

Feature Article: JAF5406

STREET EPISTEMOLOGY: THE NEW ATHEIST EVANGELISM

by Travis M. Dickinson

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 06 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

You may find yourself approached on the street being asked to consider religious faith. Sounds like Christian street witnessing, right? Well, it may be you're face-to-face with an atheist (and often a GoPro video recorder) being engaged in what's come to be known as "street epistemology."

What is street epistemology? According to Peter Boghossian, this is an activist approach for engaging "the faithful in conversations that help them value reason and rationality, cast doubt on their beliefs, and mistrust their faith."¹ He wants "people equipped with an array of dialectical and clinical tools who actively go into the streets, the prisons, the bars, the churches, the schools, and the community — into any and every place the faithful reside — and help them abandon their faith and embrace reason."²

Street epistemology has two main goals. First, the street epistemologist aims to get religious folks to apply reason to faith. But this isn't the primary goal, at least for Boghossianstyle street epistemology. The ultimate goal is to eradicate the "virus of faith."

In this article, I argue that street epistemology's penultimate aim of applying reason to faith is a good one. Apologists everywhere think it is good to think rationally about faith. However, its ultimate aim — of eradicating the "faith virus" — is a bad one, since it assumes a radically flawed understanding of faith.

STREET EPISTEMOLOGY

Boghossian gave the call, and street epistemologists have literally taken it to the streets armed with a set of rehearsed questions and a GoPro. One will find a growing number of videos online that involve a person willing to talk about certain sorts of beliefs. Usually the discussion begins by talking about “God beliefs.” Though the interviews do occasionally involve adherents of other religions, the street epistemologist channels are dominated by Christian interviews. When asked how one knows the Christian claims are true, the conversation almost always turns to faith. The Christian is pressed on why faith is a reliable way to arrive at the truth. The Christian interviewee is forced to offer reasons for faith.

It bears mentioning that the street epistemologist is typically very kind and noncombative (something Boghossian calls for). A passerby is invited to discuss, for just a few minutes, their beliefs about God, and simply to defend the basis of those beliefs.

One value in viewing these videos is that, in real time, we get a window into where the typical Christian is at with reason and apologetics, and (spoiler alert) it’s bad, very bad! Typically, Christian interlocutors can’t seem to muster a single cogent apologetic argument that they can see through to its logical end.

For example, in a discussion with a Christian college student, the discussion turned to faith. Here’s what happened:

Street Epistemologist: What do you mean by faith?

Christian: Like, belief that God is God, that He is the almighty savior.

SE: Are you saying faith is just belief?

C: Uh huh.

SE: Does just believing in something make that something true?

C: No. Just because you believe in Santa doesn’t make it true [laughing].

SE: So if someone just believed in Santa, this doesn’t make Santa true?

C: No, there’s no evidence for Santa.

SE: Is there evidence for a God?

C: Uh huh.

SE: What’s the best one?

C: There's a lot. Like I said, there's a lot. [Thinking to herself] I have to think. You are putting me on the spot. I have them written down.

SE: I'm not saying that the evidence is not true, but if all that evidence was found to be nonreliable, would that change your confidence that the [sic] God is real?

C: No. [laughs] It really wouldn't.

SE: So it is not really about evidence either for you?

C: No, it's just about faith.

When asked about her definition of faith again, she says:

C: I think faith is an internal feeling. I have this feeling in me that I know God is real. I can't explain it.

Throughout the interview, the street epistemologist was respectful and well-mannered. He simply asked *pointed* questions. This Christian college student routinely contradicted herself and appealed to faith whenever she ran out of things to say. It's cringeworthy from start to finish.

The tragedy here is that the world of apologetics is alive and well. There never has been as much material and programs that offer training in apologetics on both the popular and academic levels. There are apps one can download for quick reference. The problem is that most Christians are completely unaware.

The lesson here is that we need to take our faith seriously. I don't get the sense that these Christians are fideists, thinking that faith and reason are at odds. Frankly, that would be to give them too much credit. It is not as if they have considered these matters and concluded that fideism is the view they will embrace. It simply seems they are intellectually lazy and apathetic about their faith. If they had apologetic arguments in hand, it seems to me they would use them. Instead, they look like students forced to take an exam who not only have failed to study, but only just realized they are in the class!

ERADICATING FAITH?

The ultimate aim of street epistemology is to get people to give up their faith commitments. It's a free country, and street epistemologists are certainly allowed to do this. However, their explicit supposition is that people will give up their faith once they embrace reason. Did you catch that? Like the fideist, the street epistemologist thinks reason is opposed to faith.

How does the street epistemologist understand faith? In Boghossian's words, faith is "pretending to know things that you don't know."³ He adds to this definition the slightly (but only slightly) more charitable version: "Faith is belief without evidence."⁴

This is reminiscent of what Richard Dawkins once said about faith: "Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence."⁵ My favorite over-the-top definition, though, is Mark Twain's: "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."⁶

We should notice that whenever these characterizations of faith are given, they are not quoting any person of faith. They don't engage any scholarship on faith, any popular treatment, or mention a biblical passage. Thus, these "definitions" seem, at best, anecdotal impressions of what they take people of faith to mean by the term. That is, these are mere caricatures of Christian faith.

FAITH AS VENTURED TRUST

What then is faith? As a first pass, we should understand faith as simple trust. When we trust, there is always some thing (or person) that we trust. This is to say that faith always has an object. There must be some thing or person in which one has faith. So this could be a chair one is considering sitting in, an airplane one is waiting to board, or a person to whom one is about to say "I do." The object of one's faith would be the chair or the airplane or the soon-to-be spouse.

Notice that, on this understanding of faith, faith is not, by itself, belief. So an immediate problem with the above caricatures of faith is that they do not place faith in the right sort of category. Faith cannot be "belief without evidence," since it is not a belief at all. It is a state that may involve beliefs or may be caused by beliefs, but it is not itself a belief. Rather, it is a state of trust.

But we don't have faith in something from a distance. Rather, we must *trust in action*. When we genuinely place our faith in an object, we always *venture* something. If

we trust (from a distance) the safety of the airplane, but we never get on board, then we haven't really placed our faith in the airplane.

Faith requires not trust *from a distance* but rather an entrusting ourselves where we venture or risk ourselves and our well-being to some thing or person. To truly place our faith in a chair, we must sit down and risk the chair's collapsing. Or a much better illustration is the risk one takes when one gets married. A healthy marriage requires us to entrust virtually every area of our lives to our spouse, and this opens us up to the possibility of the deepest hurt when there is betrayal. A toxic marriage is, of course, when there is deep distrust and suspicion, but the marriage will also suffer if one merely trusts from a distance. A healthy marriage requires us to fully jump in with deep and mutual ventured trust.

Everyone, including the street epistemologist, has faith, in this sense, insofar as they entrust themselves to someone or something. Presumably, they too sit in chairs, fly on airplanes, and have deep relationships. Even when one does science, one entrusts oneself to certain methodologies, prior theories and data, and our empirical and mental faculties.

In fact, in one sense, there is really nothing unique about Christian faith other than the object of that faith. What is the object of Christian faith? Christian faith is entrusting ourselves to Christ and venturing on the truth and reality of the gospel. It is not merely the truth of the gospel, and it is not merely the evidence and reasons constitutive of the knowledge of the gospel, but we are literally entrusting ourselves to Christ and His gospel.

CHRISTIANS AND REASONS

Even though Christians on the street, as it were, can appear sometimes to have a low view of reason and evidence, I don't think they actually do. When asked pointed questions by an atheist, they may not be able to articulate a single coherent reason, let alone present any of the scientific or philosophical arguments for Christianity, but I still think people have reasons for faith. This is because reasons and evidence need not be restricted to the formal arguments of science or philosophy. What reasons do typical Christians have? They have believed precisely because they have become convinced by the preaching of the gospel, the testimony of the Spirit, the richness of Scripture, the testimony of others, a work the Lord has done in their own lives, and answers to prayer. Perhaps they can't articulate an argument from the fine tuning of the universe, but they indeed see a world that appears designed and finely tuned and believe in God, in part, on that basis. Perhaps Christianity explains for them things like value, purpose, meaning, beauty, and logic. Perhaps one has even looked at some of the many

apologetic evidences from science, philosophy, archeology, and history. The point is this: just because one is not able to articulate these things on the spot, it doesn't follow these are not part of the basis on which one believes.

If this is right, most Christians think, at least in practice, reason and evidence are very important for faith. They don't believe without evidence, and they certainly don't merely pretend that Christianity is true.

REASONABLE FAITH

We are now in a position to see that faith and reason are perfectly compatible and, indeed, are importantly related. Reason is a tool for coming to know what sort of object on which we should venture our trust. Reason helps us to know what objects are trustworthy (or what we may call *faithworthy*) in our venturing.

If I'm considering whether I should venture my trust in a potential spouse, I should think rationally about this. I should ask what reasons there are to believe she is faithworthy and what makes it wise to venture my life with her. This may not make for a great romcom or reality TV show, but it makes for a better marriage!

When it comes to my Christian faith, I have found good answers for every doubt, every question, every objection. I have found the intellectual resources for Christianity to be a very deep well, indeed. It is precisely because I have applied reason to the Christian faith that I have given my life to its truth. This isn't to say I don't still have many questions with which I wrestle. However, given the intellectual track record of the Christian worldview for me on my journey, I have confidence. That is, I have found Christianity eminently reasonable and worthy of venturing my trust.

Street epistemology is a thing precisely because the church is intellectually immature. If more Christians pursued God with an intellectual devotion as Jesus commanded ("Love the Lord your God...with all your mind" [Matt. 22:37]), then the robust case for Christianity would be on display. This is my mission in life. How about you?

Travis M. Dickinson, PhD (University of Iowa), is associate professor of philosophy and Christian apologetics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He blogs at www.travisdickinson.com and is a frequent conference speaker to adults, college students, and youth.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2013), 1.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 7.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 A lecture by Richard Dawkins extracted from *The Nullifidian* (December 1994),
<http://www.simonyi.ox.ac.uk/dawkins/WorldOfDawkins-archive/Dawkins/Work/Articles/1994-12religion.shtml>.
- 6 Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (New York: Dover, 1989), 132.