**Discussion Guide**

for

***Good Faith: Beliefs Have Consequences***

by

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**Welcome**

Welcome to *Good Faith* and this Discussion Guide. The items below, hopefully, will lead you, alone or in company, to examine your answers to existential questions.

This Guide is not an exam. There are single correct answers to existential questions. On the other hand, I argue that some answers are better than others—as judged by their effects on people.

Thinking and talking about life’s deep issues is an intellectual project, but often an emotional journey, too. The topics may touch on fears or past hurts. A person may not want to revisit painful experiences, let alone share them with others. Please keep this in mind and be gentle, both with yourself and the people around you.

But delving into one’s life and faith is also rewarding. The process can be exciting, uplifting, and liberating. Blessings on your exploration.

**Chapter 1**

The first chapter outlined accusations made against religions. It asserted that besides rebutting the charges, religions need to show real benefits for people. Helping people deal with existential questions is a potential benefit.

**Discussion Questions:**

* Which accusations against religions are true in your opinion?
* How might you argue for or against the accusations?
* What examples can you think of that support any of the accusations? What counter-examples?
* How do you know if something is a religion?
* Is your faith compatible with science? Why or why not?

**Chapter 2**

Chapter 2 addressed a number of issues regarding reason, faith, knowledge, and trust.

**Discussion Questions:**

* Is religious faith rational and reasonable? Why or why not?
* What is special about science?
* What is truth? How do you know whether something (a statement, a description, a story/narrative) is true or not?
* If theories can’t be proven (beyond doubt), are they all equally doubtful? What makes one theory better, more trustworthy than another?
* What would it mean to say a religion is true?
* The Divine is often described using the language of human characteristics (e.g., God loves, God judges, God knows, etc.). Is God a projection of human hopes, fears, and wishes? Explain.
* Why are your sacred scriptures sacred?
* How do you go about interpreting (understanding) what you read in the scriptures?
* What makes one interpretation preferable (better) than another?

**Chapter 3**

Chapter 3 explored the nature of the universe and explanations of events.

**Discussion Questions:**

* What are the implications of quantum mechanics for how you see life?
* How do you reconcile science’s story of the origin of the universe and development of life with creation stories found in sacred scriptures?
* How does evolution’s explanation of the formation of human beings (and other species) affect how you think about and understand yourself and other people?
* What’s your view of the relationship between human beings and the (rest of) the natural world?
* Does anything exist other than (or apart from) the physical universe? Explain.
* Why do bad things happen to good people (if God is loving and omnipotent)?
* Does God act in the world? If so, how?
* How do you understand miracle stories, such as the parting of the sea to enable the Hebrews to escape Pharaoh’s army?
* What is your concept of God?

**Chapter 4. Who Am I?**

Chapter 4 deals with how we understand ourselves (and thus other people, too).

**Discussion Questions:**

* Our perceptions—all that we see, hear, feel, smell, and taste—are constructions assembled by our brains. How does this perspective affect how you understand the world?
* Where does consciousness come from?
* What does “free will” mean as you see it?
* Can a person’s actions be fully explained? Why or why not?
* How can free will and causation be reconciled?
* According to biologists, some of our most basic emotion-motivation systems are descended from and are very similar to ancient (and modern) reptiles and we share basic social emotion-motivation systems with all mammals. How does this affect how your see yourself?
* Where does self-esteem come from?
* What does/would self-actualization look like for you?
* Do you think people have a need for self-transcendence? Why or why not?
* As you see it, what are pro’s and con’s of group loyalty?
* What communities (collections of people from families and friendship groups up to nations) are most important to you?
* If measured by time spent on?
* If measured by money spent on?
* If measured by your reaction to (perceived) threats?
* What would a good balance between individualism and collectivism look like in our society?
* Are people basically good or basically evil? Explain.
* How do you deal with your limitations and errors (sins)?
* If/when you are the perpetrator (when you have hurt or harmed someone), what is hardest for you and why?
* Admitting to yourself what you did?
* Acknowledging your action (confessing) to others?
* Apologizing to the person(s) hurt?
* Making amends (atoning)?
* What hurts are you carrying around inside, i.e., what pain or resentment?
* Who in your life has hurt/harmed you? How do things stand now between the two of you?
* What leftovers (if any) are still affecting you and/or your relationship with the other person?
* Imagine what forgiving would look like.
* Do you think there is (or will be) Divine judgment on your life? Explain (and describe).
* Is your religion the way to salvation? The only way? The best way? What does salvation mean, as you understand/see it?
* Where does your answer leave people who believe in other religions?

**Chapter 5. How Should I Act?**

The focus of Chapter 5 is morality.

**Discussion Questions:**

* Think of a community that’s important to you. What are the implicit norms of that community? How would you describe the culture of that community?
* Think of a community that’s important to you, but larger and less intimate than your family or circle of friends. What implicit (or explicit) agreement lays out what the member owes to the community and vice versa?
* What would cheating (violating the agreement) look like and what would happen if a member cheated? How would you react if you knew a member had cheated?
* How have you cheated on a community?
* Who has authority over you in some way(s)? Where does that authority come from?
* When have you experienced a conflict of loyalties (conflict among expectations of you by different communities)?
* How do you know what is good or right to do? Where did that basis come from?
* How do you go about making an important decision?
* What moral principles, rules, and commandments does your religion have? Are they realistic? Why or why not?
* Why should a person behave morally?

**Chapter 6. Death, Is That All There Is?**

Death threatens to make our lives meaningless. Chapter 6 unwraps this dilemma.

**Discussion Questions:**

* What do you think comes/happens after death?
* Does life/existence have a purpose? How would you know if it does and what it is?
* In the cosmic scheme of things, does your life on earth matter? If so, how?
* What gives your life meaning? What are your goals? What is precious to you?
* Who and/or what do you trust (and to what extent)? How much would you risk?
* What does trusting in the Divine mean to you?

**Chapter 7. Good Faith Religions**

This chapter compiles the findings from the preceding chapters summarizes them in five basic characteristics that make a version of religion beneficial:

1. A helpful version of religion values human cognition—consciousness, intuitive processes, emotion, and reasoning, including the science and technology that human thought has produced.
2. A helpful version believes that God’s will (or the Ultimate character of existence or Divine purpose) includes the goal that people should have abundant, deeply meaningful lives and should join together in an ideal society characterized by justice, peace, freedom, and compassion. Whatever it may teach about what comes after a person’s death, a religion should affirm the worth of life here on earth.
3. A helpful version believes that the Ultimate relates to human beings supportively. A helpful religion does not conceive God to be a harsh, vengeful being who manipulates people through guilt or threats of punishment. Rather, for a helpful religion, the Divine shows us the way to live in order to have meaningful lives, and that way then becomes the standard by which we judge our actions. Our failings are not punished by the Divine; rather we in effect punish ourselves through the painful realization that we have wasted part of our life in inferior modes of living.
4. A helpful version is not exclusive or tribal. It believes that all people can relate equally to the Ultimate and the Ultimate relates to all people equally. Accordingly, a helpful religion teaches that one should regard all people as having equal dignity and absolute value. One should treat all people with respect and compassion, and certainly without violence or exploitation.
5. A helpful version affirms human beings’ interdependence with the rest of the natural order and their kinship with all of life. A helpful religion regards all that exists as the expression or creation of the Ultimate, thus all being is valuable, not just human beings. This belief, along with concern for the flourishing of future human beings, implies that we should live so as to minimize unnecessary harm to other species and so as to maintain a physical environment conducive to the flourishing of life in its myriad forms.

The criterion used to make these assessments was contribution to human flourishing: whether a particular belief or perspective increases or decreases the wellbeing of all people. The criterion rests on the bedrock principle that all people have absolute and equal worth. The chapter makes the case for this criterion.

**Discussion Questions:**

* In your view, are all human beings truly of equal worth? Explain.
* What is human flourishing or wellbeing in your view?
* The people throughout the world are increasingly interconnected and therefore interdependent. What opportunities and obstacles does this present for improving global wellbeing?
* What are the implications for your faith?
* In what ways does your faith community support and not support the equal worth of all people?

Finally, from the last paragraph of the book:

* People continue to search for answers to existential questions. People continue to seek direction and meaning for their lives. People continue to face uncertainty and doubt. And people continue to choose what they will take as ultimate in life. Faith is making the choice and risking one’s only chance at life in order to follow that Ultimate. What is Ultimate for you? What is worth your life?

Thank you for your interest in *Good Faith*. I would welcome your feedback on this Guide. What was your experience using it? How could it be improved? Please leave a message on the “Contact” page at [www.goodfaithnow.net](http://www.goodfaithnow.net) or email me at [author@goodfaithnow.net](mailto:author@goodfaithnow.net).

Peace be with you.

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