

In the public sphere, religious beliefs are often considered to be a matter of private sentiment or preference, not as matters of fact. While this may be helpful for the maintenance of a pluralistic society, religious individuals often regard their beliefs as true in an objective sense. Attempts to incorporate fictionalism into religious practice, such as the [Anglican Sea of Faith](#), have met only with limited success.



There is thus a tension between the large diversity of religious beliefs, which prompt a more subjectivist understanding, and the appraisal by individual religious believers, who seem to have a more fact-like understanding. How do we intuitively conceptualize religious beliefs? In an [article](#) entitled "The Development of Reasoning about Beliefs: Fact, Preference, and Ideology" (forthcoming in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#) Larisa Heiphetz, Elizabeth Spelke, Paul Harris, & Mahzarin R. Banaji investigated how children and adults view religious doctrinal and faith statements. They made a psychological distinction between three kinds of beliefs: factual beliefs (beliefs concerning states of affairs, of things that are believed to be true in some objective sense); preference-based beliefs (incorporating cognitive appraisals, and varying across individuals and contexts), and ideology-based beliefs (such as religious beliefs) which contain elements of both fact and preference.

To investigate how children regard religious beliefs, Heiphetz et al presented children of various ages (youngest 5 years) and adults with disagreements about these three kinds of statements. For example, a disagreement on a fact was: "this child thinks that germs are very small and this child thinks they are very big." They were then asked whether only one of these two children could be right, or whether they could both be right. They also used disagreements about preferences, and about religious doctrines and faith statements (e.g., "This child thinks that there are many Gods, and that child thinks there is only one").

Interestingly, participants of all ages were more likely to respond "only one child is right" when asked about factual beliefs, rather than religious beliefs, but they still responded "only one child is right" more frequently for the religious beliefs compared to preferences. So, all participants judged religious beliefs to be less fact-like than facts, but more fact-like than preferences. Even the youngest children (five years old) already discriminated religious beliefs from facts and preferences. To rule out the role of background information, a second experiment presented participants with beliefs in the three categories of inhabitants of a fictional planet. The results were very similar to those of experiment 1.

In sum, concerning matters of religion, the participants were not entirely subjectivist or entirely objectivist, but intuitively regarded such beliefs to fall somewhere in between subjective preference

and objective knowledge of facts.

These results conform well with Paul Harris' earlier research on [how children regard religious testimony](#). Even young children (age 5) seem to think that religious testimony is different from factual testimony. They are, for instance, more confident that germs exist than that angels exist (even religious children), despite the fact that both are invisible, and that both are learned about through testimony.

Harris (in a lecture of his I attended at Oxford last spring) speculates that this may be due to children's receiving subtle cues from adults that there is something distinct and not entirely fact-like about religious beliefs. For instance, adults can be heard saying "I really believe God exists" but not "I really believe germs exist". Or they may be sensitive to the greater amount of disagreement about religious beliefs, compared to factual beliefs in their community. Also, perhaps religious beliefs do not figure in explanatory contexts in the same way as factual beliefs do (a child may regularly hear "wash your hands to get the germs off" in a matter-of-fact manner, whereas religious explanations "well, it was God's will" are perhaps only common in the most religious households). Perhaps disagreement itself can be a guide for perceived objectivity.

In this respect, it would be interesting to replicate Heiphetz et al.'s study with people from rather isolated, religious communities, like the Amish. My prediction is that people from such communities would regard religious beliefs as more fact-like than preference-like.