

Diverging Paths of Conviction: The Fundamental Differences Between Communist and Religious Beliefs Through the Lens of Faith and Credence

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Abstract

Faith and belief are both interconnected and distinct. Their connection lies in the inclusion of the subject's "belief." The differences between them manifest in their objects of focus, distinguishing between the concrete and the abstract, the individual and the collective, the diverse and the unified, and in their formation, where the involvement of emotion and willpower varies. There is a fundamental difference between Communist faith and religious faith, evident in their bases of existence as social facts versus mystical entities; in their modes of cognition as scientific rationality versus emotional experience; and in their value orientations as self-liberation versus the salvation of others. It is imperative to vigorously promote the education of Communist faith, transforming it into an internal "conviction" and external "consciousness," thereby advancing the grand cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics continuously forward.

1 Introduction

"Belief" and "faith" are two concepts that describe the spiritual activities of individuals. Philosophers hold opposing views on their meanings and relationships. One view is that their meanings are largely similar and interchangeable. For instance, in his work "Critique of Pure Reason," Kant uses this concept in a way that could be translated either as "belief" or as "faith." The other view posits that their meanings are distinctly different. "Belief" is generally considered a consciousness phenomenon shared by people, whereas "faith" is thought to be a consciousness activity unique to religion. Platov (К.К.Платонов), for example, believes that "faith" specifically refers to religious faith^[1]. I argue that the consciousness phenomena referred to by "belief" and "faith" have both similarities and differences. It is not possible to strictly separate the two; there is a process of transformation from the former to the latter. Nor should "faith" be regarded as a phenomenon exclusive to the religious worldview, as it is also widely present in other areas of social life. Communist faith, based on recent social ideals, is an important belief distinct from religious faith. Clarifying the essential differences between communist faith and religious faith holds not only theoretical value but also significant practical importance for the current political and faith education in our country.

2 The Connection and Distinction between Belief and Faith

"Belief" and "faith" share common internal factors and a relationship of inclusion. In terms of internal factors, both are founded on the subject's "belief." Regarding the relationship of inclusion, belief is the starting point, premise, and foundation of faith; faith is the sublimation and deepening of belief, as well as its ultimate destination.

2.1 The Internal Connection between Belief and Faith

Firstly, belief is the starting point of faith, and faith is the sublimation of belief. Belief is the natural approval of a proposition by the mind, a conviction in that proposition^[2]. For example, the belief that the Earth is round or that the sun will rise tomorrow. These are beliefs in some knowledge or viewpoint that has been verified in the past. Beliefs generally target specific things; when they are elevated to attitudes and concepts about humanity, the universe, or totality and universality, beliefs become faith. In real society, beliefs have various levels and types, the highest level of which is faith^[3]. Faith involves commitment to something, such as a person, a hypothesis, a religion, or a worldview. Furthermore, faith includes the believer's acceptance and belief, encompasses belief, and requires the believer to fulfill commitments to the object of faith, accompanied by reverence and adoration for the object of faith. For instance, faith in God, material worship, personal worship, and social ideals that cannot yet be realized in the near future.

Secondly, the most basic common factor between belief and faith is the subject's "belief." "Belief" is gradually formed and accumulated in real life, a determination and affirmation of the existence, nature, state, and function of certain material or spiritual things, and is a basic, indispensable judgment and attitude on which people's actions depend. Kant distinguished three basic types of what people "believe": opinion, knowledge, and faith. Opinion refers to judgments that lack sufficient reasons both subjectively and objectively; knowledge refers to judgments that have sufficient reasons both subjectively and objectively; faith refers to judgments that seem subjectively reliable but lack sufficient objective reasons or proof^[4]. The "New Chinese Sea of Words" defines belief as a "firmly unshakable" opinion and faith as "extreme conviction and admiration" for an object^[5]. Thus, both belief and faith involve the subject's belief, approval, and identification with specific objects.

2.2 The Essential Differences Between Belief and Faith

As seen above, the "belief" implied in faith differs from the "belief" in empirically verified natural science knowledge, that is, belief. Moreover, there are other differences between the "belief" encompassed by belief and faith.

First, the objects of belief and faith differ. The objects of belief are generally individual and concrete, while the objects of faith are more abstract and holistic. Due to differences in personal living environments, knowledge backgrounds, desires, ideological consciousness, personal experiences, and personality traits, the objects of people's beliefs vary. Therefore, the objects of people's beliefs exhibit diversity. In contrast, faith involves the overall life of human society and the highest value orientation of human spiritual pursuits. It is a comprehensive, total reflection on the conditions, historical evolution, and ultimate concerns of human societal life, a macro recognition of the relationship between human society and the natural world, a condensation and integration of people's worldview, historical view, and philosophy of life, a construction of the highest values and their commitments, and a form of highest consciousness and spiritual guidance that can mobilize other

spiritual factors to serve it. From ancient times to the present, the objects of people's faith, including gods, God, and ideal societies, are closely related to human destiny, fundamentally affecting and governing people's highest beliefs and dominating or integrating in the spiritual world of humans. Faith stands at the pinnacle of the value system, like a lighthouse on the far shore, illuminating and guiding the diverse value life of human society.

Second, the degree of emotional investment in belief and faith differs. The emotional involvement in faith is higher and stronger than that in belief, with faith encompassing more inner admiration and reverence. Both belief and faith are based on belief, with belief emphasizing "thought" and faith highlighting "looking up to." The "thought" in belief emphasizes "attention" and "keeping in mind" for specific objects, often indicating an idea. This kind of "thought" is generally manifested as judgments and concepts, with empirical and rational characteristics, thus containing more cognitive components than faith. Faith, beyond "belief," particularly emphasizes "looking up to." This "looking up to" mainly reflects the faith subject's reverence and devotion to the object, often expressing a holistic attitude, including the faith subject's inner longing, relentless pursuit, eager anticipation, and even wholehearted devotion and aspiration. "Shuowen Jiezi" interprets "belief" as "sincerity" [6] and "looking up to" as "raising one's head" [7]. Thus, faith elevates the subject's belief in specific objects to a level of certainty and reverence. Compared to belief, faith not only includes cognitive components but importantly encompasses strong emotional elements such as admiration and veneration.

Third, the degree of will involvement in belief and faith differs. Faith requires the involvement of will and is a specific willful action, whereas belief often does not need the participation of will and is a non-willful action, manifested as naturally accepting. Willful actions refer to choices and decisions made after deliberation by a person, requiring self-control and execution, distinguishing from unconscious habitual behavior, i.e., unintentional actions. Willful actions are generally completed when one is fully aware of what they are doing, accompanied by awareness, i.e., conscious behavior. Because faith manifests as accepting something, on one hand, we need to control ourselves to accept, involving thought and willpower; on the other hand, we must act according to what is accepted. For example, I believe in God or pursue a certain ideal, although my feelings cannot tell me God definitely exists or this ideal will certainly be realized, yet my will inevitably forces myself to believe in them and take action, otherwise, it would contradict my faith and incur self-reproach. Therefore, faith necessarily accompanies willful enforcement. Belief manifests as accepting a proposition as a non-willful event, neither requiring one's willpower nor any action. For instance, I believe the sky won't fall, leaves are green, and everyone will eventually die. The acceptance of these propositions spontaneously forms in people's productive and living practices, without the need for conscious control, and these accepted objects do not demand people's compliance. Thus, although both belief and faith are based on belief, faith is "wanting" to believe, while belief is "automatically" believing. Thomas Aquinas believes that faith "must rely on the believer's will" [8]. Kierkegaard also pointed out that faith relies not on knowledge but on "will" [9]. Belief does not require the participation of will, as it is generally based on the cognition spontaneously formed by individuals or groups, or on traditional concepts and universally axiomatized systems or logical rules. Therefore, faith carries a high unity of the subject's informed intent.

3 Social Facts and Mystical Entities: The Different Foundations of Faith

From the perspective of foundational existence, the worldviews upon which Communist faith and religious faith are established differ significantly. Communist faith is grounded in historical materialism and dialectical materialism, based on facts and social laws [10], revealing a social ideal.

In contrast, religious faith generally rests on idealism and is based on the imagination of mystical entities or powers. Although the concept of faith conventionally describes both, they are essentially different from each other.

3.1 Communist Faith: An Ideal Revealed Through Social Facts and Laws

From the perspective of historical materialism, Communist faith is revealed through the laws of contradiction between productive forces and production relations, economic bases, and superstructures. It is the inherent and insurmountable social contradictions within capitalist society that necessitate its abandonment for a more advanced form of society. Moreover, Communist faith stems from the fact of alienation in capitalist society, revealed through the reality of social alienation. Marx and Engels pointed out that communism cannot be detached from the "real" relations of current struggles and the movements of contemporary life and production ^[11]. The essence of Communist faith is manifested in regarding communist society as the highest goal of struggle, viewing communist ideology as an unassailable truth while consciously guiding oneself by it, investing with passion and all one's strength in the communist movement, firmly believing in the realization of communism, and striving for it throughout one's life ^[12]. Communist faith represents the integration of theory and practice, the "intrinsic unity" of ultimate purpose, scientific nature, and practicality ^[13], transcending and innovating traditional faith.

Viewing from the dialectical relationship between reality and possibility, Communist faith develops through the practical efforts of socialist ideals, thus based on possibilities contained in reality, pursuing an ideal that evolves from near-term social ideals to grand social ideals. Engels, discussing the relationship between Christianity and "socialism," noted that Christianity promises salvation in the "future," "heaven," "afterlife," whereas "socialism" seeks liberation during the social transformation in "this world." Thus, Communist faith is both transcendent and inherent; its transcendence lies in pursuing an ideal society beyond the current social reality. Its inherent nature is on the one hand dedicated to pursuing "real happiness" in current societal life ^[14]; on the other hand, it stems from the development within human society itself, where people change their actual situations through real movements, seeking true liberation.

3.2 Religious Faith: A Fantasy Based on Subjective Psychological Constructs

Religion emerges as a specific ideology or social-cultural phenomenon at a certain stage of productive force development. It proclaims the existence of transcendent mystical entities or powers outside the real world, with such entities or powers possessing absolute authority, governing all in the universe, determining human destiny, and being the embodiment of fairness and justice, capable of making just decisions on all conflicts and possessing the power to punish evil and encourage good. Thus, followers develop a sense of awe and worship towards these entities or powers. Based on this, a church, doctrines, and personal moral codes are formed by a founder and their followers ^[15]. Therefore, religious faith demands its followers' wholehearted devotion to its objects of faith, including mystical entities, powers, doctrines, etc. This devotion is manifested in religious rituals and real-world activities. Hence, religious faith is an extremely complex individual spiritual phenomenon that permeates and influences all aspects of people's material and spiritual lives.

Although religious faith reflects people's desires for a better life, its objects of faith, such as gods and God, are based on natural and historical facts that are illusory. Marx noted that in the "religious fantasy," the "products of the human brain" appear as living beings with interrelations and "existing independently" ^[16]. People's acceptance of religion is based entirely on personal subjective belief without scientific knowledge. Historical Christian philosophers emphasized: I believe, therefore God

exists. Christianity's three principles: faith, hope, love, with faith always being foremost. Western philosophers analyzing religion from a rational perspective also consider it part of the human spiritual world. For instance, Kant believed that the Christian God exists only in people's minds. Hegel viewed religion as "a mood of the heart, the kingdom of the heart" [17]. Marx stated, "Religion is the realization of human essence in fantasy," it is "human self-consciousness and self-feeling." Therefore, religious faith is entirely based on human subjective psychological activity, founded on beliefs in "immortal soul" and "existence of God." These fictional assumptions have been historically accepted because, in stages of scientific and cultural backwardness, they provided spiritual comfort. As Augustine emphasized in his "The City of God," the existence of evil in the secular world highlights God's justice. That is, from the existence of evil, one can infer the existence of God. Thus, the existence of evil in the secular world becomes a reason to believe in God's existence. However, religion does not strive to change the "real" evil but places God's just judgment and human happiness in a transcendent world beyond the reach of earthly beings, rendering God's justice and human happiness into illusions.

4 Scientific Rationality and Emotional Experience: Differing Cognitive Approaches to Faith

Viewing from the divide between rational and irrational cognition, Communist faith is a crystallization of human rationality, formed solely through the aid of human rational faculties; while religious faith, moving beyond "pure myth" or "otherworldliness" and even showing tendencies to align with scientific rationality and serve secular life, is "overall a supernatural irrationality" [18]. Religious faith primarily relies on human irrationality, often requiring the abandonment of rationality for its formation. This irrationality manifests epistemologically as fantasy and emotionally as dependence, consolation, and expectation.

4.1 Communist Faith: A Crystallization of Human Rationality

From a materialist epistemological perspective, faith is an extension of knowledge, a deduction from the known to the unknown. Such deductions about the future are limited and incomplete, facing the challenge of future practical verification. Communist faith, based on scientific worldview and historical knowledge, is not in itself a scientific worldview or historical perspective but a vision of an ideal society. This vision, yet to be realized, can only be accepted as faith prior to its realization, requiring prolonged and arduous effort from people.

Communist faith is the result of extensive and outstanding scientific research by the founders of Marxism. Scientific research inevitably relies on rationality, a process of observation, experiment-based, or logic-deductive reasoning. This process involves two steps: first, discovering many specific facts, then finding universal laws through fact analysis. In other words, scientific activity starts from observing "specific facts," following logical rules and employing various logical thinking methods such as induction, deduction, analysis, synthesis, and comparison, rising from phenomena to essence and laws. The scientific nature of Communist faith is reflected in its method of holism and open critique, with human activity goals of "strict scientific calculation" as its faith [19]. It is widely recognized that Communist faith is based on a critical examination of capitalist alienation, economic reality, and in-depth study of capital operation logic, grounded in solid empirical facts and verified scientific knowledge.

Communist faith emerges from reflections on capitalist reality. It is always the antithesis and critic of capitalism, not only holding a strong critical attitude towards the realities of capitalist society but also

demanding a fundamental transformation of the capitalist system. As the highest program of Communists, it also serves as a measure and benchmark for real socialism, critiquing socialism's initial stage. It propels the continuous development and perfection of the real socialist system, changing actual conditions through practical actions to "achieve real liberation"^[20]. As long as communism has not been realized, Communist faith maintains its critical function towards the real world. In its critique, Communist faith follows a method of jointly critiquing reality and ideals, fighting against old notions as well as forces maintaining the status quo and hindering social progress. Only by changing the social reality in which people live can people's concepts be fundamentally altered, achieving the free and full development of humanity and the liberation of all humankind.

4.2 Religious Faith as a Result of Mystical Emotional Experiences

Throughout human history, the founders and propagators of theistic religions have largely advocated anti-rationalism. They knew that proving the existence of God through rationality was impossible, thus promoting reliance on mystical emotional experiences to perceive God's existence. Most followers of religious faith are not adept at using their rationality, preferring blind faith or even being ignorant. The ancient Roman theologian Cicero emphasized that religion relies on emotional experience. He stated that once "piety" disappears, religion "will also vanish" ^[21] The Church Father Tertullian openly proclaimed that Christian faith fundamentally opposes philosophical rationality, accusing "philosophy of being the root of heresy," a "desecration" of the truth ^[22], and believing in Christianity "precisely because it is absurd"^[23]. Augustine, although somewhat moderating the opposition between faith and reason, still believed that "sacred matters" are "things believed first and understood later,"^[24] promoting faith over reason, understanding through faith, and defending faith with reason, serving faith with rationality, as typically said, making philosophy the handmaiden of theology.

Since the modern era, with the "disenchantment of reason" in the Western world, Christianity's domination over society and people's thoughts has gradually waned. However, Western religious scholars still believe that religious faith is primarily based on emotion rather than rationality. The 19th-century German theologian F.D.E. Schleiermacher viewed religion as originating from humans as "finite beings" experiencing dependence on the "infinite" or "absolute" when facing their limitations and urgent situations. This absolute dependence is irrational and unexplainable. It's not an empirical experience that can be grasped through knowledge or rationality but a non-knowledge, irrational experience. In this sense, religion is actually based on "direct self-experience," where individuals feel entirely dependent on an "infinitely transcendent object," which in Christianity is referred to as "God." Kierkegaard believed that from the subjective experience of the existent, religious faith is a persistent emotion, a relationship with God based on inner devotion. God's existence is not a moral postulate as Kant believed, because faith does not require moral justification ^[25]. Even if evidence opposes religious doctrines, faith, through the emotional "determination" it generates, is justified in accepting even a "leap" from the existent world to the non-existent world. Therefore, Kierkegaard considered the basis of religious faith to be the believer's emotion rather than rationality, with emotion prevailing over rationality, forsaking rationality for emotion. However, rationality-forsaken emotion is blind and easily exploited. Historical religious organizations, institutions, and theocracies have precisely targeted this trait, using it as a tool to unify people's thoughts, maintain, and defend the social and political order they need.

Hence, religious faith's dominance at certain historical stages and its continued popularity in specific regions of the current world are because it exploits humans' inherent irrational cognitive forms and

psychological traits. Since religious faith is based on irrationality, devout religious belief often leads to irrational religious fervor in religious movements.

5 Self-Liberation and Salvation by Others: Different Value Orientations of Faith

From the perspective of the value orientation of faith, Communist faith is grounded in the materialist view of history, focusing on the perspective and line of the masses, pursuing human self-liberation and the liberation of all humanity, and committed to "saving the world," i.e., achieving the real happiness of human society. In contrast, religious faith is based on idealist historiography, seeking salvation from God—the Other, and is committed to "saving the soul," i.e., cultivating an individual's goodness and compassion. Such transformation targeting individuals cannot fundamentally transform the entire society or realize the truly beautiful life of the people.

5.1 Communist Faith Focuses on the Liberation of All Humanity

Communist faith is based on materialist historiography. According to this view, the masses not only live in history's "drama" but are also its "creators." Human history is nothing but the process of "humans being born through human labor," a historical process of interaction between humans and nature. Through labor practice, people have created a world suitable for their existence, thereby creating their own history. In the process of dealing with themselves and nature, people inevitably need to continuously transcend the natural and social constraints on themselves, achieving specific "individual freedom." This "individual freedom" is based on the comprehensive development of humans and the transformation of their communal productive capabilities into their common wealth, founded on the premises of universal material exchange, comprehensive demand for social products, the establishment of comprehensive social relations, and the formation of comprehensive productive capacities. Individuals who develop freely regard social relations as their common relations, place these relations under their control, forming a community of free individuals, i.e., a communist society. Therefore, Communist faith hopes that in the future society, people will jointly control social relations and material wealth with their fully developed abilities, eliminate various forms of alienation, truly achieve human autonomy and freedom, and ultimately realize the liberation of all humanity.

5.2 Religious Faith is Devoted to Human Salvation

In theistic religions, there is always a God with a personal will, who is the supreme ruler of the world, such as the God of Christianity, Jehovah of Judaism, Allah of Islam, and Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) of Buddhism. In religious traditions, there are "holy scriptures" taught by these personal gods that explain everything in the experiential world, including all existents and human value ideals in nature and history, proclaiming that humanity can only be saved by faith in them. For example, the concepts of God's creation, original sin and redemption, soul salvation, and the coming of the kingdom of heaven as proclaimed in the Jewish "Bible · Old Testament"; the "Bible · New Testament" of Christianity not only inherits the aforementioned views of Judaism but also adds a humanized Jesus "made flesh," with the resurrection of Christ, the Last Judgment, and the coming of the kingdom of heaven as its basic faith. The Quran of Islam adopts the Christian and Jewish concepts of monotheistic creation, the Last Judgment, and the hereafter, proclaiming "all submission to Allah," with those who submit to Allah being Muslims. A commonality among these world-renowned religious faiths is the proclamation that all problems faced by humanity cannot be solved by human power alone but only by the power of a God who reigns supreme over humanity, denying

humanity's ability to recognize truth and denying the possibility that humanity can overcome all difficulties encountered and achieve liberation through its own power. Historically, these theistic religious concepts have been continuously refuted by the facts of human progress.

6 Conclusions

Based on the conceptual analysis between belief and faith, this paper elucidates the essential differences between Communist faith and religious faith from three aspects: foundational existence, cognitive approach, and value orientation. In the new era, it is imperative to clearly promote the education of Communist faith, striving to turn it into a "material force" that leads the advancement of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

First, regarding the essential differences between belief and faith, Communism can only be expressed using the concept of faith, not belief. Faith represents a higher level of the subjective spiritual phenomenon than belief, with an essential distinction between the two that should not be confused. Belief does not require emotional investment or willful enforcement; it forms naturally, while faith requires emotional investment and forms through willful enforcement and deliberate self-control. Therefore, the formation, cultivation, and reinforcement of faith are significantly more challenging than belief. As a grand social ideal, our acceptance and belief in Communism can only be expressed using the concept of faith, not belief. That is, we can only speak of Communist faith, not Communist belief. Otherwise, it would be theoretically untenable and practically harmful, as it would conflate the formation of Communist faith with the formation of general belief, underestimating the difficulty of forming Communist faith. Some even propose abandoning Communist faith, leading to "aphasia" in theoretical research in this area and a "loss of position" in theoretical struggles. In real life, some even easily claim to be Communists without recognizing that establishing Communist faith is a process requiring strong will involvement and lifelong effort.

Second, from the comparative perspective of Communist faith and religious faith, the essential content of Communist faith is reflected in the following aspects. Ontologically, Communist faith is a grand social ideal revealed through social facts and historical laws. It focuses on starting from facts, transforming society, and achieving true human liberation. In essence, it is the transformation of social reality and real humans, or the process of transformation and progress towards Communism, where achieving Communism and the process towards it are dialectically unified. Epistemologically, Communist faith starts from the reality of capitalist alienation and reaches rational cognition of future society through rational critique. On one hand, it starts with the perceptual cognition of capitalist alienation, based on perceptual knowledge, ultimately transforming perceptual humans and society to achieve "perceptual" liberation. On the other hand, it is based on the rational knowledge of social evolutionary laws, through judgment, reasoning, and deduction, forming the scientific socialist thought, thereby revealing Communism as the most beautiful social system. From the perspective of value theory, Communist faith advocates for the masses to liberate themselves, achieve the free and comprehensive development of humans, and the liberation of all humanity. This liberation is closely related to productive forces and production relations, manifesting as the full release of social productive forces and the communal sharing of social wealth.

Third, one cannot engage in idle talk about Communist faith detached from real work. The great practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics is a movement towards the value goals of Communism. As Marxist classic writers have stated, the current movement of Communists

"simultaneously represents the future of the movement." General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, "One cannot talk about grand ideals without engaging in the real work of developing socialism with Chinese characteristics and realizing national rejuvenation" [26]. The construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics is a stage-wise task to achieve Communism, with Communist faith running through this process. The common ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics is closely related to the path of socialist revolution, construction, and reform, with Communist faith linked to the ultimate goal of achieving Communism. Compared to Communist faith, the socialist ideal, although of stage-wise value, is indispensable, with their relationship being one of "construction" and "guidance." The struggle to achieve the socialist ideal "directly constructs" the real foundation of future communist society, while firm Communist faith is the value orientation that sustains the advance of real socialism. Because Communism aims for the ultimate goal of a community of free individuals and the free and comprehensive development of humans, it is a long-cherished dream of humanity that is hard to resist.

Fourth, firming up Communist faith is an extremely important task of ideological and political education. Transforming Communist faith from belief to conviction, and from conviction to persistent pursuit and practical action, is an important subject of ideological and political education. Communist faith forms as Marxists consciously accept the scientific worldview and historical view, reject all opposing notions and doctrines, continuously overcome their own adverse instinctual impulses, and resist external environmental temptations. The formation of Communist faith requires believers to have strong will and perseverance; a person without the spirit of self-sacrifice cannot firmly hold Communist faith. General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out, "If Communists lack ideals and beliefs, they will 'lack calcium' spiritually, suffer from 'rickets,' inevitably leading to political degeneration, economic greed, moral decline, and life corruption" [27]. Therefore, strengthening the inner support of Communists, supplementing the "calcium" of the spirit, and forming and firming up Communist faith are crucial. Theoretically, it is necessary to resolutely resist and refute the "evasion," "denial," and "abandonment" theories that smear Communist faith [28], and recognize that our knowledge about communist society and how to transition to it is extremely limited. Therefore, conducting research on communist society and how to transition from socialism to Communism is necessary. Practically, it is essential to further strengthen the propaganda and education of Communist faith, striving to make it an internal "conviction" and external "consciousness" among the people.

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