THE NECESSITY OF BELIEF

SPENCER CUNNINGHAM

In considering our life philosophies, it is hard to distinguish between what we accept through mere faith and what we arrive at through thought and mental discipline. And further, what happens when these two modes of our understanding collide? It would seem that belief and reason are mutually exclusive, that whenever they come into contact there must be a victor and a loser—that a choice must be made about which way of understanding we choose to embrace. We struggle daily to reconcile the beliefs we choose to accept with the empirical knowledge we cannot ignore.

E.M. Forster's essay "What I Believe" addresses this pervasive mental struggle. Forster's ultimate humanist goal in the essay is to find a life philosophy independent from the dogma of religion, evidenced by his opening sentences: "I do not believe in Belief. But this is an age of faith, and there are so many militant creeds that, in self-defence, one has to formulate a creed of one's own" (67). He suggests his era embraces the notion of religious faith too wholeheartedly, and he wants to develop a functional alternative. To achieve this, Forster affirms that life should be lived to create, ultimately, "tolerance, good temper, and sympathy" (67). In his attempt to reach this philosophical ideal, he highlights the inevitability of turning to belief, even in his fiercely non-religious worldview.

Forster's essay raises, and may implicitly answer, the enduring question: *Can reason coexist with belief?* In the essay, it becomes apparent that reason *can*, in fact, coexist with belief, provided that belief is founded upon and cooperative with empirical and philosophical derivations. That is, provided it is not *blind* faith.

From the outset of his essay, Forster criticizes religion and the tenets it seeks to uphold. The very first sentence of the essay, "I do not believe in Belief," suggests that Forster withholds his commitment to anything requiring blind-faith acceptance of a rule (67). He feels assaulted by the "militant creeds" of the Age of Faith, or religious reactionism, and writes in part to defend his humanistic principles against this threat (67). One of the more pointed rejections of religious faith is expressed in his discussion of the principles of Christianity: "[The orthodox say] man always has failed and always will fail to organise his own goodness, and it is presumptuous of him to try. This claim—solemn as it is—leaves me cold. I cannot believe that Christianity will ever cope with the present worldwide mess" (75). He is arguing that it is man's *duty* to clarify for himself his own values. This argument for intellectual independence characterizes Forster's stance on the issue of belief, leaving no doubt that he is opposed to religious faith.

A consequence of Forster's wholehearted rejection of blind faith, religion, and maybe even God is that it seems he must develop his own philosophy based

exclusively on reason. But paradoxically peppered throughout the essay are passages that both triumphantly accept reason and implicitly praise faith. This is not a logical pitfall of Forster's essay but a manifestation of the subtle distinction between religious faith and humanistic faith that Forster seeks to establish. Regarding personal relationships he claims, "For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid and the 'self' is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence. And since to ignore evidence is one of the characteristics of faith, I certainly can proclaim that I believe in personal relationships" (68). Furthermore, he explains, "The people I respect most behave as if they were immortal and as if society was eternal" (71).

Both these quotations contain an explicit abandonment of reason and an acceptance of faith. But even so, Forster carves a distinction between the religious belief he feels is reckless and the principled belief he feels is both constructive and unavoidable. Subscribing to religious dogma does not satisfy Forster's skeptical stance on faith, but holding to considered, principled beliefs like the ones above does. Ultimately, he understands that reason and belief are hopelessly intertwined, and that there is a correct and constructive way to arrive at belief and an incorrect, destructive way. Given the historical context of the essay, this principle is particularly poignant.

Published in 1938, "What I Believe" was written in the throes of the political and social instability that led to World War II. A number of remarks within the essay point to Forster's acute awareness of the unrest of the time. He discusses a "gathering political storm," mentions the merits of democracy allowing "public criticism" and avoiding "hushed up scandals," describes "labour camps" as a consequence of extreme governmental control, and notably ambiguously asserts "Some people idealise force and pull it into the foreground and worship it" (68-70). Clearly, Forster was well aware of the brewing political issues of World War II, and his essay is in part a reaction to the philosophical confusion and gravity of the coming war.

When viewed in this light, the dissonance between belief and reason takes on new meaning. The war itself highlighted the fact that two logically derived diverging philosophies can exist and that each side may still vehemently oppose the other. In the struggle of democracy versus totalitarianism, at which Forster hints heavily, both sides had justifications for their stances and, of course, the rhetoric for each would have been particularly pervasive in 1938. The Axis powers asserted that totalitarianism provided order, cohesion, obedience, and efficiency, and the Allied powers argued democracy promoted free speech, individual liberties, creativity, and social justice (Palmieri; Griggs). Both sides had their intellectual stances, but both possessed something further: faith that their respective cause was correct. Just as Forster sought to define a humanistic philosophy that satisfied his ideals, the two sides developed their philosophies to satisfy their preconceived faith. Forster captures this quiet parallel in his extensive discussion of democracy and maybe most revealingly demonstrates his fears in the conclusion of his essay when he notes that "one likes to say what one

thinks while speech is comparatively free: it may not be free much longer" (76). Clearly, Forster understands that the war and its ideological struggle may come at a heavy cost.

But what is the importance of the philosophical dichotomy between the Allied and Axis powers and its phantom presence within the context of Forster's essay? It illustrates how belief is inexorably intertwined with reason. That is, we use reason to accommodate belief and belief to accommodate reason. Forster, in his essay, was using the irony of rejecting one belief and asserting another to capture the futility of arguing a point based largely, or entirely, on blind faith. This parallels the political struggle of the time. At the same time, he understands faith is inevitable and is wrestling with the implications of this reality. Faced with war and the potential losses of lives and freedom, a satisfying solution to the issue of belief versus reason seems particularly urgent. Ultimately, he knows he cannot argue his worldview against another if it is buoyed by dogma, so he seeks to change faith's "big 'F'" to a little "f" by transforming the monolithic faith necessary for religion into one that coincides with our innate sense of common humanity. Forster explains that the religious, those whose faith he does not support, "have Faith with a large F," whereas his faith "has a very small one," and he "only intrude[s] it because these are strenuous and serious days" (76).

To Forster, faith is inevitable; blind faith is not. He illustrates that at some level we must accept certain central axioms on faith to live our intellectual lives at all (belief in personal relationships, the permanence of human civilization, democracy, an aristocracy of intelligentsia, etc.). We do not and cannot know if these are true, but our choice of what and what not to have faith in is not necessarily blind. It reflects our understanding of how the world is and how we feel it should be, an empirically idealistic guess. Forster and those who subscribe to his distinction between beliefs attempt to capture how the world appears, and further, how it *should* work. Forster embraces relationships, aristocracy of intelligentsia, living life as if it had no end, and acting as if civilization was eternal not because he knows these things are true but because these satisfy his understanding of how the world must exist for a philosophically, humanistically, and personally satisfying life.

Forster does not reject faith—only faith stemming from religion. The chief difference between faith in religion and faith in principles, and the reason Forster makes this seemingly "splitting hairs" distinction, is that the former must necessarily be blind, while the latter is informed to the extent it reflects some ideal about the human condition reached through consideration, not dogmatic acceptance. Belief and reason are not in fact mutually exclusive. In fact, they are unavoidable and can even complement each other handsomely, provided that faith is not employed as a simplistic and convenient replacement for thought, but as a mechanism for developing informed principles.

WORKS CITED

Forster E.M. "What I Believe." *Two Cheers for Democracy*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1951. 67–76. Print.

Griggs, Edward Howard. *The Soul of Democracy: The Philosophy of the World War in Relation to Human Liberty*. 1918. *Project Gutenberg*, 2004. Web. 16 July 2012.

Palmieri, Mario. *The Philosophy of Fascism*. Chicago: Dante Alighieri Society, 1936. Print.

SPENCER CUNNINGHAM '15CC is from Cary, North Carolina, and is a sophomore in Columbia College. He is an avid writer and musician and enjoys surfing, cooking, and the occasional N64 game when he's feeling nostalgic.