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# Philosophical Faith

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**F**aith became an enduring element of [Augustine](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx>)'s contribution to theology. But how does faith accord with reason?

Hellenistic philosophers viewed reality as rational and therefore subject to reason, and mathematics as the basis of rational explanation and reason. Augustine held to Plato's belief that mathematical principles were at the heart of everything in the universe and that they provided essential clues to the purpose of human existence. This included aesthetics as well as other abstract aspects of life. Augustine felt that with an understanding of mathematics a person was halfway to being a philosopher or a theologian. In a world of uncertainty, the pure truths of mathematics were vastly more certain than anything the five senses could perceive. The senses ultimately belonged to the body, which, being physical, was evil, but that was not true of the soul, or the inner man. So Augustine held to Plato's belief that rationality and reason were based on the abstract thought processes of the mind, not on the senses.

Augustine maintained that in the face of the unknown, a person was to meditate on invisible realities in a manner similar to the solving of a geometric abstraction. Such meditation or mental training would lead to an understanding of the mysterious aspects of God, such as immortality, and therefore also to faith. All of this was in accord with the mystical views of Plotinus and with Augustine's own yearning for a state of ecstasy. Hence reason, or the use of the intellect, became the only basis for faith or belief. A relationship with God was based solely on reason, but reason that considered matters on a purely theoretical basis, disconnected from practical experience.

As a result, Neoplatonism, upon which Augustine built, had no place for experimentation and action. Natural science, which sought knowledge based on observation or experimentation, held no interest for the Neoplatonists; such pursuits were beneath the philosophers and merely the burden of artisans. Knowing God became an academic exercise, with the philosopher turning to his own authority to buttress his reasoning. No further debate or consideration was necessary.

This development paralleled the standard that had arisen from the numerous church councils of the fourth century, when creeds became the foundation of the belief system of the various churches. No action was required—just acceptance of a creedal position, whether or not it was understood. If acceptance was not forthcoming, then the authority of the church and, following Constantine, of the state was used to demand conformity; heretics were subjected to the death penalty. Orthodoxy of belief became the measuring stick of a person's Christianity, rather than conduct or practice. Piety or faith declared through action was declared anti-intellectual and a second-class form of Christianity.

Creeds simply had to be agreed with. They required nothing of the confessor other than the acceptance of an authority—in this case, the church. Augustine's Neoplatonic view of faith cemented this approach within what was now a state religion.

What impact has this had on the rationalists of today? In effect, Augustine's Neoplatonism set up the conditions for the eventual schism between the church and science, which developed in the period of the Enlightenment and exists today in the inability of religion and science to communicate with each other. Neoplatonism rejected any practical experimentation, which is the foundation of the scientific method. It preferred to devote its studies to the theoretical. To Augustine, knowledge of God and human existence was gained by looking inward and not by examining the world around.

Augustine provided the church with a worldview that sought to find answers to questions relating to the physical world from allegorical interpretations of Scripture written for a different purpose. The trial of Galileo is a case in point. The church considered his concept of the universe heretical. The irony is that it was formulated during attendance at masses as he perceived the movement of the giant chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceiling of the duomo in Pisa. Church authorities subjected him to house arrest for the remainder of his life. The "lenient" nature of his punishment was most likely due to his personal association with the incumbent pope.

To this day Augustine's understanding has shaped the outlook of most who hold to Christianity. Based on Augustine's definition of faith, [Martin Luther](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-martin-luther/579.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-martin-luther/579.aspx>) dismissed James's letter in the New Testament as "an epistle of straw." The apostle's view of faith was defective in Luther's opinion because it demanded a response ("works" in Luther's parlance) to prove itself. For Luther, faith was an intellectual argument that placed no demands upon the faithful. The demands to which Luther objected, however, stemmed from the church's asserted authority over its flock, especially with regard to indulgences. He was also influenced by Augustine's belief that while faith would result in good works, those works would be based on "love," another purely intellectual quality according to Augustine. Thus the practical aspects of love were easily overlooked.

Contrasting Luther's and Augustine's view with the Hebraic view that would have been expressed and understood by the New Testament Church and the writers of the Epistles is instructive. David Stern, a Messianic Jew, has written a commentary on the New Testament from a Jewish perspective. He says of the apostle Paul, "Sha'ul [the Hebrew equivalent of Paul's original name, Saul] has a very Jewish view of trust (or 'faith') as being not merely a mental attitude or belief in a creed, but a firm reliance which produces action" (Jewish New Testament Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 1:3). Paul, like James and other Jewish writers of his day, saw faith as a practical part of life that was demonstrated by the response of individuals to the circumstances they faced. It was not an intellectual concept detached from the reality of life. Love was practical and defined in seeking the good of one's neighbor (1 Corinthians 13:1–8).

The same approach is linked to Jesus in the Gospel accounts. Both Matthew and Luke record that Jesus stated that those who claim to recognize his name or authority but fail to do what he commands are engaged in an exercise in futility. Such an approach is equated with building a house on a foundation of sand (Matthew 7:21–27; Luke 6:46–49). John's Gospel has an even stronger statement, in that the knowledge of God is coupled with doing His will: "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own" (John 7:17, New Revised Standard Version). Just as action was important to Judaism, so it was central to the early Church.

To this very day, Christendom is driven by the Augustinian view of faith without works. Christendom stands in judgment of its Jewish relatives, accusing them of practicing a religion based on works to earn salvation. Yet Christian challenges to the Jews are based on definitions that are foreign to the Bible itself. In the words of the apostle James, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."