

# Fideism

Fideism is the view that accepting the truth or rationality of religious beliefs cannot depend on and should not be made to depend on any method or system of thought lying outside those beliefs. In particular, it means that religious beliefs can be known to be true independently of scientific or philosophical arguments. Some fideists argue for this independence of religious beliefs by asserting that they rest on revelation and not reason. Others argue that, although religious beliefs are characterized by rationality, they have a different rationality from the sort found in scientific proof and philosophical argumentation. Fideism is often linked to antifoundationalism, the view that there are and can be no universally acceptable standards or methods for verifying the truth of statements.

## Key Points/Challenges

- Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) represents a type of fideism that goes back to the French mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–62), who observed that the heart has reasons of which reason is ignorant. Although faith is not irrational, it cannot be attained or verified by reason alone. For Kierkegaard, this characteristic of faith is exemplified by belief in the incarnation. For those standing outside faith, the incarnation is absurd and cannot be proved true by human reason. In order to accept the incarnation we must decide to embrace this paradox; once embraced, it is seen to be true. The idea of the incarnation, therefore, can be verified to be true only by those who stand within the situation of faith and not by those who stand outside faith.
- Another sort of fideism is represented by Karl Barth (1886–1968), who emphasized that the content of God's revelation is not the sort of universal or generalized truth that

is the goal of science and philosophy. On the contrary, the content of revelation is always particular, that is, it is directed to humans in particular circumstances. This means that theology, which is the church's response to revelation, has nothing to do with science and philosophy (as least as they have been hitherto understood). That is why Barth vehemently rejected the possibility of **natural theology**. Barth was primarily concerned that we not subordinate revelation to human reason by seeing revelation as just one means of attaining universal truths that are also available by other means.

- The contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1932–) argues against the assumption that there is a universal norm of rationality. On the contrary, for those who believe in God neither science nor philosophy nor any other discipline provides grounds for such belief. This is because belief in God is not inferred from another belief but is instead “properly basic” for those who hold this belief. A belief is properly basic when it does not require rational justification and functions as a foundational belief for other beliefs. As a result, faith is methodologically independent of science, philosophy, and other disciplines.
- The main critique of fideism is expressed in the injunction, stated in classical form by William Clifford (1999), that it is always wrong to believe something on insufficient evidence. Of course, this critique assumes that there is a universal form of evidence that should govern all our beliefs, including religious beliefs. It is just this evidentialist assumption that fideists contest.
- With respect to the relationship of science to theology, fideism stands for the independence of theology from scientific inquiry. In particular, fideists argue that

theology has a source of truth about the created world that is independent of the sciences even while admitting that the sciences provide important insight into the created world. Fideists are therefore suspicious of natural theology, which implies the ability to know about God and things related to God by means of human reason and universally available truths.

## Discussion Partners

Amesbury, Richard. 2005. *Fideism*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fideism/#2.2.2>.

A good exposition of some of the main forms of fideism, with extended bibliography.

Barth, Karl. 1962. *Credo*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

A readable introduction to Barth's theology, consisting of his lectures on the Apostles' Creed.

Clifford, William K. 1999. "The Ethics of Belief." In *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, 70-96. New York: Prometheus Books.

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The basic statement of the thesis that belief must always be warranted by evidence.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1985. *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard's presentation of the incarnation as a paradox and of the relationship of faith to reason.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1992. "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" In *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, 133–41. New York: Oxford University Press.

Argument that belief in God is not inferred from some more fundamental belief.

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