

On Faith (or, The Things We Look For)

In a dusty basement classroom in the bottom drawer of a rusted desk, I discovered an old documentary about space. I don't recall if it ended with a grainy image of the Earth, a brilliant blue-green in the looming darkness of the room. All I remember are the millions of planets and stars, swallowed by an endless sea of black.

Some summers I spend with my cousin in the city. There, the lights are bright, even at night, and there is always a thick layer of smog that blankets the sky. "That we are important," he tells me, sprawled out across the rooftop and searching for stars, "is a lie we tell ourselves."¹

We were the center of the universe, once, before Copernicus suggested that the Earth went around the sun.²

"We are so small," the narrator cannot stop saying, "So very small, compared to the vastness of the universe."

There were a grand total of five churches and one synagogue in the town where I grew up. "Discover the meaning of life with us," they all exclaimed, bright banners draped across peeling paint and closed doors. They were difficult to miss, bold letters never failing to draw my attention, but my parents and I never had reason to go in. If my eyes ever lingered, nobody noticed.³

From my experiences, the questions that pertain to our existence are ones best pursued alone. Empty houses are the best listeners, and I've always found that the responses vary from person to person. There aren't always answers, of course, but that has never stopped us from looking for them.

Religion has been around since the very beginning of recorded history, yet its exact nature remains elusive. A belief, after all, isn't religious in itself. It becomes so when it functions in a certain way—sometimes, even a vital one—in the life of a person or a community.⁴

My parents prefer science. That is, the systematic accumulation and organization of proven knowledge. The rules are rigid, the language sound, and for facts—there is no doubt. Objectivity and truth, they reason, are much safer things to have faith in.⁵

"Faith," the German-American theologian Paul Tillich suggested in 1957, "determines our being or not-being...it is an unconditional and infinite concern."

In a footnote, his biographer Wilhelm Pauck takes care to tell us that the original text read:

Der Glaube ist das Ergriffensein von dem was einen unbedingt angeht.

It is telling that the German word *angeht* doesn't mean "concern" so much as a "coming upon," just as the verb *ergriffen* more accurately connotes being deeply moved by something. Perhaps it is more apt, then, to say that faith is what comes upon us, moves us and takes us such that it becomes infinite in its seriousness.

Faith, Tillich eventually concludes, is the state of being ultimately concerned.⁶

In "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," at some unspecified point in time, a computer attempts to calculate the Answer to "the Great Question, the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything."⁷

The concept of religion has existed for millennia, yet its origins cannot be pinpointed with any certainty. Some believe that it was the Mesopotamians who first brought organized religion into the world. Others suggest that it was developed independently by different cultures, an attempt to maintain social order, a way to make sense of the unexplainable. Perhaps it is simply a part of the human condition, a manifestation of our want to believe.⁸

Even now, some of us continue to believe that we are the center of the universe.¹¹

Science is a belief, too. It is belief that extends only as far as we can confirm and as wide as we can perceive. Everything else, for the time being, is uncertain.

There has always been an element of uncertainty that comes with the word "faith." It traces its roots back from the Latin verb "fidere," "to trust," and that is what it asks us to do. Phrases like "have faith" and "take a leap of faith" urge us to embrace the unknown, and unlike science, to trust that there is something to be found.⁹

My cousin never finds anything, when we search for stars. Most nights, there are only the lights that glow below us, and the smog that swirls above. The moon is dim, and he wonders if there is anything else.¹

The Answer to the Question, by the way, was forty-two.⁷

If “faith” asks us to trust in the face of uncertainty, “religion” refuses to ask—it is defined, simply, as a cultural system of behaviors and practices, a joining of ideologies and world views.¹⁰

The ultimate origins of the word itself are obscure. Some, like the Roman philosopher Cicero, choose to trace its meaning back to the Latin word *lego*—to “read, choose, consider carefully.” Modern scholars, however, tend to favor the root *ligare*—“to bind, to connect.”¹⁰

At the very deepest level, all our questions are the same.

“We are so small,” the narrator cannot stop saying. The stars flicker in and out. “We are so small—we are so small—we are so—” and I blink and they disappear, and I am left alone in the dark.

The Answer to the Question was forty-two, yes. But then again, what was the Question?⁷

Religion may have been around since the very beginning of recorded history, but the practice of burying the dead arose long before that. The earliest evidence of ceremonial rites can be traced back over 300 millennia, to a handful of graves scattered throughout Eurasia. Most were simple funeral caches, plots of unadorned earth that left no indication of what lay underneath. A few, however, were marked with limestone blocks, carefully placed and weathered to the touch.¹²

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¹²Wikipedia contributors, "Timeline of religion," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Timeline_of_religion&oldid=712804499 (accessed April 5, 2016).

Notes

I wrote this lyric essay about the existential questions that I've struggled with growing up, and, I suppose, how being non-religious has affected my experiences with these issues. The subject matter is pretentious, I know, but it's something that I've always had to grapple with; I spent (and spend) a lot of my life trying to find meaning in the things that I do. I suppose I also wanted to share my experiences (or, at least, try to articulate them), and see what other people thought.

I originally wanted to call this, "On Faith," which is admittedly not the most catchy title (and, once again, sounds more than a little pretentious), but I hoped that the meaning of the phrase "on faith," meaning "without evidence or investigation; on trust," would come across, instead of just the "about faith" part of the meaning (OED).

***A special shout-out to Indy Sobol, Katherine Hall, and Emily Humphreys, who read my essay and gave spectacularly helpful feedback.**

1 *About my cousin:* This is an actual conversation that we had one night, on the roof of my aunt's apartment complex in Beijing. Some nights the smog does clear up (though the lights in the city never do seem to turn off), and we would play a game where we tried to find the stars in the sky. More often than not, we'd point at a blinking light only to realize that it was an airplane, and so far, the moon is the most we have ever seen while playing this game. He is, as you can probably tell, quite disillusioned with the world, but he is always willing to lend an ear (or at least, humor me) when I have existential crises.

2 *About geocentricism:* The idea that all celestial bodies revolved around the Earth was first introduced in the 3rd century BC, made famous by philosophers and scientists like Aristotle. This would remain the common belief until Copernicus arrived almost 2,000 years later, in the 16th century (during the Renaissance), and sparked the Copernican Revolution. And thus arose the idea that is (hopefully) taught in schools today: heliocentricism.

3 *On Westford:* This is actually a true story, as weird as it might sound: there are five churches and one synagogue in Westford (or at least, there were when I lived there), and they seemed to have a rotating schedule of banners with slogans like, "join us, and discover the meaning of life" or "find a purpose with us." They were amusing, somewhat gaudy with their bright colors, and caused me to think about the meaning of life at age five (instead of later on). So I suppose I owe this essay, in part, to those banners that were strewn across the front doors of the churches and synagogues of my hometown. Thanks, I guess.

4 *On the nature of religion:* As a person with no religious experience, I thought that understanding the nature of religion would allow me to better understand the idea of faith itself. There isn't a set idea of what a religion is, but there are certainly multiple interpretations on the topic. The interpretation that I used in this essay was inspired by the cited article (see Works Cited).

5 *On my parents*: Perhaps they aren't as strict on their interpretation of science as I make them out to be, but they certainly believe that science is reliable, and that it approaches some version of truth. They, too, are non-religious.

6 *On Tillich*: Paul Tillich was one of the foremost theologians and philosophers in the 20th century, and wrote a lot about his interpretation of religion (including works like "Courage to Be" and "Dynamics of Faith," among others). He himself was a German-American Christian, a background that certainly affected his writing.

The particular section that I quoted came from "Dynamics of Faith." Even though there's a lot lost in translation (from German to English), and his specific thoughts are obscured, his ideas are still pretty thought-provoking.

7 *On The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy*: This is one of my favorite books (and series, to be honest)—exciting, funny, and with a ton of amazing sci-fi ideas. Admittedly, I only remember snippets of the text now, since I haven't read the series for a good five years. There are a lot of moments that stood out to me when I first read the books, but the scene that stuck with me the most was the sub-story of the "Ultimate Question." I remember my disappointment when the answer was revealed to be forty-two, and how hopeful I was when I realized that the next computer, the one used to calculate the Question, was the Earth. This subplot was, in many ways, an echo of my own experiences, trying to find an overarching purpose in life.

8 *On the origins of religion*: The historical origins of religion are unclear. We cannot (as of yet) go back in time and ask who created the concept, nor can we ask why they did so. In the lack of facts, historians speculate; the ideas mentioned in this lyric essay are only a few of the broader theories that historians have about the birth of organized religion.

9 *On the etymology of "faith"*: The etymology of a word is always interesting; it's a reminder (at least for me) that language is dynamic, changing over time to reflect the culture of the period that they were a part of. The history of a word is often telling of its meaning.

10 *On the etymology of "religion"*: It is also interesting to trace the etymology of words, especially when their origins are obscure. The different interpretations of etymology that exist, like the ones for "religion," tell us a lot about the culture and the people who favor them.

11 *Geocentricism vs. heliocentricism*: It's true—one in four Americans still believe that the Sun revolves around the Earth. There's even an article about this finding, cited in the Works Cited section.

12 *On burials*: It felt important to me to find out that burials existed long before recorded history came into play. The idea that even millennia ago, before the rise of civilizations and

organized human interactions, we decided to believe that our lives are *important* (to whatever degree), is astounding.