

# Introduction

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## Dimensions of Faith

### What Qualifies One to Build a Cairn?

STUMBLING TO THE TOP of yet another Rocky Mountain peak, I discover that the cairn-builders have been hard at work. Ironically, the way is anything but clear. Although the function of a cairn<sup>1</sup> is to show the best path, at the moment there appear to be four or five suggested summit routes, each marked with its own metamorphic or igneous signage. At least the cairns announce that someone has been this or that way. But what kind of someone might that have been? These piles of stones indicate that lots of folks have had lots of ideas about the best way to reach the top of this particular mountain. As it is improbable that each way is equally good, I consider it more likely that the primary function of these cairns is to serve as tribute to the egos of their creators. If true, they are little more than the idols of those worshipping their own perceptions. Apparently, some of the cairn builders are not to be trusted, but which ones?

The one clear thing is that this proliferation of cairns has made my job harder. The paradox pleases me, however, for it means that I will actually have the chance to make some navigation decisions on my own. It hasn't always been so. On earlier trips, unsure of myself, lacking the explorer's instincts, or simply looking for the easiest way, I often found myself craving a cairn and not too picky about it. Sometimes, that was a mistake. Even a single cairn can be wrong.

Whatever their guise, cairns have their place, of course—most of us would not wish to guess which medicine bottle to open or which religion offers the best chance for immortality—but it is also apparent that a world with a cairn at every choice would be a bland place, indeed. More likely, it

1. A pile of rocks used to mark a route.

would be no better than a world with no cairns at all. One would still be forced to decide which cairns, if any, are valid. An endless flow of clear-cut answers seems even worse, leading quickly to erosion of the soul because the ideas and conceptions necessary for its stability have no chance to take root and grow. Searching, therefore, is more than an honorable profession—it is an essential component of development. Forced to evaluate the various alternatives for proceeding upward, perhaps even trying a few, we sharpen our way-finding skills and build endurance for further adventures.

Thus, although my current position on this mountain is testimony to the usefulness of cairns (in this case some reasonably accurate maps and prescriptions for proper training), it is also evident that too many—or the wrong kind—would actually be detrimental to further progress. Perhaps this is one reason why our requests for an endless supply of answers for life's difficult questions are not readily met. This need not imply that questions are more important than answers, but it does suggest that we take care in their framing. Even in cosmic *Jeopardy*, an answer only has value if someone is asking the right question. Furthermore, acknowledging that cairns can only take one so far is actually a step in the right direction because it precludes the accompanying insinuation that, by not providing the clear-cut answers we desire, God is somehow derelict in his job. There is no need to be towed by a master worth following. Indeed, it seems unlikely that such a master would ever tow the apathetic, much less the unwilling. Cairns are not some magic carpet—we still have to climb.

The implicit assumption is that, given the proper cairns, we would always climb in the right direction. This, however, is a fallacy. In the first place, humankind has a less than admirable track record of doing the right thing, even when the right thing is clearly evident. Nor does this just happen periodically on a global or national scale. Daily desires for immediate gratification frequently lead to poor choices, despite the evidence of a better way. It is not that the long term consequences are not clearly marked—they are merely ignored while we try a shortcut to happiness. Furthermore, guarantees of never making the wrong choice can only be offered to puppets. Under such assurances, the cairns themselves (or perhaps their builders) would be the puppet masters. Free will cannot exist in such a world.

So, clamoring for more cairns is often the mark of laziness, whereas claiming that one would always follow the right cairn is a sure sign of arrogance. Failure to evaluate and compare may be worse, for by another name it is known as blind faith. Far from being something one should proudly cherish, blind faith is little more than hope without substance, belief without evidence, and, ultimately, wishful thinking. For those with blind faith, any old cairn will do.

## Why Faith?

This book, you might deduce, is a cairn of sorts and I am thereby reminded of the admonition by mountaineer Gerry Roach to “trust your judgment, not some stranger’s pile of rocks.”<sup>2</sup> For most of those beginning this book, I am just that—a stranger—and whether I am one who can be trusted is a question worth asking. However, as with any cairn, one can only assess its ultimate viability and the trustworthiness of its creator after either reaching the goal to which it points or finding that it is poorly placed. If, in the process of reading this book, you discover new and productive ways to think about faith, take a hard look at the reasons for specific beliefs, and evaluate your own approach to truth, you will have reached the goals I intended to mark. Whether this book contributes positively to your journey neither of us can yet say but your decision to read it (or not) is an expression of your faith about what you believe are the likely consequences of doing so. It can be no other way because faith is woven into the very fabric of our being.

Unfortunately, many religious people believe that they have a corner on the use of faith and the non-religious are more than willing to agree. While the former see faith as some mystical but admirable quality in and of itself, the latter are often led to disparage it. Perspectives such as that of artificial intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky that, “faith and critical thinking are mutually exclusive”<sup>3</sup> are typical. I think it is clear that Minsky has religious faith specifically in mind but what would he say of faith in all of its other manifestations? Although his statement may apply to some types of faith some of the time, in no way can it be construed as an accurate comment on the nature and role of faith in general. In fact, as I’ll be careful to show, critical thinking itself is impossible without faith.<sup>4</sup>

This tendency to conflate faith with religion is understandable in part but it can cause one to dismiss the pervasiveness of faith outside that domain. It also predisposes us toward an unwarranted compartmentalization of cognitive function and can even lead to some rather silly proclamations such as that of well-known atheist Richard Dawkins that, “Atheists do not have faith.”<sup>5</sup> Faith, however, is central to everything we are and do and, as Dawkins should know, is integrated into our biological natures.

2. Roach, *Colorado’s Fourteeners*, 200.

3. Kuhn, *Closer to Truth*, 212.

4. Or, as Alister McGrath puts it, “Faith is part of the human condition. It is impossible to construct an argument proving the legitimacy of reason without presupposing faith” (*Surprised by Meaning*, 113).

5. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 51.

Some of our beliefs are clearly of little concern but others have life-changing consequences. Deciding which is which is itself a matter of faith and, as a result, it makes more sense to understand where faith comes into play and how it operates than it does to deny its existence or downplay its role. In light of this, an obvious goal is to have the most accurate set of beliefs possible, particularly in those domains deemed important. Faith, then, is central to an ongoing search for truth but even the results of such quests must always be cast in terms of faith.

Consequently, faith is what we think is true about the universe and everything in it, including what we think is or is not in it. Faith is deciding how we will live our lives—deciding if we will focus on this or that, whom we will or will not trust, where our energies should be spent, what is and is not in our best interests and the best interests of those we care about, who it is that we should care about, what is worthwhile and what is worthless. Faith colors life and makes it possible. Everyone has faith in everything but the degrees vary widely among people and even within a person from time to time. Where and to what extent our faith is placed determines who we are and what we do. Some lives are colored primarily true and some primarily false, but all are colored both partly true and partly false, for that is the artistry of faith.

## Vistas, Visions, and Voyages

Among the many advantages of climbing a mountain is the perspective it affords the climber—one that is unavailable to the person content to remain at its base. Several years ago when my three older children (at that time quite young!) and I hiked up Mounts Democrat, Lincoln, and Bross in the Mosquito Range of Colorado, we began our trek near a small body of water called Kite Lake. I gave little thought to why it might have that particular name until we had gained sufficient altitude for it to be readily apparent that the outline of the lake bore a distinct resemblance to the shape of a kite. In retrospect, I might have guessed as much but, if reduced to guessing, it would have been equally valid to imagine that the lake was named for someone named Kite, that it commemorated the experience of some pioneer who found the mountain gusts ideal for flying a kite, and so forth. In fact, in the absence of any disconfirming evidence, those would have remained possible explanations except, having seen the lake from above, they hardly seemed likely.

In general, dimensions that are all but unobservable from one perspective become visible with effort, possible explanations sort themselves out, and views of the truth become clearer. Regrettably, misapprehension

of faith can destine us to a low dimensional world where it is all too easy to end up functioning with less than valid beliefs to which we cling with unbecoming passion. Not the least of those may be our view of faith itself. To debunk such anemic perspectives of faith, it helps to see its true multi-dimensional character.

As a college student studying physics I was aware of the potential conflicts between my religious faith and what I saw revealed through science but I have never been satisfied with the idea that the domains must be so separate as frequently proclaimed. Yet if faith operates on both sides of the supposed divide, then understanding faith becomes a reasonable starting point for any attempt at resolution. Most people may not be focused on bridging that particular gap but erroneous and unhealthy attempts by both religious and non-religious people to pigeonhole their lives into faith and non-faith parts create their own set of gaps—traps might be more accurate—of which many are conveniently unaware. It is also the case that poor conceptions of faith are not restricted to those with impoverished academic backgrounds because very well-educated and otherwise intelligent individuals frequently demonstrate naïve views of faith regarding both themselves and others.

My aim in this book, then, is to explicate the nature and role of faith and to ponder the implications of its proper conception for how we live. Part I considers the nature of faith. In chapter 1 we will contemplate how everything we think, believe, or think we believe is founded on assumptions that are often so far removed from our present state that we have lost sight of their origins. Nevertheless, we have a strong sense that saving those assumptions is paramount to maintaining our current beliefs and in that we are correct. Whether they should be saved is an altogether different matter, but, because some mindsets are nothing more than set minds, they may be all but impossible to change. In chapter 2 we'll ponder briefly why we are disposed to believe certain things as a prelude to considering the fact that the content of our faith differs from each other in dramatic ways. Naturally, we should want to know why that is the case. Chapter 3 deals with a number of common misconceptions about faith. Before we say what faith is we will try to understand what it is not. This leads us, in chapter 4, to a definition of faith that makes it easy to see how faith permeates our existence and is operative in virtually everything we do. Chapter 5 concludes the first part by showing that there are definitive reasons why we operate on the basis of faith—it is the natural and inevitable product of brains.

Part II examines the relationship between faith and reason. Chapter 6 begins this process by probing limitations that necessitate faith and explaining why faith will, therefore, always be necessary. Chapter 7 shows why any perceived dichotomy between faith and reason is a false one and

considers how to move in the direction of rational faith. Given that we have no choice but to live with faith, getting things right is the name of the game. Consequently, chapter 8 develops a metaphor for thinking about how we approach the acquisition of valid beliefs and what it means to adopt one persona versus another.

Part III is devoted to an exploration of the nature of religious faith. Why do people think traditional religious faith is different from other kinds? Chapter 9 asks how people see religion and inquires into the nature of religious belief. This leads us to consider in chapter 10 what constitutes a religion and to ask if even science might not be a religion of sorts. Because a major sticking point for many individuals centers on God's perceived lack of clarity, chapter 11 asks, "How clear is God?" and reflects on whether he is doing his job well enough to warrant religious faith. In chapter 12 I consider various objections to my characterization of faith in religious contexts and indicate how traditional views of religious faith can be evaluated in light of other themes in the book. The final part (IV, chapter 13) attempts to imagine a world without faith and contemplates how truth seekers can sometimes end up in very different places.