Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith

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The Distinction between Belief and Acceptance

My aim in this chapter is to use the distinction between belief and acceptance to throw light on some of the complexities of the cognitive aspect of religious faith. Before doing so, I must explain the distinction as I understand it, and explain my conception of religious faith as involving various aspects, including a cognitive one. The distinction between belief and acceptance I will employ was mainly inspired by L. Jonathan Cohen's An Essay on Belief and Acceptance. My way of putting it is my own, however, and Cohen should not be held responsible for it.

The concept of belief that I will be setting out, is, I believe, a familiar commonsense concept, though, as in many cases, a philosophically unreflective subject will not be explicitly aware of its constitution. There are several salient features of the concept. But before getting to that I should make it explicit that the concept I will be dealing with is the concept of propositional belief, belief that so and so. This is to be distinguished from belief in, for example, belief in acupuncture and believing a person, as when I say to someone who has just told me something, “I believe you.” I will say a bit about belief in after laying out the concept of propositional belief. It is also worth pointing out that “belief” is ambiguous between the psychological state of believing something, and what is believed, the propositional content of that state. It is the former with which I am concerned.
(1) Belief is dispositional.

I have believed for years that outlining a philosophical article helps one to get clear as to its structure, though this has not been on my mind during all my waking hours (not to mention my sleeping hours) through all those years. Nor is it the case that for every moment during that period some manifestation of the belief has been evoked. Whatever it is to have that belief, it is not to be in a certain episodic conscious state or to perform any action or undergo any process. Thus, it is clear that belief is something that one can have in a latent state as well as in an active state. A disposition of a suitable sort nicely satisfies this constraint.

But what disposition is it? A disposition to do what under what conditions? We can begin to answer this question by thinking of the various outcomes we would expect, under certain conditions, if a subject, S, believes that \( p \). Here is a partial list.

1. If S believes that \( p \), then if someone asks S whether \( p \), S will have a tendency to respond in the affirmative.
2. If S believes that \( p \), then if S considers whether it is the case that \( p \), S will tend to feel it to be the case that \( p \), with one or another degree of confidence.
3. If S believes that \( p \), then S will tend to believe propositions that he or she takes to follow from \( p \).
4. If S believes that \( p \), then S will tend to use \( p \) as a premise in theoretical and practical reasoning where this is appropriate.
5. If S believes that \( p \), then if S learns that not-\( p \), S will tend to be surprised.
6. If S believes that \( p \), then S will tend to act in ways that would be appropriate if it were the case that \( p \), given S's goals, aversions, and other beliefs.\(^2\)

Note that in each case, it is only a tendency to a certain manifestation that is specified in the consequent of the conditional. That is because a given belief by itself does not necessitate a certain outcome. What eventuates is also influenced by other psychological states and attitudes of S. The most that can be said to follow from the belief that \( p \) alone is a tendency to a certain outcome in the relevant conditions. To say that one has a tendency to A is to say that A will be forthcoming in the absence of sufficient contravening influences, where we have some conception of what counts as such an influence.

If we ask whether all these conditionals form part of the meaning of
“believe” (part of the concept of belief), and whether any other conditionals have an equal claim to that status, it would seem that the answer is not at all clear. Even if, as I think, Quine is mistaken in supposing that no analytic-synthetic distinction is viable, there are cases in which the distinction is not sharp and there is a largish boundary region that cannot be confidently assigned to either side. This is a strong candidate for such a case. Some of the items on this list are much stronger candidates for being part of the meaning than others, particularly 1, 2, 4, and 6; but I don’t think it is possible to draw a sharp line between the ones that hold by virtue of what “believe” means, and those that we confidently believe to be true of belief.

Cohen gives pride of place to 2. His version of that component is the “disposition, when one is attending to issues raised, or items referred to, by the proposition that \( p \), normally to feel it true that \( p \) and false that not-\( p \)” (4). Notice that Cohen’s “normally” has the same role as my “tendency”—to take account of the fact that one may have the disposition even though the typical manifestations are blocked. Cohen points out that “feelings that would have exemplified the belief that \( p \) sometimes do not occur . . . because you have difficulty in remembering that \( p \) or because you need or want to concentrate on other relevant matters. Or they may just be crowded out because you have too many relevant beliefs for them all to be activated within the same span of consideration” (7–8). He mentions other factors as well. It is not all clear to me how to understand “feel it true that \( p \).” If it involves deploying the concept of truth, then the suggestion is mistaken. One can have beliefs without possessing the concept of truth at all. Hence I take it that the same basic idea can be more felicitously expressed as “feel it to be the case that \( p \)” or “have the sense that \( p \).”

I have used the term “feel” for the manifestation in 2 in order to convey the idea that it possesses a kind of immediacy, that it is something one experiences rather than something that one thinks out, that it is a matter of one’s being struck by (a sense of) how things are rather than deciding how things are. This is also connected with the second basic feature of belief, to be introduced shortly, its involuntary character. I am not suggesting that “feeling it to be the case that \( p \)” is some kind of sensation or some kind of emotional state. I take “feel” to be a broad enough term to range over a great variety of inner experiential states.

My formulation of 2 is designed to allow for degrees of belief, belief that is more or less firm, assured, confident, certain. We may think of the different degrees of assurance that \( p \) is the case as a handy measure of degrees of belief. We ordinarily regard it as such. We ask questions like
"How sure are you that \( p \)?", "How confident are you that \( p \)?", "How certain do you feel of it?", when we want to know how strong or firm the belief is. But we should not suppose that degree of belief simply consists in the degree of confidence with which \( p \)'s being the case strikes one. It is certainly part of what constitutes that degree, but it is used as the indication of choice because (1) it is easily accessible and (2) it is assumed to vary with parallel variations in the other dispositional components of belief. Consider 4. One may use \( p \) as a premise where appropriate more or less often; and when one does so, this may be with greater or lesser alacrity, and with greater or lesser confidence. Similar points apply to 6. All the manifestations of belief are subject to variations in degree, and it is plausible that they usually do so in lockstep. But this is not always the case. One can feel very certain that \( p \) but (frequently) not act as if one believed it and seldom use it in one's reasonings where appropriate. And the reverse also happens. In these cases we have to qualify the belief attribution in some way if we are not to withhold it altogether. Just how we do this depends on the relative emphasis we give to the different components of the complete package. I won't have time to go into all this in this essay. I will be concerned here with cases in which the various components match up in a neat fashion.

I must confess to some uneasiness about the whole notion of degrees of belief. I am inclined to think that unqualified, flat-out belief that \( p \) requires that it seem unquestionable to \( S \) that \( p \). On this view, belief excludes any doubts or uncertainty. To be sure, one can find oneself feeling positive about the proposition that \( p \) without feeling at all certain about it. But we have other terms (than "believe") for such states. One may "think \( p \) to be more or less likely," "think it to be more likely that \( p \) than not," "be inclined to suppose that \( p \)," "be of the opinion that \( p \)," and the like. If I were to set things up this way, I would have to recognize that in addition to belief and acceptance there is a variety of belief-like states that present basically the same configuration as belief except for differences of degree of confidence. That would considerably complicate my discussion. Hence I will go along with the common view that beliefs come in all degrees of strength, from complete certainty at the top all the way to down to a mere inclination to suppose that \( p \). Below a certain degree of felt sureness, practically everyone will withhold the (unqualified) term "believe" and say instead that the person "is inclined to think" or something of the sort. But I won't try to say just where that minimum requirement is to be located; I doubt that any sharp line can be drawn. In any event, my concern in this essay is with beliefs that exhibit a high degree of felt certainty.
Cohen gives 2 pride of place in a very strong way, by regarding it and only it as embodying the meaning of "believe." There are reasons for this. It seems that feeling sure that \( p \) is more intimately connected to belief than the behavioral manifestations. Clearly one can act as if one believes that \( p \) when in fact one does not. One can dissemble. (This does not, of course, show that a tendency to such manifestations does not enter into the meaning of the term.) Moreover, it is also possible to deceive oneself into thinking that one is sure of something when one is not. But belief would seem to involve a much stronger tendency to feeling it to be the case that \( p \) than to any behavioral manifestations. When I come to discuss acceptance, we will see that 2 plays a central role in distinguishing belief from acceptance. Nevertheless, I can't go along with Cohen in identifying belief with 2 alone. It seems the better part of wisdom to recognize that a variety of dispositions is involved.

(2) Belief is not under direct voluntary control.

Beliefs are items we find ourselves with, not items we choose to have. I cannot decide to believe that the Blue Jays will win the pennant or that Sam is trustworthy. In saying they are not under direct voluntary control, I am not only denying that we cannot believe that \( p \) at will, just by choosing to do so. To deny that is just to deny that believing is a basic act, one that can be done without doing it by doing something else. But belief is also not under direct voluntary control in the way opening a door or going to the office is. These are not basic acts either. I can't open a door just by willing that it be open (unless I have extraordinary telekinetic powers), nor can I go to the office just by choosing to do so; I have to make a variety of movements, and enjoy some environmental support, to do so. Believing is not under voluntary control in the way these nonbasic acts are, either. In their case, I can perform various basic acts that I can rely on to bring about the intended result, but this is not possible with respect to belief. If I were to try to do something that will bring it about, right away, that I believe that Salem is the capital of Massachusetts, I wouldn't know what button to push. In some cases I can perform voluntary acts that will have some effect on what I believe on certain matters, by, for example, selectively exposing myself to pro or con considerations; but that is a long way from being able to exercise effective, much less immediate, voluntary control.

The concept of belief in question here is neutral between knowledge and what we might call "mere belief." So long as I have the right dispositions, then I can be said, in this sense, to believe that \( p \), whether
or not I also know that \( p \). The supposition that belief contrasts with knowledge is encouraged by conversations like the following.

Jane: Go out and see what's making that noise in the kitchen.
Husband (returning): I believe the faucet is leaking.
Jane: You believe it's leaking?! Can't you see whether it is or not?

In most contexts, when one says, "I believe that \( p \)," that is taken to imply that the speaker is disavowing knowledge that \( p \). But that can be explained in terms of H. P. Grice's "conversational implicatures," without supposing that non-knowledge is part of the meaning of "believe." The conversational rule involved here is "Don't make a weaker statement than you are prepared to make." Because this rule is generally observed, when one says (in most contexts) "I believe that \( p \)," the hearer takes the speaker to be observing that rule, and hence infers that the speaker is not also prepared to say that he or she knows that \( p \). But despite that, on the concept of belief under discussion here, belief is not incompatible with knowledge, and, for reasons just given, I take this to be true of the ordinary concept of propositional belief.

I could go much further into the concept of belief, but these points will suffice as a basis for the contrast I want to draw with acceptance. Acceptance differs from belief in each of the two respects I have mentioned.

The First Respect. Acceptance is, in the first instance, an act, more specifically a mental act. Like belief, it involves what we might call, in neutral terms, a "positive attitude" toward a proposition, but the mode of involvement is quite different. Whereas belief is a disposition to various reactions involving the proposition, the act of acceptance is the adoption, the taking on, of a positive attitude to the proposition. It is something one does at a particular time. In characterizing it as a mental act, I distinguish it from the verbal act of assent, which can be taken to be the overt expression of acceptance. But we must note that "assent" is not infrequently itself used for the mental act I call "acceptance." For examples, see the quotations below from Aquinas and Locke.

But just what positive attitude toward \( p \) does one adopt in accepting \( p \)? Cohen's capsule characterization is this: "to . . . adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that \( p \)—i.e., of including that proposition . . . among one's premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context" (4). I take this to be along the right lines. To accept that \( p \) is to "take it on board," to include it in one's repertoire of (supposed) facts on which one will rely in one's theoretical and practical reasoning and one's behavior.
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But though the act of acceptance is not a disposition, it typically engenders a complex dispositional state, which in the passage just cited Cohen calls a "policy." Indeed, if no such policy were engendered, if acceptance were just a momentary act that left no residue, it would have no point. The point lies precisely in the fact that to accept a proposition is to be prepared to make use of it in reasoning and in guiding one's behavior. Hence, we could attach "acceptance" to the *possession* of that policy, or, alternatively, let it spread over both adoption and possession. The latter is Cohen's choice. Here is the sentence cited above, with the omissions filled in. "More precisely, to accept that $p$ is *to have* or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that $p$—i.e., of including that proposition or rule among one's premisses for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that $p$" (emphasis added). It is, to be sure, infelicitous to use "accept," which is obviously an act term and moreover a term for *having* and acting on a policy as well as adopting it. Nevertheless, there are sometimes sufficient reasons for overriding linguistic felicity. When I come to my thesis that accepting basic Christian doctrines can undergird a full-blown Christian commitment, I don't want to restrict myself to the act of initial adoption. If one "accepted" the doctrines and then promptly forgot all about them, if no further use were made of them or attention paid to them, this clearly would not serve as a foundation for a robust Christian life. We need the full package of accepting the propositions and thereby being disposed to use them in one's thinking, feeling, and behavior. I could spell all this out every time I have occasion to discuss Christian acceptance, but it would be tedious to do so. Hence I will go along with Cohen's practice of using "accept" for the full package—(actively) having the policy as well as adopting it.

But what are the components of the complex dispositional state involved in acceptance? They will largely overlap those involved in believing that $p$. Specifically, they will include 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 from the list I gave for belief. (In 3, substitute "tend to accept" for "tend to believe.") There will be some differences. Belief, at least firm belief, will involve more confident, unhesitating manifestations of these sorts than acceptance will. But in the main, the story on these components will be the same. By far the largest difference is the absence of 2. The complex dispositional state engendered by accepting $p$ will definitely not include a tendency to feel that $p$ if the question of whether $p$ arises. That is, indeed, one of the main distinctions between the two. This gives us the reason foreshadowed earlier for taking 2 to be especially crucial for the
nature of belief. It constitutes one of the main respects in which believing $p$ differs from accepting that $p$. So accepting that $p$ does not entail believing that $p$. But does it allow it? Can one accept a proposition one believes? The end of the quote from Cohen, "whether or not one feels it to be true that $p$," indicates that he takes them to be compatible. This is partly because of a feature of his position in which I am not following him, namely, taking it that the disposition to use propositions as premises in theoretical and practical reasoning is restricted to acceptance and is no part of belief. Hence, if he is to recognize the obvious fact that we do reason from premises that express beliefs, he has to allow a very considerable overlap. But since I take dispositions to use $p$ as a premise to be partly constitutive of belief itself, I lack that reason for supposing an overlap to be possible. Indeed, if we concentrate on the upper part of the dimension of strength of belief, I see no point in one who believes that $p$ also accepting that $p$. The believer already has everything that accepting it would give him or her and then some. To find any reason for adding acceptance to the picture, we have to go to beliefs of a weaker strength. There the dispositions, including dispositions to taking $p$ as a basis for inferences and behavior, are themselves weaker. Hence, they may be shored up by a deliberate acceptance of $p$. In any event, in this chapter I will be concerned with the contrast between one who feels sure that $p$ and one who, lacking that, accepts that $p$.

To put some flesh on this skeleton, let's think of some familiar examples of accepting propositions one does not (firmly) believe. Suppose it is not at all clear what is the case or what one should do, but the relevant considerations seem to favor one alternative over the others. As the captain of the defensive team I am trying to figure out what play the opposing quarterback will call next. From my experience of playing against him and his coach, and given the current situation, it seems most likely to me that he will call a plunge into the middle of the line by the fullback. Hence I accept the proposition and reason from it in aligning the defense. Do I believe that this is the play he will call, unqualifiedly believe it, as contrasted with thinking it likely? No. I don’t find myself feeling sure that this is what he will do. Who can predict exactly what a quarterback will do in a given situation? My experience prevents me from having any such assurance. Nevertheless I accept the proposition that he will call a fullback plunge and proceed on that basis.

Moving up to loftier heights, I survey the reasons for and against different positions on the free will issue. Having considered them carefully, I conclude that they indicate most strongly an acceptance of
libertarian free will. Do I flat-out believe that we have that kind of free will? There are people who do feel sure of this. But I am too impressed by the arguments against the position to be free of doubts; it doesn’t seem clear to me that this is the real situation, as it seems clear to me that I am now sitting in front of a computer, that I live in Central New York, and that I teach at Syracuse University. Nevertheless, I accept the proposition that we have libertarian free will. I announce this as my position. I defend it against objections. I draw various consequences from it, and so on.

The Second Respect. Acceptance differs strongly from belief on the voluntariness issue as well. Accepting a proposition is a voluntary act. I have effective voluntary control over my acceptances and abstentions therefrom. That is not to say that I can accept any proposition I can envisage, whatever my epistemic situation. In my first case, the defensive captain could not have accepted the proposition that the quarterback will take the ball and run in the opposite direction. And my philosopher, given her assessment of the relevant considerations, could not accept the proposition that human beings are unconscious automata. Nevertheless, she does have a choice even if libertarian free will is the only position that is a live option for her acceptance. Another course she could voluntarily choose is withholding acceptance of any of the alternatives until she sees the relevant reasons pointing more unambiguously in one direction. That is always an option where one of the alternatives does not seem clearly to be the correct one.

But we don’t always have the luxury of postponing a decision in this way. When the press of affairs requires us to act on one assumption or another, we cannot wait for more evidence. This is the situation of our defensive captain. He must dispose his forces in one way rather than another, based on one or another assumption as to what the offense will do. But he still need not accept a particular hypothesis on this point. He can adopt an assumption, a working hypothesis, for the sake of action guidance without accepting it. Accepting \( p \) involves a more positive attitude toward that proposition than just making the assumption that \( p \) or hypothesizing that \( p \). The difference could be put this way. To accept that \( p \) is to regard it as true, though one need not be explicitly deploying the concept of truth in order to do so. But one can assume or hypothesize that \( p \) for a particular limited purpose, as our captain might have done, without taking any stand on truth value. Again, one can assume or hypothesize that \( p \) for the sake of testing it, trying it out in practice, so as to help one decide whether to accept it. Thus, whenever it is not clear to one that \( p \), and one is able to accept that \( p \), one always at least has a
choice between accepting that \( p \) and refraining from doing so. And often the area of choice will be wider. My view of the reasons for and against positions on the free will issue might be such that more than one position seems viable to me and, hence, a live option for acceptance.

**Faith In and Faith That**

Now I turn to a brief consideration of faith, first in general and then religious faith in particular. As with belief we have a distinction between “faith in” and “faith that.” “Faith that,” though like “belief that” in being a positive attitude toward a proposition, is most clearly distinguished from the latter by two features. (1) It necessarily involves some pro-attitude toward its object. If S is said to have faith that democracy will eventually be firmly established everywhere, that implies not only that S believes that this will happen but that S looks on this prospect with favor. If S were strongly opposed to universal democracy, it would be somewhere between inapt and false to represent S as having faith that democracy will triumph. Whereas one can truly and unproblematically be said to believe that democracy will win out even if one views the prospect with horror. (2) “Faith that” has at least a strong suggestion of a weak epistemic position vis-à-vis the proposition in question. One would say that one has faith that Jim will be promoted only when one’s evidence is less than conclusive. One is said to “take it on faith” that this will happen. But this feature is less tightly connected semantically to “faith that” than the pro-attitude feature. This can be seen by considering cases in which we have one feature without the other. Suppose I definitely want you to get the job but also have strong reasons for supposing that you will, and contrast that with the case in which I don’t want you to get the job but lack strong reasons one way or the other. It seems much more felicitous to speak of my having faith that you will get the job in the first case than in the second. Indeed, that way of putting it seems quite out of order in the second case.

Be this as it may, the central paradigmatic cases of “faith that" exhibit both of the features we have been discussing. This is classically exhibited in the famous passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Here we have the pro-attitude in the first phrase, the relatively weak epistemic situation in the second.

Now for “faith in.” Paradigmatically one has faith in a person. I believe that when one is said to have faith in a group, a social institution, or a
movement, either these are being personified or we are thinking of a person or persons as being involved in them in some crucial way. In any event, let’s concentrate on faith in a person. Here the crucial feature would seem to be trust, reliance on the person to carry out commitments, obligations, promises, or, more generally, to act in a way favorable to oneself. I have faith in my wife; I can rely on her doing what she says she will do, on her remaining true to her commitments, on her remaining attached to me by a bond of love. To return to the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the “heroes of faith” celebrated there are said to have faith by virtue of trusting in the goodness and providence of God, even when they could not see how it would all turn out. “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household” (verse 7). “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go” (verse 8). “By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land” (verse 29). Note that in these attributions we have weak epistemic status as well as trust prominently displayed.

How is “faith in” related to “faith that”? Obviously, faith in a person presupposes that one has some positive attitude toward the proposition that the person exists and that he or she has various characteristics that provide a basis for one’s faith. But it is not obvious that this attitude has to be properly characterizable as a case of “faith that”. On the other hand, there are reasons for accepting a dependence in the other direction. It seems plausible that wherever it is clearly appropriate to attribute “faith that,” there is a “faith in” in the background. If I have faith that Joe will get the job, I thereby have faith in Joe, of some sort. If I have faith that the church will rebound from recent setbacks, I thereby have faith in the church and its mission.

Here is an interesting linguistic point. Think of faith in as a mode of relationship between the one who has faith and the one in whom he or she has faith. Call the occupants of these two roles the subject and the object, respectively. Now think of the adjective “faithful.” One might naturally be led to suppose that this means “full of faith,” so that a faithful person is one who is outstanding in the subject role of the relationship, one who often, or readily, or fully has faith in others. But, as a moment’s reflection will assure us, the use of the word is quite different. It has to do with the object role. A faithful person is one who is worthy of faith being reposed in him or her, trustworthy, reliable, loyal, steadfast, constant, and so on. It is as if the genius of the language
puts the emphasis on the characteristics that inspire one to have faith in another, rather than in the having of that faith itself.  

This is an appropriate place at which to say something about "belief in" and its relation to the other concepts I have been discussing. I don't see a great difference between "belief in" and "faith in," certainly much less than between "belief that" and "faith that." "Belief in" would seem to carry an implication of a pro-attitude, though perhaps not as strongly as "faith in." Think of some typical cases. One believes in the public school system, foreign language study, regular exercise, the sacraments, one's plumber, one's adviser, manufacturers' guarantees, free enterprise. In all these cases it would be incoherent to express opposition to, for example, foreign language study in the same breath as expressing belief in it. This is vividly brought out in the old joke Q: "Do you believe in infant baptism?" A: "Believe in it! I've seen it done!" Even if belief in infant baptism presupposes that it is practiced (and we will soon see reasons for doubting this), it also essentially involves favoring it in some way.  

As for the relation of "belief in" and "belief that," it is tempting to suppose that "belief in X" presupposes a belief that X exists. They often go together. But here too we must remember that, among positive propositional attitudes, acceptance is an alternative to belief. As I will be suggesting shortly, I can believe in God (trust in his providence) while accepting that He exists, rather than firmly believing this. Moreover, as Price points out, belief in X does not always presuppose any sort of positive attitude toward X's existence. One can believe in equal pay for equal work even if one realizes that there has never yet been a society in which this is observed. Perhaps there is a difference here between things and states of affairs, such that believing in a "thing" presupposes its existence, while believing in a state of affairs does not presuppose that it is realized.

Religious Faith

Let this suffice as a survey of some salient aspects of faith in general. I now turn to religious faith. Since "faith" is a highly loaded positively evaluative term in religion, there is a tendency to attach it to whatever a particular thinker deems most important or central in a religious response to the divine. Thus we find Tillich characterizing faith as the "state of being ultimately concerned," where "ultimate concern" about X is, in turn, characterized as involving a number of elements—commitment to
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X, taking X as a center of orientation for one’s life, devotion and surrender to X, trusting X to provide ultimate salvation, and so on.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly, Tillich has inflated the term so as to be a catchall for anything he deems to be centrally important in religion.\textsuperscript{17} When this happens, “faith” loses its distinctive meaning as one element in religion among others. I want to think of religious faith in a more specific way as one important aspect of a total religious response, not the whole package. Since the concept exhibits somewhat different contours in different religions, I can keep the discussion manageable only by considering faith as it figures in a particular religious tradition.\textsuperscript{18} For this purpose I consider the Christian tradition. What, then, is faith in Christianity?

It will be sufficient for our purposes here to point out that Christian faith essentially involves both cognitive and affective-attitudinal elements. The general discussion of faith foreshadows how this goes. On the cognitive side it involves some positive attitude toward the fundamental Christian doctrines as revealed to us by God. Thus, St. Thomas Aquinas says, “The act of faith is an act of the intellect assenting to divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God.”\textsuperscript{19} Six centuries later at the First Vatican Council, the Roman church was saying the same thing, characterizing faith as “A supernatural virtue, by which, guided and aided by divine grace, we hold as true what God has revealed, not because we have perceived its intrinsic truth by our reason, but because of the authority of God who can neither deceive nor be deceived.”\textsuperscript{20} This latter formula makes explicit something that Aquinas elsewhere stresses, that faith does not count as knowledge because it, for the most part, does not concern matters that we can “see” to be true.\textsuperscript{21} With respect to the Trinity and the Incarnation, for example, we would have no basis for believing these truths had God not revealed them to us, and moved us by a supernatural act of grace to accept them.

John Locke, writing in the seventeenth century and not as a theologian but as a philosopher, lays out a similar concept. He characterizes faith as “the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication.”\textsuperscript{22}

It would appear from these passages that Aquinas’s, and more generally the Roman Catholic, conception of faith is purely intellectual, a matter of a certain way of accepting certain propositions. But room is made for an affective-attitudinal aspect as well, though it is not given as much stress as in Lutheran and other Protestant formulations. Aquinas makes it explicit that faith is a virtue only if it is informed by love, which directs the will to the supreme end, namely, God.\textsuperscript{23} So love of God must play a
central role if faith is to be complete. In Luther and many other Protestant thinkers we find a stress on trust in God, complete reliance on the goodness and mercy of God who wills our salvation.

Much more could be said about the affective-attitudinal aspect of Christian faith, but since this essay is concerned with the cognitive side, I have made only a perfunctory bow in the former direction so as to set our central concern in its proper context.

Belief and Acceptance in Religious Faith

I now turn to the question for which all the above has been a propaedeutic, namely, how we are to think of the cognitive aspect of faith, and in particular, how the belief-acceptance distinction bears on this.

Contemporary discussions of religious faith on its cognitive side are almost entirely in terms of belief, especially philosophical discussions. I take it that the concept of belief used there is the one I adumbrated in the first section. I now want to explore the possibility that this exclusive concentration on belief is unfortunate and unrealistic, and that an adequate picture of the situation would allow an important place for acceptance in Christian faith.

The first point is that propositional belief and propositional acceptance are both to be found in Christianity. Some Christians have firm beliefs that, for example, Jesus of Nazareth was an incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, that he was resurrected after being crucified and buried, and that he is alive today and in personal relationship with the faithful. For them these are facts about which they have no more doubts than they do about their physical surroundings and the existence of their family and friends. Even if they can see how one could doubt or deny these doctrines, they are not themselves touched by this. Perhaps this has been part of their repertoire of constant belief for as long as they can remember, and nothing has come along to shake it.24

But not all sincere, active, committed, devout Christians are like this, especially in these secular, scientistic, intellectually unsettled times. Many committed Christians do not find themselves with such an assurance. A sense of the obvious truth of these articles of faith does not well up within them when they consider the matter. They are troubled by doubts; they ask themselves or others what reasons there are to believe that all this really happened. They take it as a live possibility that all or some central Christian doctrines are false. How, then, can they be sincere, committed Christians?
There are two ways. First, they may believe these doctrines but with less than full, undoubting confidence. But, second, they may accept them. The difference between these alternatives follows the earlier explanation of the distinction. To accept them is to perform a voluntary act of committing oneself to them, to resolve to use them as a basis for one's thought, attitude, and behavior. (And, of course, it involves being disposed to do so as a result of this voluntary acceptance.) Whereas to believe them, even if not with the fullest confidence, is to find oneself with that positive attitude toward them, to feel that, for example, Jesus of Nazareth died to reconcile us to God. That conviction, of whatever degree of strength, spontaneously wells up in one when one considers the matter. And so, at bottom, it is a difference between what one finds in oneself and what one has deliberately chosen to introduce in oneself.

Let's elaborate a bit on the acceptance alternative for Christian faith. Just as the philosopher described previously accepted the thesis of libertarian free will, though she did not spontaneously feel it to be the case, so it is with our (quasi) skeptical Christians. This can take several different forms. Perhaps such a person, having carefully considered the evidence and arguments pro and con, or as much of them as she is aware of, judges that there is a sufficient basis for accepting the doctrines, even though she does not find herself in a state of belief. Or perhaps she has been involved in the church from her early years, from a preskeptical time when she did fully believe, and she finds the involvement meeting deep needs and giving her life some meaning and structure. And so she is motivated to accept Christian doctrines as a basis for her thought about the world and for the way she leads her life. Or perhaps the person is drawn into the church from a condition of religious noninvolvement, and responds actively to the church's message, finding in the Christian life something that is deeply satisfying, but without, as yet, spontaneously feeling the doctrines to be true. Such a person will again be moved to accept the doctrines as something on which she will build her thought and action.

In view of the concentration on belief in thought about religion, it is important to realize that the person who accepts the doctrines is not necessarily inferior to the believer in commitment to the Christian life, or in the seriousness, faithfulness, or intensity with which she pursues it. The accepter may pray just as faithfully, worship God just as regularly, strive as earnestly to follow the way of life enjoined on us by Christ, look as pervasively on interpersonal relationships, vocation, and social issues through the lens of the Christian faith. She will undoubtedly receive less comfort and consolation from her faith than the unquestion-
ing believer to whom the whole thing seems certain. She will feel less assured of the life of the world to come, and in what she takes to be her interactions with God she will not be wholly free of nagging suspicions that it is all in her own mind (though such suspicions need not always arise). But the accepter can be as fully involved in the form of life, and not just on an “as if” basis. This is not a matter of resolving to act as if the doctrines are true, while not really taking seriously the idea that they are true. To accept the doctrines is to accept them as true. Since Jesus was resurrected is true if and only if Jesus was resurrected, I can’t accept the latter without at least being committed to accepting the former. It is only the unthinking assumption that belief exhausts the possibilities for a positive attitude toward the articles of faith that gives rise to the judgment that the accepter is engaging in an elaborate make-believe or pretense.

Neither the believing nor the accepting groups are confined to cases like those I have indicated. As for the latter, I have already suggested some of the variety to be found there, but I need to give the former some attention too. One can be a believer, even a firm believer without having preserved intact an unquestioning faith from early childhood; converted believers are legion. St. Paul is a familiar paradigm, and if anyone has ever felt certain of the truth of Christian doctrine it was he. Again, as I pointed out above, it is possible for acceptance to turn into belief as one gets deeper and deeper into the religion one has accepted. Neither the believer nor the accepter is necessarily frozen forever into that stance. And I will point out once more that one can be in a condition that can be called belief even if it is a lesser degree of certainty or firmness than the strong belief on which I have been concentrating.

It is my distinct impression that a significant proportion of contemporary sincere, committed, devout Christians are accepters rather than believers. I have no direct statistical evidence to establish this. Gathering such evidence would require considerably more conceptual sophistication than one can expect from sociologists. And even if the sociologist had the distinction straight, it would be tricky to devise questionnaires that would elicit the information from a wide range of church goers. When we look at sociological surveys of “religious belief,” we do not find our distinction in evidence. But there is considerable literary evidence, in spiritual autobiographies, for both the belief and the acceptance alternative among committed Christians. Consider, for example, two collections of faith stories of philosophers, Clark’s Philosophers Who Believe and Morris’s God and the Philosophers. I will present a few samples from the latter. Some of the contributors clearly fall on the side of belief. Jerry L. Walls, for example, says “I was sure that I had met God and that He
had granted me salvation" (103). "My relationship with God was very real to me" (103). "I had no doubt that it was God encountering me, speaking to me, forgiving me, and so on" (106). "I still believe I encountered God when I was eleven years old and have walked in His grace—often very imperfectly—ever since" (111). Marilyn Adams’s contribution is filled with testimony such as “In my earliest years, a vivid sense of the reality of God came with mother’s milk, with green grass and blue sky” (137). “I knew that God was an empirical entity; I had tasted and seen” (150). This is not to say that these people enjoyed an uninterrupted and untroubled enjoyment of their faith. Quite the contrary. The last quote from Adams, for example, continues, “I felt I was in a religious rut, but I didn’t know what to do.” But despite these ups and downs, the grasp of what is taken as Christian truth is one of feeling sure.

With other contributors it is a different story. William Wainwright tells us that “to this day I find it difficult to embrace any controversial belief without some hesitation” (78). The general picture is one of acceptance, rather than one of firm belief. “I have long thought that even if Christian theism isn’t more probable than not, it is still reasonable to embrace it” (80, my emphasis). Most explicitly

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. (85, my emphasis)

Again, Jeff Jordan writes

I should note, first, that my faith is perhaps best described as a hope rather than as a belief . . . I hope that the Christian message is true, and I try to act in the light of that hope. While I assent to the propositions of Christianity, I think it best to describe my faith as a hope rather than as a belief because I do not think I have rationally decisive evidence for the truth of Christian claims, and I realize that it is a real, but to my mind not a very likely, possibility that Christianity could turn out to be false. (134, my emphasis)

No doubt, philosophers are more articulate at bringing out distinctions than many other people, but it is my sense that the differing cognitive
components of faith brought out so clearly in these passages are widely distributed among contemporary "believers."

If my impression is correct that acceptance as well as belief is common among committed Christians, it raises a question as to why this fact has so completely escaped notice in the mountain of literature on faith. How is it that I can advance my thesis as a startling discovery? I think the answer is that the term "belief" has been allowed to spread over any positive propositional attitude. It has been used to apply indifferently to both sides of the distinction I have been emphasizing. This is reflected in dictionary entries. In the Oxford English Dictionary, we find among the entries for "believe"—"To give credence to, to accept (a statement) as true." And one of the main entries for "belief" reads, in part—"mental acceptance of a proposition . . . assent of the mind to a statement." It is also reflected in the widespread use of the term "believer" for an adherent of a religion.

There are many indications in the philosophical literature of this inflated use of "believe." I will mention one of the most striking. Philosophers who discuss the question of whether belief can be voluntary regularly take certain thinkers to give a positive answer to this question, where the passages cited in support of this clearly have to do with something in the area of acceptance, rather than with belief. For example, Louis Pojman in his generally excellent treatment of belief and the will, takes both Aquinas and Descartes to be voluntarists with respect to belief. But in the material on which he bases these attributions, though these thinkers do clearly take something in the area of positive propositional attitudes to be voluntary, they are speaking about a mental act of the acceptance sort, rather than belief. We have already seen Aquinas characterize faith as "an act of the intellect assenting to divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God." What is said here to be "at the command of the will" is a mental act of assent, what I have been calling "acceptance." And when he argues that faith can be meritorious because it proceeds from free choice, it is mental assent that is freely chosen. As for Descartes, it is clear in the primary source for his voluntarism, Meditation IV, that it is some mental act that is said to be voluntary, rather than belief in the contemporary sense.

... the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid). . . . (40, my emphasis)

... If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I
either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. (41, my emphasis)

... it is surely no imperfection in God that he has given me the freedom to assent or not to assent in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with a clear and distinct perception; but it is undoubtedly an imperfection in me to misuse that freedom and make judgements about matters which I do not fully understand. (42, my emphasis)

Descartes consistently uses act terms, in the acceptance family, to specify what he is saying to be under the control of the will.

One thing that sometimes makes it difficult, though not in these cases, to determine whether a pre–twentieth century author is speaking of belief or acceptance is the widespread practice before our century of thinking of belief itself as an act. But when one uses “believe” for a mental act, that is clearly not the contemporary sense of “believe” with which I have been dealing.

**Does Christianity Require Belief Rather Than Acceptance?**

To resume the main line of the discussion, if we may take it that in fact many sincere, committed, devout Christians accept rather than believe many central Christian doctrines, that still leaves us with a normative question. Are they, by virtue of this, in violation of some basic Christian injunction? Even if they are heavily involved in the Christian way of life, are they still missing something that is essential to being a Christian in the fullest sense? Does Christianity require its devotees to believe the articles of faith, and not just to accept them?

If the question concerned what is the most desirable state possible (in this life) for a Christian, then it seems clear, as we saw Wainwright acknowledge, that this would include believing the claims of Christianity, rather than just accepting them. But that is not my question. I am asking whether the church requires of its adherents that they believe central Christian doctrines. Is one in violation of authoritative injunctions if one does not believe those propositions? Or is one in the clear, as far as what is required of a follower of Christ, if one accepts the doctrines in question?

Obviously, what is taken as authoritative will differ somewhat for different denominations. And where acceptance or belief of certain doctrines is required, those doctrines will differ for different denominations. I can’t go into all such variations in this chapter. What I will do is
to look at some pronouncements that are widely recognized as authorita­tive and consider their bearing on our issue.

The first thing to note is that many formulations that are frequently read as involving propositional belief are better construed in terms either of acceptance or of “belief in” or of faith. First look at a couple of biblical passages that seem to require belief. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read, “For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11: 6). But the Greek verb translated “believe” in the Revised Standard version, from which I quote, and in many other translations, is *pisteuo*, the verbal form of the noun *pistis*, “faith.” In English we lack a verb cognate of “faith,” and this leads translators to settle on “believe” as the nearest English verb. But once we come to realize that it is not always belief that constitutes the cognitive aspect of faith, we can see that a better translation would be “have faith that he exists” (as in the Good News translation). Propositional “faith” can involve either belief or acceptance. Again, in Mark 16:16, typically translated as “he who does not believe will be condemned,” the verb rendered “believe” is once more *pisteuo*.

The formulations outside the Bible most widely accepted as authorita­tive are the Nicene and the Apostle’s creeds. Here “believe” appears only in the “believe in” form. In the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord . . . I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints.” It is the same story with the Nicene Creed. “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord and Giver of Life . . . And I believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.” Of course, believing in God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Ghost, and believing in the church, presupposes various propositional commitments, that God exists and did create heaven and earth, that Jesus Christ is His son who came down from heaven, and so on. But there is nothing in the language of the creeds that requires these commitments to be beliefs rather than acceptances.

For another example, look at the Baptismal Service in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, a form that in its essentials goes far back in the Christian tradition. Here no propositional beliefs are required of the candidates (or their sponsors in the case of infants). They are required to renounce various things, for example, “Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God”; they are required to affirm that they accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and put their whole trust in his grace and love; they are required to promise to follow Jesus Christ and
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obey him as their Lord. They are required to affirm the Apostle's Creed, and to commit themselves to various lines of action, for example, proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. But nowhere is the candidate required to make a statement of the form "I believe that ________ ."

This last example may lead readers of a Reformed or Baptist or old-line Roman Catholic persuasion to reply that this is what might be expected of a wishy-washy liberal crew like the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion in general. But if we look at some of the classic "confessions" of groups like these, it is still not clear that propositional belief, rather than acceptance, is required. Consider the "Profession of the Tridentine Faith" (1563), faith in the doctrines propounded by the Council of Trent. Except for the opening, which speaks of believing every one of the things contained in the Nicene Creed (and we have seen how belief enters there), the terms used with "that" clauses are "admit" (admitto), "embrace" (amplector), "profess" (profiteor), "receive" (recipo), "confess" (fateor), "assert" (assero), and "acknowledge" (agnosco). These are all terms that belong on the acceptance side of our contrast. And if we look at the major Protestant confessions, such as the Augsburg Confessions (1530), the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1571), or the Westminster Confession (1647), we find that they consist of doctrinal statements without any explicit injunction to anyone to believe any propositions. Naturally, in putting these bodies of doctrines forward as "confessions" the plain intent is to formulate what is held in common by full-fledged members of the communion in question. But there is no indication that anyone is required to believe these doctrines rather than to accept them.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that our currently familiar propositional sense of "believe" is a relative newcomer to religious discourse. He amply documents the fact that "believe" originally meant "to hold dear" or "to love," as its German relative belieben still does. One of his examples involves two manuscripts of a thirteenth-century poetical composition. At a certain point, one manuscript has (in modern rendering) "to her he had love" while the other has "in her he believed." Even as late as Shakespeare's All's Well That Ends Well, when the king says to Bertram, "Believe not thy disdain," this is not to be understood as exhorting the hearer not to believe (in our sense) that he has disdain, but rather not to cherish, foster, or hold dear the disdain that he obviously has. To be sure, the fact that "believe" prior to the sixteenth century or so didn't mean what it does currently, doesn't show that the English prior to that time lacked the current concept of propositional belief or
that they didn’t have other linguistic means of expressing it. But at least it shows this. When the King James translation of the Bible or the early Anglican prayer books use “believe,” we cannot suppose without more ado that the word is being used in its familiar contemporary propositional sense.

I do not mean to deny, of course, that in certain quarters belief, and even firm, undoubting belief, is taken as normative for Christians. It is even sometimes taken as a mark of being “saved,” and its lack as a mark of being unsaved. Perhaps unawareness of the belief-acceptance distinction is playing a role here, though even if that distinction were fully appreciated, there would, no doubt, be some who would still take the elect to be restricted to the firm believers. Nevertheless, the above survey indicates, at the very least, that it is more difficult than one might have thought to find support for such attitudes in scripture and in classic Christian creeds and confessions.

My central thesis in this paper is distinct from some other recent attempts to find an alternative to belief as a component of faith. For example, James Muyskens plumps for hope as the crucial propositional attitude in faith.\(^{37}\) But acceptance is quite different from hope. I can hope that God will grant me what it takes to carry out tasks He gives me without accepting the proposition that He will. Indeed, what I hope for is typically something the reality of which I do not accept. In the usual case, I hope that Jim will keep his promise only if I neither accept nor believe the proposition that he will.\(^{38}\)

Robert Audi’s suggestion that propositional faith is distinguishable from propositional belief may be closer to my suggestion.\(^{39}\) However, Audi’s propositional faith does not seem to be identical to my acceptance. Though Audi’s exposition leaves me without a clear grasp of his concept, it seems that he takes it not to be or involve any sort of act that is under voluntary control.\(^{40}\)

How Recognition of Religious Acceptance Helps Resolve Difficulties

I can further elucidate, as well as recommend, my suggestions in this essay by exploring the application of the belief-acceptance distinction, in the religious sphere, to certain issues and problems.

1. An appreciation of the distinction, and of the possibilities of genuine Christian faith based on acceptance, can alleviate nagging worries about “lack of faith,” where the source of the worry is a lack of belief,
the absence of any spontaneous feeling of certainty that, for example, Christ atoned for our sins. The frequency of this kind of concern is amply borne out by Christian spiritual autobiography. And if one comes to realize that a full, committed Christian life can involve acceptance of the doctrines in question, rather than belief, one may be spared much gratuitous anxiety. One can proceed more serenely and confidently with one's Christian life, while hoping and praying that one may come to believe what one now accepts.

2. Turning to more theoretical matters, I have already hinted that puzzles about whether religious faith is under voluntary control can be alleviated by the recognition that it can involve acceptance rather than belief. Such puzzles arise in connection with the idea that faith is required of the "believer," and that it is meritorious, while its absence is a demerit. But if the faith in question must contain certain propositional beliefs, and these are not within our voluntary control, how can anyone require us to have faith, and how can any merit attach to our doing so? Robert Adams wrestles earnestly with this problem and attempts to solve it by maintaining that we can be culpable, or the reverse, for items that are not under our voluntary control, provided they are items we should repent of.41 This is how unbelief can be a sin and belief a virtue. But if we recognize that insofar as faith is required and lack of faith something for which we can be culpable, the cognitive element thereof is acceptance, which is under our voluntary control, rather than belief, the puzzle need never arise. We can give a much more straightforward account of how faith is a virtue and lack of faith a sin, without engaging in the pyrotechnics Adams feels called upon to produce. Needless to say, even if the cognitive aspect of faith is under effective voluntary control, that is not sufficient to render faith a virtue and its lack a vice. Voluntary control is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition. But it is the only one of the conditions that I am concerned with here.

3. Revisionist theologians often aver that this or that traditional Christian doctrine is "unbelievable" by people today, or at least unbelievable by those who are imbued with the modern "scientific ethos," or who take seriously the historical-critical method, or who are sufficiently reflective. This motivates these thinkers to reinterpret those doctrines in such a way as to be believable. Here is a recent example from John Shelby Spong concerning the resurrection.

I cannot say my yes to legends that have been clearly and fancifully created. If I could not move my search beyond angelic messengers, empty tombs, and ghostlike apparitions, I could not say yes to Easter. I will not allow my
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twentieth-century mind to be compromised by the literalism of another era that is not capable of being believed in a literal way today. If the resurrection of Jesus cannot be believed except by assenting to the fantastic descriptions included in the Gospels, then Christianity is doomed. For that view of the resurrection is not believable, and if that is all there is, then Christianity, which depends upon the truth and authenticity of Jesus' resurrection, also is not believable.42

But all this ignores the belief-acceptance distinction. Suppose these thinkers are right in taking certain fundamental Christian doctrines, as traditionally understood, to be unbelievable by contemporaries, at least those who satisfy certain widely satisfied conditions. I do not believe this to be the case, but suppose I am wrong about that. In any event, it seems clear that many Christians, especially now, do not find themselves believing in, for example, a bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead in the distinctive sense of belief. This will not seem to require a reinterpretation of the doctrine unless the belief-acceptance distinction is ignored. For even if I don't find myself spontaneously feeling that this is what happened, and even if this is impossible for me, it is still within my power to accept the doctrine, at least provided I take there to be sufficient reasons to do so.43

4. Finally, there is a question to which the distinction gives rise, rather than a prior question on which the distinction throws light. Do belief and acceptance have different statuses vis-à-vis the need for evidence, reasons, grounds? Do judgments of rationality or irrationality, justifiability or the reverse, apply differently to them? Or is the same story to be told about the two?

In discussing this, I will not undertake to get into the complex and thorny question of the way in which, or the extent to which, sufficient grounds, evidence, or reasons are required for rational or justified religious faith. In order to compare belief and acceptance on this point, let's assume for the sake of argument that there is a significant dimension of assessment of religious faith on which sufficient reasons constitute a good-making feature, and the lack of such reasons a bad-making feature. Call this dimension "justifiability." Does this mode of assessment apply to religious belief and acceptance in the same way?

The crucial thing to note here is the distinction between a "deontological" concept of justifiability, according to which being justified is a matter of satisfying, or not violating, intellectual obligations; and an "evaluative" conception, on which being justified is a matter of one's cognitive state satisfying certain desiderata, but where notions like per-
mission, requirement, responsibility, and the like do not come into the picture. It is because of the voluntariness issue that this makes a difference. Since acceptance is straightforwardly under voluntary control, a deontological conception of justification is unproblematically applicable. I may fail to accept a proposition I could have accepted when I ought to do so, or accept a proposition I could and should not have accepted. The deontological terms “ought” and “should” are (sometimes) applicable to acceptance. When they are, acceptances and failures to accept can be epistemically assessed in deontological terms. But since belief is not under effective voluntary control, this concept of justification is not applicable. The most we can do along these lines is to assess a belief in terms of what the believer has voluntarily done or failed to do in the past, such that these commissions or omissions have influenced the present state of belief.

With an evaluative conception of justification, on the other hand, it would seem that belief and acceptance are on all fours. Both belief that $p$ and acceptance that $p$ can be assessed for epistemic goodness or excellence, for example, in terms of whether one has adequate grounds for them, or whether they are based on adequate grounds.

An appreciation of the belief-acceptance distinction can open up new vistas in a variety of fields. If it is taken seriously, epistemology will be significantly transformed, since practically all recent epistemology has been hypnotically focused on belief when anything short of knowledge is discussed. Ever so many topics—justification, the internalism-externalism contrast, foundationalism, the role of coherence, the possibility of immediate justification—will have to be rethought to take into account the possibility that the applications to belief and acceptance have to be worked out separately. In this essay I have suggested that attention to the distinction will powerfully affect our understanding of the cognitive aspect of religious faith. I have mentioned only a few of the fallouts from that reexamination. I hope that others will join me in continuing the project. 44
Notes

Chapter 1


4. Deciding how things are will be seen to fall on the “acceptance” side of my basic contrast.

5. What I call “feel that $p$ is the case” is what is often termed, in the philosophical literature, “consciously believing that $p$” or “occurrently believing that $p$.”

6. I am indebted to Dana Radcliffe for helping me to get straight about this.

7. For this to be a sound assessment it must be limited to *human* belief. When it is belief of sub-human creatures that is in question, the behavioral manifestations loom much larger. Since these creatures lack language, they cannot tell us how certain they feel.


10. Note that Cohen speaks of accepting rules as well as propositions. I have no objection to that, but it will not figure in my discussion.
11. Here I am indebted to Jonathan Bennett.


13. A further complication is this. Acceptance can turn into belief. I may begin by adopting a positive attitude toward the proposition that \( p \) and then at some later stage find myself feeling it to be the case that \( p \). Here it may be difficult to say exactly where the mere acceptance ends and where the belief begins.

14. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does list a subject-connected meaning of “faithful”—full of or characterized by faith. But it designates this sense as “obsolete.”


17. Another historically famous example of the way in which “faith” is used to express a particular thinker's basic perspective on religion is found in Kierkegaard’s famous statement, “Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty.” See Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postsript*, trans. D. F. Swenson & W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 182.


21. ST II, II, 2, 10, ad 2.


23. ST II, II, 4, 5.

24. I have already acknowledged that one can be in an involuntary belief-like state with respect to \( p \) without feeling sure of \( p \) and without being free of doubt. But my present concern is to exhibit acceptance as an alternative to strong belief—feeling sure.


27. Later, I will briefly discuss some alternatives to belief that have been proposed in accounts of faith. But none of them are the same as “acceptance.”


29. ST II, II, 2, 9.

30. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, trans., *The Philo-
31. The reader may think that I have already answered this question in the third section, where I insisted that one could lead a full Christian life even if one accepted, rather than believed, certain central articles of faith. But in saying that, I was expressing my sense of the matter. The present issue has to do with whether there are authoritative church pronouncements that require belief.

32. In this connection, Wilfred Cantwell Smith gives some interesting linguistic statistics concerning the Bible. See his Belief and History (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977). Words in the pistis family occur 603 times in the New Testament. In only 4 percent of these occurrences is the word followed by a proposition. The noun pistis itself occurs 246 times, and in 217 of these occurrences there is no object, that is, the reference is just to faith, not to faith in something or faith that something.

33. For details, see Marion J. Hatchett, Commentary on the American Prayer Book (Seabury Press: 1980).

34. For these confessions I have drawn on Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom.


36. I don’t mean to suggest that this is typical of Shakespeare’s use of “believe.” Quite the contrary. My point is only that the earlier meaning can be found, atypically, as late as this.


38. The reader may wonder how I square differentiating my thesis from Muyskens’s with my earlier citation of Jordan, who says that his faith is best described as a hope rather than as a belief, as an example of one who accepts the articles of faith. It is like this. Acceptance is to be contrasted with hope as such. That does not mean that one who accepts Christian doctrines cannot also hope that they are true. Indeed, Jordan in the passage in question speaks of himself as assenting to the propositions of Christianity. This indicates to me that his characterization of his faith as hope is seriously incomplete, however prominent a place hope occupies in his total religious response.


43. No doubt, Spong and like-minded thinkers would be just as confident
that the resurrection of Jesus could not be accepted in a literal way today as they are that it cannot be believed in a literal way today. Nevertheless, the point remains that for certain people acceptance might be a live option even if belief is not.

44. This paper has greatly benefitted from comments by Jonathan Bennett and Dana Radcliffe.

Chapter 2

55. I read an earlier version of this paper at a meeting of the Soren Kierkegaard Society and on the campuses of the University of Illinois at Urbana and Northern Illinois University. I am grateful to my audiences on those occasions for stimulating discussion. I am also indebted to Martin Andic, who commented on the paper at the Kierkegaard Society meeting, for asking whether love of neighbor is a distinctly Christian ethical doctrine. As he observed, ideals resembling it are commended in other religious traditions. Thus, for example, at Bhagavad Gita 12, 13–19 Lord Krishna says: "He who has no ill feeling to any being, who is friendly and compassionate, without selfishness and egoism, who is the same in pain and pleasure and is patient . . . He who is alike to enemy and friend, also to honor and disgrace, who is alike to cold and heat, pleasure and pain, and is freed from attachment, He who is thus indifferent to blame and praise, who is silent and is content with anything, who is homeless, of steady mind and is devoted—that man is dear to Me." I quote from The Bhagavad Gita, translated by Eliot Deutsch (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1968), 105. I see resemblance only, and not identity, between the non-attached benevolence dear to Lord Krishna and the love of neighbor commanded by Jesus Christ. More generally, as far as I can tell, love of neighbor, as Christian authors such as