financially. She even resumed reading the New Testament, and always found it deeply meaningful and encouraging. To this day, she is often moved to tears by the tales of forgiveness or grace. She is known to express her love for the character Jesus to her closer friends, and while she no longer believes in his imminent return to earth, she thinks it would be just wonderful if that were true. Perhaps most significantly, Sarah continues to believe that the moral outlook she has learned from the New Testament and her church tradition is extremely valuable. It seems to her that if more people could embody the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount—which she still struggles to understand—that the world would be vastly improved. (158)

Despite her disbelief, Sarah's life is "inextricably bound to the Christian tradition." (158). Whitaker thinks that someone like Sarah, who disbelieves that God exists, nonetheless has faith that God exists. Again, there's something plausible about this; despite Sarah's disbelief, she also has a firm, unwavering commitment, so there's a sense in which Sarah has faith that God exists. But how is this possible, given her disbelief and lack of a positive cognitive attitude toward God's existence?

There's a way to capture what's intuitive behind both of these opposing positions. We can capture plausible features of both views by making a distinction between two kinds of faith. My thesis, which I'll explain and defend in the next two sections, is that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith, but cannot have attitude-focused theistic faith.

3. Two Kinds of Faith

Faith is a trusting commitment to someone or something (see Jackson 2023-a). Faith is closely connected to trust: if you trust someone, you'll have faith in them and faith that what they say is true,

and likewise, if you have faith in someone, you'll trust them and their testimony. Faith is closely tied to commitment; one of the functions of faith is that it helps us keep our commitments over time. For example, faith in your spouse helps you keep your marital commitment; faith in God helps you keep a religious commitment; faith in yourself helps you keep personal commitments like finishing a degree or learning a new language (see Jackson 2019, 2021; Buchak 2017-b).

While all faith shares these general features, there are also different kinds of faith. One of the most important distinctions is between attitude-focused faith and action-focused faith.

> **Attitude-focused faith** (attitudinal faith): faith as an attitude or mental state.

Attitude-focused faith is in the same category as other mental states like beliefs, desires, emotions, and intentions.; it's faith as a thing in your head. Most authors writing about attitude-focused faith contend that it has at least two necessary components (see Howard-Snyder 2013; Page 2017; Jackson 2022-b). First, it involves a positive belief-like (or cognitive) attitude. In other words, it involves some kind of truth-aimed attitude that represents the world and is generally responsive to evidence. This could be a belief, but as we saw earlier, on many views, it doesn't have to be a belief; it could be high confidence, thinking something is probable or more likely than not, and the like. Second, attitude-focused faith involves a positive desire-like (or conative) attitude. This is because the faithful view the object of faith in a positive light. I don't have faith that my friend has cancer or faith that there was a global pandemic, even if I believe those things are true, since I don't view them positively.

But sometimes faith is an action, rather than a thing in our heads. This brings us to the second type of faith.

> **Action-focused faith** (praxical faith): faith as an action or as a decision.

Sometimes action-focused faith is called a leap of faith. It's faith as something that you do, rather than something in your head. Action-focused faith often involves acceptance, that is, acting as if the propositions of faith are true.[7] If I have action-focused faith that

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[7] For more on acceptance, see Cohen (1992). Note that the notion of acceptance I'm interested in isn't radically contextualist (such as van Frassen's (1980) notion)

you'll pick me up at the airport, I wait for you patiently and don't call a cab instead. Or recall Sarah, who structures her life around the Christian story; she accepts the Christian story, acting as if it is true, even if she doesn't have the belief-like attitudes needed for attitude-focused faith.

To make this distinction clearer, let's consider two non-religious examples. First is an example of attitude-focused faith without action-focused faith. Suppose you have attitude-focused faith that your spouse isn't cheating on you: you believe your spouse isn't cheating and you desire for your marriage to succeed and for your spouse not to cheat. However, let's suppose you're paranoid and jealous, and despite your beliefs and desires, you still find yourself reading your spouse's texts and emails behind their back, constantly worrying about their whereabouts, asking their coworkers to confirm that they are where they claim to be, etc. While you have the beliefs and desires required for attitude-focused faith, you aren't acting on those beliefs and desires. So you have attitude-focused faith without action-focused faith. You are probably irrational, since you are acting out of fear and paranoia rather than your justified beliefs and desires, but the point of the example is that sometimes we have attitude-focused faith but something (e.g. fear, paranoia, delusion) prevents us from acting on that faith, so we don't have action-focused faith.

Second, consider an example of action-focused faith without attitude-focused faith, borrowed from Speak (2007: 232). Suppose Thomas was raised in circumstances that instilled a deep distrust of the police. Thomas finds himself in an unsafe situation and a police officer is attempting to save him; Thomas needs to jump from a dangerous spot so the officer can catch him. While the officer has provided Thomas with evidence that he is reliable, Thomas can't shake the belief instilled from his upbringing that the police are untrustworthy. Nonetheless, Thomas jumps. Thomas disbelieves that the office is trustworthy, so he doesn't have attitude-focused faith in the officer. However, his decision to jump shows that he has action-focused faith in the offer. So Thomas has action-focused faith but not attitude-focused faith.

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but is a relatively stable, general commitment to act. On acceptance and faith, see Alston (1996) and Jackson (2021). Thanks to Ben Lennertz for helpful discussion.

4. Atheism and Theistic Faith

In this section, I defend my thesis that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith, but not attitude-focused theistic faith. At this point, the reader should have a basic grasp of the following: the nature of belief and confidence, what an atheist is, and the distinction between attitude-focused and action-focused faith.

Notice that my thesis has two parts: first, that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith (section 4.1), and second, that atheists cannot have attitude-focused theistic faith (section 4.2). I defend each in turn. Then, I address outstanding questions and objections (section 4.3).

4.1. Atheists can have action-focused faith

Recall that, while atheists disbelieve that at least one God exists, they won't necessarily assign this a probability of 0. An atheist can acknowledge that, while they think that God's nonexistence is best supported by the evidence, there's a real possibility that they're wrong, and God does exist. This acknowledgment of the possibility of error is crucial for atheistic faith.

I'll sketch three different examples of atheists who can, at least potentially, have action-focused theistic faith. The first is the *hopeful atheist*. The hopeful atheist says: "I don't have enough evidence to believe theism; in fact, I think the evidence supports that theism is false. However, I know there's a chance I'm wrong; theism is possibly true. And I hope there's a powerful, good Creator. On this basis, I'm going to commit to acting as if theism is true." Hope is widely taken to have two main components: a desire or positive attitude toward the object of hope, and an acknowledgment that there's some possibility that the hoped-for thing is true or obtains (see Milona 2019). It's both psychologically possible and potentially rational for an atheist to have these attitudes toward God's existence: they can both acknowledge that it's possible that God exists and desire for God to exist. This can, in turn, rationalize the atheist to accept or act as if God exists (see Jackson 2021). So the hopeful atheist can have theistic faith.

Second, consider the *wagering atheist,* who reasons: "While I'm a firm atheist, I also acknowledge there's some chance I'm wrong. And how good would it be to commit to God, if theism turned out to be true. Knowing a being like God would be incredibly valuable! On this basis, I'm going to commit to acting as if theism is true."

This reasoning alludes to an argument known as Pascal's wager (see Hájek and Jackson forthcoming); this atheist realizes that, because of how valuable it would be to have a connection with a powerful, good Creator if such a being exists, it's worth taking a risk to commit to God. They are focused on how good it would be if they committed to God and God did exist, contra their atheism (see Jackson 2023-b).

Finally, consider the *trying-it-on* atheist. Their thought is: "I believe that theism is false. However, I see many benefits of religion, in both studies I read and in my religious friends. Religious people are happier, help others, enjoy deep community, give more to charity, and live with peace and assurance that God is taking care of them. And of course I could be wrong about religion; in fact, there might be evidence for God available that I can't see from the outside. On this basis, I'm going to commit to acting as if theism is true, and see what happens." This atheist alludes both to studies about the benefits of living a religious life (see McBrayer 2014 for a summary) and also to an idea that goes back to William James (1896/1979) that it's hard to evaluate a religion from the "outside." Even epistemically, those outside religion might lack access to certain evidence that is inaccessible until they take a "leap of faith" and make a religious commitment. Faith *reveals* evidence one wouldn't have had otherwise.

In all three of these cases, the atheist makes a trusting commitment to accept, or act as if, theism is true, despite disbelieving that theism is true. Practically speaking (and depending on the religious tradition) here are some examples of what accepting theism might look like: prayer, even if conditional ("God, if you exist…"; see Klienschmidt 2017; Griffioen 2022), attending religious services and/or engaging in religious rituals (Benetar 2006; Cuneo 2014), participating in a religious community (Eshleman 2005), doing acts commanded by the religion (e.g. fasting, giving to the poor, etc.), reading religious texts, structuring one's life around the religion (Eshleman 2005), and seeing the good and the beautiful in the religion. Recall Whitaker's example of Sarah, the atheist who is committed to Christianity. All of this is not only possible for an atheist but could be rational, especially for the uncertain atheist. And, with the caveats below, engaging in these religious actions and accepting these religious claims, even if accompanied by disbelief, is sufficient for action-focused theistic faith (for a related view, see Wilczewska 2022; for a dissenting view, see Ekstrom 2015).

Two notes about this claim. First, in certain religious traditions, there might be religious rituals or acts that would not be appropriate for an atheist, given their disbelief. For example, on the Christian tradition, taking the Eucharist and being baptized are two potential examples; while Christians may disagree on this, some may maintain that an atheist ought not do these things, at least while they remain firm in their disbelief.[8] Nonetheless, the vast majority of religious actions (prayer, attending services, participating in religious community) would be open to the atheist. There may be similar examples from other traditions; however, an atheist can nonetheless engage in quite a few religious acts, including many meaningful religious practices.

Finally, I want to be clear that I'm not claiming that *mere* acceptance of theism or of a religion's central claims is always sufficient for action-focused faith. You could act as if a religion is true for lots of reasons; some won't be sufficient for action-focused faith. For example, suppose you are manipulated and threatened by a cult, and so you accept the cult's claims but only out of fear due to the threats. You wouldn't have action-focused faith, despite outward acceptance of the relevant religious claims.[9]

This teaches us something about action-focused faith: it can't be reduced to *mere* action; motives and intentions matter, at least to a degree. In particular, it is crucial that the atheist (i) acknowledges the possibility that theism (or the religion in question) is true and (ii) views theism (or the religion) positively or wants it to be true. While, then, it's not merely about action, it's still appropriate to call this action-focused faith, since the "action" is in the actions; the actions just need to be motivated in particular ways. Generally, this objection is helpful as it clarifies what, in addition to acceptance, is needed for action-focused faith. My thesis stands; atheists can have action-focused faith, as the other conditions required (i.e. (i) and (ii)) are both possible and potentially rational for atheists.

This completes my defense of the claim that atheists can have action-focused faith. Now, we turn to atheism and attitude-focused faith.

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[8] Thanks to Georges Dicker and Robert Audi for helpful discussion.

[9] Thanks to Lieke Asma, Kevin Gausselin, Joe Long, and Maura Tumulty for raising this worry and for helpful discussion.

4.2. Atheists cannot have attitude-focused faith

Why can't an atheist have attitude-focused faith? First, note that my defense of this won't require the claim that attitude-focused faith that p entails belief that p; I won't take a stand on that here, but if attitude-focused faith entails belief (as the authors in footnote 2 argue), then the claim that atheists are precluded from attitude-focused faith is straightforward.

But even on views that deny that belief is necessary for faith, attitude-focused faith still involves a positive cognitive attitude (Howard-Snyder 2013 is quite explicit about this, but see also Alston 1996, Audi 1991, Aijaz 2023, among others). This positive cognitive attitude cannot be mere acknowledgment that it's possible that theism is true or that theism has a non-zero probability, but requires something stronger: for example, thinking theism is more likely true than not or a moderate to high confidence that theism is true. Atheists, in contrast, take theism to be false, so they very likely won't at the same time take theism to be probable or likely (especially if rational). While, as noted in the previous section, they could *hope* that God exists, their cognitive attitudes are too weak to have attitude-focused faith.

One might wonder here: what if an atheist has contradictory beliefs? Then, it seems like an atheist could have the positive cognitive attitudes required for theistic attitude-focused faith. In response, sure, but two points. First, an atheist with contradictory beliefs would also be a theist, since they'd believe both that God exists and that God doesn't exist. So even if this were psychologically possible because they are e.g. fragmented or similar, this amounts to an uninteresting claim: atheists who are also theists can have attitude-focused faith that God exists. Second, this atheist would be irrational, and recall that I'm not merely interested in psychological possibilities but also whether the rational atheist can have theistic faith. Then, perhaps a fragmented atheist who is also a theist can irrationally have attitude-focused faith, but that's not particularly significant for my purposes.

Before addressing questions and objections, note two final motivations for my view. First, if atheists can have action-focused faith, but not attitude-focused faith, this carves an attractive middle ground between the two more extreme views. For the view that atheists *cannot* have theistic faith, it's plausible that you cannot have faith that p while actively disbelieving it. At the same time, for the view that atheists *can* have theistic faith, it's plausible that if you

want p to be true, structure your life around the truth of p, and make serious sacrifices on the truth of p, you have faith that p. While *prima facie* these intuitions seem to conflict, my view makes sense of both of them: you have faith in one sense but not another. Furthermore, while I've focused on theistic faith, this view applies to the relationship between faith and disbelief more generally: if you disbelieve p, you cannot have attitude-focused faith that p, but you can have action-focused faith that p.

Second, my view has attractive implications for how to maintain a faith commitment over time, despite changes in your evidence and beliefs. Consider a theistic commitment in which you initially both believe and accept theism; suppose you have both attitude- and action-focused theistic faith. However, like Whitaker's example of Sarah, you get *lots* of counterevidence, so you end up in disbelief. You can nonetheless continue in their commitment to theism, even in light of your disbelief, if you want theism to be true, think it's possibly true, and continue to accept theism. At the same time, we don't have to say that nothing of value is lost (with respect to faith) when Sarah comes to be an atheist; Sarah loses her attitude-focused faith. But in another very real sense, Sarah continues to have a faith commitment to theism.

The inverse is another possible trajectory; consider the atheist who starts off in disbelief but commits to accepting theism. Over a slow process of intentional actions, they may come to not just accept, but also believe theism. Then, they go from mere action-focused theistic faith to having both action- and attitude-focused theistic faith.

4.3. Outstanding Questions and Objections

4.3.1. What about the Christian teaching that we are saved by faith, not by works?

I've argued that the atheist can have faith in how they act, even if they lack faith in their attitudes. One might wonder how this fits with the idea, from the Christian tradition, that we are saved by faith and not by works. If faith and works are opposed to each other, is the notion of action-focused faith even coherent?[10]

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[10] Thanks to Lyu Zhou for raising this objection.

In response, this question introduces a third category of faith: saving faith. Here, I haven't meant to take a stand on which kind of faith (if either) is saving faith. Ultimately, I also don't want to take a stand on whether atheists can have saving faith; proper treatment of this question would require theological and exegetical work that is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, on this topic, the following comparison is illuminating:

> **Christian belief without action**: someone who believes the relevant Christian claims (e.g. God exists, Jesus is God, God is a Trinity, the Bible is inspired, Jesus rose from the dead, etc.) but does not act on them, doesn't follow Christian moral teachings, and doesn't live their life with a concern for God's desires or God's will.
>
> **Christian action without belief**: someone who does not believe the relevant Christian claims, but because they see the value of a Christian commitment, they act on them, do their best to follow Christian moral teaching, and live their lives with a concern for God's desires and will.

Is the person who has the right beliefs but doesn't act on them more likely to be saved than the inverse? I don't see this in Christian Scripture/tradition. Consider the father from Mark 9, who, although admitting unbelief, took a risk in fighting through crowds to bring his son to Jesus. Jesus honored his faith, told him anything was possible for him, and healed his son, despite his unbelief. Or the parable of the two sons from Matthew 21, in which the first son claims he won't work in the vineyard but does, and the second son says he will work in the vineyard but doesn't. Jesus says the first son did what the father asked, not the second. Finally, consider the claim from the epistle of James that faith without works is dead. I don't see a strong biblical case that the person with only attitude-focused theistic faith is more likely to have saving faith than the person with only action-focused theistic faith.[11] If anything, the Bible seems to suggest the latter is more likely to be saved. Whatever

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[11] Thanks to Heather Rabenberg for helpful discussion. Even consider Abraham, who was doubleminded and, while he acted on faith, does not seem to develop full-on attitude faith until later in life. Nonetheless, he is praised for his action-

we say about saving faith, at least from the Christian tradition, saving faith isn't solely a matter of having certain propositional attitudes (see Bates 2017). This brings us to a second, related question.

4.3.2. Is one type of faith more important or fundamental?

One might wonder whether either action or attitude-focused faith is more important or more fundamental. From one perspective, action-focused faith seems weighty and important: consider the saying "actions speak louder than words." If you make a claim but aren't willing to act on it, we tend to see you as inauthentic and might question whether you believe the claim in the first place. This applies in the religious case as well: the religious person who acts without believing seems to have a more genuine commitment than the religious person who believes without acting. This suggests there's a sense in which action-focused faith is more significant.

However, it's also worth noting that, at least as a psychological matter, each kind of faith often leads to the other. If you genuinely believe particular claims (religious or otherwise), you will likely experience a degree of cognitive dissonance if you aren't acting on them; if you continue to have the relevant beliefs, you will likely at some point begin to act on them (otherwise, you'll probably give up the beliefs). Likewise, action-focused faith can lead to attitude-faith. Sometimes if you want to believe something, you need to "fake it 'till you make it." The hopeful atheist, the wagering atheist, and the trying-it-on atheist may, if they continue in their action-focused faith, eventually find themselves believing (or at least with higher confidence in) the accepted propositions. Thus, faith in one sense often leads to faith in the other sense.

4.3.3. Can all atheists have action-focused faith?

No, not all atheists can have action-focused faith. Specifically, atheists who are 100% sure that God doesn't exist cannot have theistic faith in any sense. They think God's existence is impossible, so wouldn't hope for theism to be true, wouldn't want to try it on, and it wouldn't make sense for them to wager on it. Second, atheists who don't view theism positively on any level—that is, they don't

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focused faith and considered the father of faith (see Hebrews 11:8-19 and Zoll 2024).

desire it to be true, don't have any kind of pro-attitudes toward it, or see it as good, or have a second-order desire for theism—also probably cannot have action-focused theistic faith (see Jackson MS). If one sees nothing good or beautiful in theism or in a religion, it's unclear what would motivate them to commit to it, even if they admit it's possibly true.

5. Conclusion

I've argued that atheists can have action-focused theistic faith, but not attitude-focused theistic faith. There are apt, plausible examples of atheists with action-focused faith; however, atheists don't have the positive belief-like attitudes required for attitude-focused faith. This moderate view of atheism and theistic faith also captures the main positive features of the more extreme views. Thus, the relationship between atheism and theistic faith is nuanced. Generally, I hope I've shed light on the nature of atheism, different kinds of faith, and, most importantly, strands of religious commitment that, while overlooked, deserve a place at the table.[12]

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