God, Save the Faith; The Modernization of the Relationship Between Faith and Certainty

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Certainty, within the modern era, has become increasingly rare. Even when reliable evidence is presented, opposition is not far. Myth is no exception to opposition either. In this essay, I will argue that the modernization of the West has created an uncertainty of myth, which has altered the interpretation of what it means to have "faith". This is seen through the loss of an psychological and epistemic certainty of faith. This claim will be justified by Charles Taylor, and Karen Armstrong and exemplified by Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Søren Kierkegaard, and Saint John of the Cross.

In this analysis two types of certainty will be considered: psychological certainty and epistemic certainty. In psychological certainty, the individual's conviction is the validator of certainty. This certainty encompasses the feeling of truth that may not be justified universally, but is considered undoubtedly valid by the individual (Reed). Psychological certainty is a subjective feeling of truth. In epistemic certainty, logic, reason, and falsification are used to universally prove claims (Reed). Epistemic certainty encompasses objective truth that is secure from error and empirical skepticism. Epistemic certainty can lead to psychological certainty but epistemic certainty is not necessary for psychological certainty to be felt (Reed). Either kind of certainty can validate faith, in that they provide convictions for belief.

For this essay, I will define faith as being a trust and strong belief in a claim or theory. Faith is often questioned when it relates to myth, including: God, gods, and religion. In reading this essay the negative connotation of "myth" and "mythology" should be displayed, placing focus on these terms as they relate to mythos, as explained further below. As seen with Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Kierkegaard, and St John of the Cross, the place of certainty within faith of the mythical has been of great debate.

In the process of modernization, society experienced a shift in certainty as it is related to faith. In the pre-secular age, faith in God was a default because it was unchallenged (Taylor). Thus, the question of certainty in God was irrelevant. In modernity, faith and religion have moved from the unchallenged "objective" to subjective claims. Charles Taylor states that the "conditions of belief" have changed since the sixteenth century. In what he calls the secular age, multiple paths of transcendence are available (Taylor). Society now has many platforms to invest faith in, including various mythological theories. However, the various paths to transcendence can conflict from the vast difference. The claims and truths,

often fundamental statements, offered by the paths cannot all simultaneously be true. This conflict makes each option fragile because it is constantly contradicted by another option (Taylor).

The availability of multiple paths to fullness and the fragility of each path can affect the psychological certainty of the faithful. The reliance of psychological certainty on feelings of certainty makes it vulnerable to sway by contradicting statements, including evidence, opinions, and faith. To believe in a specific path of transcendence in the secular world one must deny or ignore the doubt caused by the knowledge of alternative options. Dedicating one's self to a specific belief does not dispel the alternative options, thus the doubt caused by the availability of the other options will also continue to exist. This doubt undermines the feelings of certainty associated with the belief.

Taylor explains that he is personally confronted by paths to moral and spiritual fullness that counter his own. Taylor states, "I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith." In this passage, Taylor admits the potential validity of a subversive lifestyle, thus, confronting the fragility of modern faith. The acknowledgement of an alternative lifestyle inclines Taylor to attempt to confirm his certainty of his faith by stating that losing his faith was "inconceivable". The combination of the confrontation with alternative lifestyles and Taylor's need to validate his feelings towards his own faith shows an existing personal doubt.

Similarly, the scientific revolution brought about an alternate path to fulfilment. Science offers individuals another system of which they can govern their beliefs. For instance, falsification theory sets conditions of belief and regulates the consumption of claims. This lifestyle brings fulfilment through empirical evidence. The existence of this path, and the claims it has brought, conflict with many other paths to fulfillment. However, falsification based fulfillment is in constant conflict with each non-falsification based fulfillment method, and vice versa. This undermining of each belief system weakens the individual's psychological certainty of their system of belief by destroying the feeling of certainty that accompanies an unchallenged belief.

The scientific revolution brought another challenge to the certainty of many faiths. With advances in science much of society has grown to consider it the only path to truth (Armstrong 83). Armstrong states that it is common for individuals to attempt to intellectually comprehend myth before having faith in it (73). This can be viewed as an attempt to validate faith through epistemic certainty. The problematic nature of combing myth and epistemic certainty can be seen through Armstrong' analysis of *logos* and *mythos.*

Logos is reason. *Logos* includes rational thought. It forges a path forward and tried to discover new things (77). Using empirical evidence, *logos* corresponds with mundane reality which facilitates the individual's effective functioning in the physical world (77). It can provide epistemic certainty because it bases knowledge on universal truths. An example of modern *logos* is science, which prioritizes empirical evidence in the creation of its ideology. This ideology can become a lens through which the world is experienced and perceived. In contrast to *logos*, *mythos* can also guide the understanding of the world.

Mythos originates from the Greek term "musteion" (75). "Musteion" is associated with the obscure, and what is not rationally demonstrable (75). *Mythos* gives meaning to everyday life (much like Taylor's concept of fullness), explains the origins of life and culture. Unlike the rational, however, the stories of mythos are not intended to be taken literally

because they do not represent mundane reality. For example, one of the doctrine's creators, Gregory of Nissa describes that the mythological Holy Trinity as "terms we use" (qtd. in Armstrong 85). He says that the Father, Son, and Spirit do not denote three objective factual bodies (Armstrong 85). Instead, these terms described the "unnameable and unspeakable" (qtd. in Armstrong 86). The Holy Trinity represents that which is beyond reason.

Comparatively, *logos* and *mythos* are ways of understanding different aspects of the world. In relation to the individual, *mythos* explains the interior, whereas *logos* explains the exterior. Traditionally both areas were necessary in life: one gave life meaning, and the other moved society forward. However, the two are not meant to be combined, rather, it is traditionally considered impossible to combine the two (Armstrong 76). This attempt to combine *logos* and *mythos* can be dangerous to each other, as they are not complimentary.

Despite the different intentions of *logos and mythos* as society modernizes, there have been attempts to combine them. Of these attempts include those of St. Anselm of Canterbury and Søren Kierkegaard. Anselm prays *"credo ut intellagam"* ("I have faith in order that I may understand") showing a refusal to blindly submit to faith. Instead he searches to understand it (qtd. in Armstrong 73). Anselm exemplifies an early shift towards the modern necessity to accept *mythos* as objective truth before placing faith in the it. In his ontological argument, Anselm attempts this through a demonstrating of the existence of God through logic and rationality. Anselm believes this argument is needed because he believes faith causes uncertainty. Reason and logic are his proposed remedy for the uncertainty. Reason and logic, however, are the cause of his uncertainty in *mythos. Logos* cannot validate *mythos*. The combination of *logos* and *mythos* leads to *mythos* appearing senseless through the lens of *logos* as well as the inherent misinterpretation of both (Armstrong 83).

Kierkegaard arrives at a similar conclusion. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard tries to rationalize myth. However, he ultimately resigns that myth cannot be rationalized, a step towards the "leap of faith" (Kierkegaard 17). Rather, human logic hinders the devotion to a belief, which subverts faith (Kierkegaard 63). Combining logic and mythos creates the absurd. In the absurd, meaning is searched for where there is no meaning. Instead, as Camus notes, rationality must be delayed to reach faith (35). This leap by faith is a complete, and lasting commitment that forgoes rationality and certainty (Camus 29). The commitment is made based on individual, rather than universal truths (Kierkegaard 97). This concept relies on the paradox of faith. The paradox posits that individual truth is higher that the universal truth. The individual truth, like *mythos*, is interior and subjective, whereas the universal truth, like *logos*, is exterior and objective. In making the leap of faith, one devotes his or her self to an individual belief, regardless of universal truth, thus forgoing *logos* to maintain belief in *mythos*.

A contrast between Armstrong and Kierkegaard is that Kierkegaard differentiates that the inability to combine *logos* and *mythos* is not because it is "logically impossible", rather that it is "humanly impossible" (17). However, Armstrong and Kierkegaard both state that the logical rationalization of myth creates uncertainty, through myth either appearing senseless when interpreted by *logos* (Armstrong 83), or despair caused by the absurd (Kierkegaard 63). As exemplified by St. Anselm, the feelings of senselessness and despair stem from a search for greater understanding and certainty. The approach of combining *logos* and *mythos,* however, suggests that faith should be understood as the acceptance of mythological claims as objective facts. This denies the metaphorical nature of myth. In practice, this attempts to combine *logos* and *mythos.* The inquiry suggests that epistemic

certainty is possible. This raises questions of the rationality and logic of faith in search for epistemic certainty. The questions introduce doubt of logical certainty that, when are noticed to be unanswerable through rationality, undermine epistemic certainty.

In his analysis of Kierkegaard's "leap of faith", Camus explains this undermining well when he says, "it is nature to give a clear view of the world after accepting the idea that it must be clear" (32). Camus explains that we only expect things to be logically or epistemically valid after accepting the idea that they should be. Thus, if an individual accepts the idea that *mythos* should be epistemically valid, then he or she will only be certain of that claim when it is proven. Despite logic being irrelevant to the debate of myth, the doubt that it creates when it is considered meaningful affects epistemic certainty, and subsequently psychological certainty.

The decreased certainty of the Western population is represented in statistic reports. The Pew Research Center reports that in the seven-year timespan between 2007 to 2014 there has been an eight percent decline in the number of adults, of all major God-believing faiths, that report that they believe in God with "absolute certainty" ("Religious Landscape Study"). Subsequently, reports of belief in God in all levels of lesser certainty have increased ("Religious Landscape Study"). It should be noted that having faith in a single "God" does not represent all individual's mythological faith. Additionally, the sample size, although large and religiously diverse, only represents adults in the United States of America. However, the statistics represent a growing trend among the most popular *mythos* based faiths in the West, as well as one of the most diverse and influential nations, suggesting similar trends in other Western nations. The personal measures of "certainty" the participants refer to is, at the simplest notion, the feeling of certainty caused by psychological certainty. Epistemic certainty can influence this feeling. The decreasing certainty in *mythos* will undoubtable effect society.

Two effects are likely to occur in relation to faith: decreased societal faith, and modified qualifications for faith. If atheism is the ultimate lack of faith in *mythos*, based on its denial of the existence of a mythical presence in the physical world, then the modern landscape should show an increased atheist population as a representation of decreased certainty in *mythos* leading to loss of faith in *mythos*. Pew Research Center reports that in the seven-year timespan between 2007 and 2014, the percent of anonymous adults in the United States of America reporting to be atheists has nearly doubled ("Religious Landscape Study"). This has either occurred due to an increasing conversion rate of religious and unaffiliated individuals to atheism or to a change in the social climate in which it has become acceptable to claim atheism. In either case the statistics address an acceptance of loss of faith within the modern West that would not have occurred before the modernization of certainty in faith.

Further, the increasing climate of uncertainty pertaining to religious faith should lead to a modification of the qualifications for claiming "faith" in myth. St. John of the Cross demonstrates an early justification of uncertainty in faith. In *the Dark Night of The Soul*, St. John suggests that uncertainty is what defines true faith in God. *The Dark Night of the Soul* is a temporary spiritual crisis in which the individual feels he or she has been abandoned by God. From this it can be read that this uncertainty in God leads to a nihilistic despair that purges everything he or she previously knew about God. By purging the preconceived notions of God, the individual becomes more connected to God. This is a justification that validates faith through uncertainty. By validating uncertainty people are allowed to continue

to feel faithful without being certain. The uncertainty becomes a search for connection to the myth that faith has been placed in. Thus, rather than abandon the myth in the face of uncertainty, this style of thought rewards and encourages uncertainty through promises of stronger feelings of faith. Although the uncertainty accepted in this faith risks damaging the trust in the myth, this definition allows "faith" to survive a climate of challenged certainty.

In the modernization of society, myth has been challenged by the addition of a multitude of conflicting paths to transcendence as theorized by Taylor, as well as the introduction of validation through logic and rationality as necessity to maintain faith in a *logos* centric society, as theorized by Armstrong. To combat the psychological and epistemic uncertainty that this has caused, the qualifications of faith have evolved to adjust for the loss of certainty that through traditional thought would have lead to loss of faith. This loss of certainty is not limited to mythological faith; nor are the implications it has on society. Society will continue to experience loss of certainty in traditional thought as it clashes with modernity. What will define humanity is how society adjusts for these clashes. In relation to faith in mythos the modernization of society will require faith to modernize if it is to remain relevant.

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