

Several people have said that faith is evidence of “unseen things.” I don’t think that’s precise. Faith is also shorthand for culture, worldview, ethics, and so forth. More to the point, however, “unseen things” could mean at least three very distinct things.

First, it could mean something like, “there is no way to know the answer, but we think it is this.” For example, no one knows what happens after you die, and some believe that spend eternity in some realm (e.g., heaven or hell) and others believe we are reincarnated. So, if someone says, “my faith says that we are reincarnated,” I don’t have major problems with this usage. If people all agree that since the answer can’t be known and that any answer is arbitrary, then this usage is not that objectionable. My only one real problem is when people forget that the real answer can’t be known and start asserting that their answer is the real answer, and start hating or killing each other over the answers they give to questions where the answer cannot be known.

The second use of “unseen things” could be something like, “My religion teaches that the answer is XX and if I were to examine the evidence I would find that to be true.” Again, I don’t have a problem with this use of the word faith. This meaning is essentially saying that the answer could be known, and you are going to trust that others have discovered it.

There is a third meaning of “unseen things” where people use faith that I feel isn’t really a faith issue at all. This is the use of faith where the answer is or can be known. For example, if someone were to say, “my faith tells me that the earth is a sphere.” That’s not really a faith issue at all. “Unseen things” cannot cover the realm of things that could be seen.

If the answer can be known by observation, it is not a question of faith. However, some people say their faith gives them answers to questions that aren’t really faith issues at all, and that it gives them answers that contradict what can be observed. I want to use an example that I think would be a plausible claim (but I am not saying anyone believes it). Let’s say someone says, “Males have one fewer rib because God took one to make Eve.” It’s this type of claim that I feel is inappropriate. The number of ribs that males and females have is not a question of faith. It’s a question of counting. Again, where the answer can be known, it is inappropriate to use faith.

It is this last usage that perplexes me. I don’t see issues that can be observed as faith issues at all. I am especially perplexed when people say their faith has given them an answer that contradicts evidence and they are going to go with their faith. I see this usage all the time.

I have many religious friends and honestly we don’t sit around insulting each other. While I might disagree with them, we don’t get into heated arguments. I think it’s because they tend to use faith in the first two senses. They say where the answer can be known, faith is irrelevant. Can we all agree that “unseen things” cannot cover the realm of things that could be seen?

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