A Surefire Recipe for Unassailable Faith: Involving Four Judgments and a Vegetable Analogy

Therese Doucet

As a housewife who spends a lot of time in the kitchen, I tend to favor homely metaphors related to food and cooking. So in trying to come up with a worthy simile to introduce the subject of faith, I am drawn to the cauliflower. I hear the cauliflower is fractal in form, that is, the complexity of its shape reproduces itself in miniature on closer view, and at successive levels of magnification new levels of complexity are revealed. Yet what is simpler, more pedestrian, than this humble member of the brassica family? On one level it would seem the main question pertaining to it is whether one should eat it or not. Some like it, some don't, and the question of its consumption is a matter of preference, of taste, although the vegetable does have its disciples who go around trying to convert others, citing its healthfulness, culinary versatility, economical qualities, and so on. (I admit I have engaged in such evangelism myself, but have had little success as yet in getting my toddler to see the light.)

Faith, then, is like the cauliflower in being a workaday concept, an unglamorous engagement that plenty of people take for granted as something they either participate in or don't, depending mainly on personal preferences. And like the cauliflower, faith too has its vitriolic detractors and its impassioned partisans. Yet, viewed up close, it strikes me as something highly complex, and the more microscopically I examine it, the more complex it appears. What is faith really? How does it come to mean such different things to different people? How does one tell if one has it or not? Is it possible to get hold of it if one doesn't have it already? How does one keep it, or obtain it in the first place? Can we choose it, or does it choose us? Is there a sense in which it's necessary? Is it a good or a bad thing? Does its goodness or badness depend on something outside of it? Does it really conflict with reason (whatever *that* might be)? Is faith compatible with intellectual integrity?

It's that last question that has particularly concerned me, and with which it could even be said I was obsessed during an earlier time in my life. That, and the question of whether faith could be chosen. It was a time when faith was a matter of life and death, as far as I was concerned. I had depressive episodes, and when I was suffering I felt like I needed reasons to endure it. The religion in which I was raised, Mormonism, offered a personal God whose love would endow my existence with so much value that it would be worth enduring, however hard it seemed. It also offered other consolations familiar to both Christian and non-Christian believers, like a close-knit community and a moral structure that I could take as a guide for living. So I wanted to desperately to believe in it. On the other hand, if God wasn't real, I would have to conclude I had been enduring all that suffering for nothing.

What happens when a person wants to believe, and yet faces obstacles like uncertainty, ambiguous evidence, and the seeming absurdity of some aspects of a religious narrative that contradicts not only common sense but also archeological discoveries, historical data, and scientific findings? Does one have a choice to believe in spite of the contradicting evidence? And if so, must that belief come at the cost of being honest with oneself?

I remember wanting to beat my head against a wall when I was an exchange student in Germany and my friends and classmates, who were training to become Lutheran pastors, would tell me faith was a gift from God. Like salvation itself, it was all God's decision, and our own will could have nothing to do with it. If I found it difficult to believe, I had to conclude it was because God hadn't decided to give me that gift. But how could a loving, merciful God deny me this life-saving faith, and in such a capricious, arbitrary fashion, too? How could He be capable of such casual cruelty? And would I even want to believe in the sort of God who doled out the gifts of faith and salvation like lottery-ticket winnings?

Mormonism had presented faith to me in ways that were just as problematic, if not worse. (And I don't mean to single out Mormonism or Lutheranism for special censure here. I would have encountered similar difficulties in any number of denominations.) As seems to happen also in more conventional forms of evangelical Christianity, people tended to conflate faith with certainty. Faith meant having a

conviction that the religion in all its major aspects was true and trustworthy. This sense of conviction was called "having a testimony." Every so often there were church meetings in which members were invited to go up to the podium as the spirit moved them and "bear their testimony," which meant talking into a microphone, usually tearfully, about the strength and depth of their convictions. Over and over again you would hear people say things like, "I know the Church is true. I know God lives and that He loves me." And all these "I know"s were considered the proper form for the expression of faith.

And how did you get a testimony? The preferred method was to pray and read the scriptures and by that means to have a "spiritual experience." That is, you would get a certain warm, pious, joyful feeling, and this feeling would convey to you that it was all true and right.

But suppose I didn't get the requisite feeling? Did this mean it wasn't all true and right after all? Or was God merely testing me? Did God perhaps want more praying and scripture reading on my part before He would confer the confirming experience and feeling? It all ended up not so far from the Lutheran view of my German friends, where the actual having of faith was out of my hands.

And then again, even if I did get that joyful, tearful feeling—could this really convey true certainty, sufficient for saying "I know"? And if faith qua certainty, faith as an "I know," was dependent on and followed from this experience and feeling, wasn't this more or less like believing based on being given a sign? And didn't the Bible say we shouldn't depend on signs? Wasn't expecting to believe on the basis of signs the symptom, rather, of having little or no faith?

One thing gradually became clear to me: If faith was to be worth having—if God was loving and merciful enough to be worth believing in—I had to be able to actually have it. There had to be some sense in which I was able to choose it for myself. And for largely the same reason, a faith worth having could not be the same thing as certainty, since it seemed that at least for me nothing remotely resembling certainty was possible. If faith was certainty, than faith might be impossible, and it had to be possible if it was going to be worth thinking about at all.

So far so good. But if faith could be—had to be—something a person could choose, how then would you choose it? Did you simply decide, by a fiat of the will? Should you say to yourself, "I want to believe God exists and the Church and its scriptures and doctrines are true—so there, *voilà*, I believe it now"? Was faith where you forced yourself into believing something that, if you were really being objective about it, would otherwise seem doubtful? Was faith a matter of convincing yourself, as though you were inhabited by a tiny cheerleader waving the mental equivalent of pompoms and shouting, "It's true! It's true!"?

More troublingly, if I could force myself to believe in my religion, couldn't I likewise say, "I want to believe unicorns exist, so I believe in them," or "I want to believe Brad Pitt loves me, so I believe in his love"? And most disturbing of all, didn't this, in the end, mean lying to myself about my own doubts? If someone said to me, "You can gain eternal salvation and the blessings of God will rain down on you in this life; you can have unlimited powers of divine miracle-working and deep, profound happiness. All that is necessary is to lie to yourself on just this one small point, by telling yourself you believe something, when in truth you are not sure if you believe it or not." That, to me, would seem to defeat the whole point.

So then was the tyranny of a capriciously choosy, cliquish God only to be replaced with a tyranny of evidence and probabilistic judgments? Was I back to having no choice?

As Kierkegaard points out so movingly in his discourse "Love Believes All Things" in *Works of Love* (probably one of the most important works that ever has been or will be written on the subject of faith), there are many situations in day-to-day life where the same evidence we can cite as reason to mistrust our neighbor can also be the basis of giving her the benefit of the doubt. In cases like that, we have to choose whether to mistrust her or give her the benefit of the doubt, and our choice reveals much about us. As Kierkegaard writes, existence "presents you with truth and deception as two equal possibilities in contrast to each other, so that there must be a revelation of what is in you since *you* judge, that is, since in judging you *choose*."

But judgment is more complicated, perhaps, than even Kierkegaard makes plain. In considering the truth or falsity of something, there are often not one but several judgments involved.

First there is a judgment of possibility or impossibility, and this is generally an either/or. Something is either possible or not—possibility is an absolute, not a relative quality; there are no degrees of possibility.

When something is judged possible, there is then a second judgment, relating to probability—for something may be possible and yet not probable. If a person wants to be really systematic and precise about things, she can express probability as a number between 0 and 1, with 1 representing certainty that something is the case and 0 representing certainty that something is not the case.

Sometimes we can get away with stopping at a judgment of probability—when no action is required of us. I think it's probable meerkats exist even though I've never seen one in person, even though there's the possibility of a worldwide conspiracy to convince me they exist when they really don't. As long as I face no pressing meerkat-related decisions, like whether to take up a research grant to study them, I can leave the matter there. But if I'm a prospective meerkat researcher, I have to choose to act on the supposition that meerkats exist or don't exist.

When probability falls short of 1 but exceeds 0, however asymptotically it may approach one or the other, we face a gap between probability and certainty. But the necessity of making a decision requires that somehow we bridge that gap in one direction or the other; we must act as though it were 1 or 0, even in full consciousness of our ignorance as to which number would tell us the truth of the matter.

And so a third judgment is then required of us, namely, a judgment of risk. We must consider what we risk in choosing to base our action on an uncertain supposition that something is the case or not. And the greater the risk that follows from being wrong, the more the already existing gap between probability and certainty is magnified. Take the example of a husband considering whether his wife is faithful to him. Perhaps he finds signs of possible betrayal: her behavior changes, she disappears for hours and can't account for where she's been. A judgment that the probability of her cheating is high doesn't conclude the matter, because the risk of being wrong is terrible, the more so the more he loves her. Suppose his suspicions are as baseless as Othello's of Desdemona, but he hurts his wife and weakens her love for him by voicing his doubts and accusing her (or, like Othello, ends up strangling her)?

Sometimes the judgment of risk suffices to conclude the matter—where the risk that follows from supposing wrongly is judged small. But if the risk is judged great, this judgment of risk does nothing to get us across the gap between probability and certainty, which has to be spanned if we are to make a decision and take action. And then a fourth judgment is required of us, namely, a judgment of desire. The person who questions whether something is true must judge how much he desires it to be true. For a great risk is worth running only if great desire is present that offsets the risk. A hero risks her life to save a drowning child by jumping into a frozen lake, where the child has fallen beneath the ice, because her desire to save the child is greater than her desire to avoid the risk.

A wife faced with the question of whether her husband is faithful—to turn our earlier example around—might judge that the risk that would follow from wrongly trusting him was great. But her desire for her husband to be faithful might be so strong she is nevertheless willing to run the risk of being wrong. That is, she would rather risk being betrayed and made a fool of than hurting her husband and harming the relationship by making accusations that turn out to be baseless. And so she chooses to act based on the supposition her husband is faithful. She is fully conscious she may be making a terrible mistake; nevertheless, as an act of love, she chooses to put her faith in him and go on with life as normal.

In this way, passion plays a role in considerations of truth and falsity, a role that, as I hope the last example illustrates, may be wholly appropriate and compatible with even the strictest requirements of intellectual integrity. And in this way, if in no other, it seems to me an honestly chosen faith becomes possible, a faith that can stand up to any and all criticisms a Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens might level at it, and one that provides a great deal more clarity than the contrarian obfuscations of Terry Eagleton.

The key is that the judgment of desire must be preceded by the other three judgments and constantly refer back to and revise them. In order for passion (or feeling, or love, or will, or mercy) to become the basis of a supposition that is in turn the basis of decision and action, there must be the fullest awareness that uncertainty is always present and that one still could very well be wrong. And there must be an equally piercing awareness of the terrible consequences if one is mistaken. Otherwise, the supposition risks degenerating into mere wishful thinking, or dogmatism, or self-deception.

If faith is to coexist with integrity, the judgment of desire must never cease to interact with the judgments of

risk and probability and must be loyal to its relationship with them. This relationship is an inverse one: the more probable it is that something is true, and the less risk involved on a practical level if one is wrong, the less ardently we have to desire for it to be true in order for faith to stay within integrity. Conversely, the less probable something is and the greater the risk that would follow from being wrong, the more urgent our desire needs to be in order for faith to stay within integrity.

If someone finds God's existence doubtful and doesn't even much care for the idea of God, and yet takes on himself the risk of acting as though God existed, something has gone awry and the believer is outside of integrity. If someone passionately desires God but denies herself faith merely because God's existence is not totally certain, she is also outside of integrity. But as the judgment of probability (or improbability, in the case of the religious doubter) approaches certainty, it becomes ever more difficult and dangerous for desire to lay claim to faith. In the case of the wife who refuses to believe her husband is a cheater even when she catches him in *flagrante* (reasoning, perhaps, that she might after all have been dreaming, or might be a brain in a vat, or stuck in the Matrix, or having a psychotic episode—and therefore it wasn't certain), she, too, is outside of integrity.

Another way of saying it is that faith must be faithful to consciousness. It must be faithful to our consciousness of our "objective" judgments of probability and risk. At the same time, it must also be faithful to our awareness of our desires, impulses, emotions, and will—our "subjective" judgments. A faith that is not faithful, in this sense, is no faith at all. Faith's fidelity also depends on our performing due diligence, continually revising our judgments of probability and interrogating our desires to become ever more transparent to ourselves about what we want. That is, faith requires us to make a good faith effort to challenge and understand its own basis.

So we become free to choose faith, although in a somewhat limited sense and with conditions attached. (And the question remains: if it is a judgment of desire that ultimately chooses faith, to what extent can we choose our desire?) However, the danger in faith becoming something one can choose is that it also then becomes something one can not choose. It becomes optional, unnecessary. The same conditions and conceptions that make faith possible simultaneously make its opposite possible.

This is how I ended up an atheist, not long after I had at last come to feel secure in my faith as a Christian with a passionate commitment to intellectual integrity. The gap between certainty and probability in my judgment grew smaller, and my desire for God also flagged as I figured out that I cared a good deal more for human than for divine love.

Unlike some of my fellow avowed atheists, like Christopher Hitchens, I think of my atheism very much as a form of faith. Like my former commitment to Christianity, my stance of unbelief is based in uncertainty. It would be idiotic to claim I am sure God doesn't exist, given that I haven't searched every corner of the universe. Yet I don't think it's probable He (or She or It) exists, at least not in any sense that would interest me. By now it's also not something I care that much about, since I no longer have the sense that the value of my existence hangs on the attentions of a personal God. I acknowledge I may be wrong and that I risk hefty punishments in the afterlife if it turns out I've cocked it all up. But it's a risk I am willing to take, because I care more about living in the way that seems right and best to me (in more of a Socratic than hedonistic sense) than avoiding such punishments.

I respect people of good will who have earnestly struggled with faith and found it, even if their judgments differ from mine. I don't respect all faiths, however, because if faith relies on the judgment of desire, some desires are clearly ugly and despicable. As for whether and to what extent others' faith is faithful to their consciousness, this is something only they can know. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt. But from what I see, I can't help suspecting a lot of what goes by the name of faith is of the mendacious inner cheerleader variety, and that genuinely faithful faith is all too rare. Cauliflower, when properly prepared using a good recipe, can be absolutely delicious, although I'm sure there will always be those who prefer to take my word for it. Something similar could be said of faith. So I'm sharing my recipe for the latter, in hopes of someday seeing more that looks like the real thing.