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Faith, Understanding, and the Hidden God of *The Matrix*

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The Matrix Reloaded and *Revolutions* highlight a notion that plays a central, perhaps *the* central role in traditional revealed religions, the notion of faith. The prophecy, Neo, and Morpheus and Lock going head to head over the legitimacy of the Oracle are a metaphor for the centuries-old philosophical struggle to understand what faith is, and what legitimate place it has—if any—in human life.

Faith and Revealed Religion

The struggle to understand what faith is and how it relates to other forms of human experience goes back at least to the Middle Ages when Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers tried to assimilate the wisdom of the pagan philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle's philosophical system was wide-ranging and rigorous. He seemed right about . . . well . . . just about *everything*, and he had arguments purporting to prove there must be a divine being. The problem was that the divine being whose existence he claimed to prove seemed quite different from the being Jews, Christians, and Muslims claimed to worship. According to Aristotle, for instance, God was ceaselessly engaged in contemplating his own being, and hence had neither knowledge of nor love for individual human beings, something at odds with the beliefs of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

If Aristotle was right about the nature of God, their entire way of life, their entire way of understanding themselves in rela-

tion to God, the universe, and each other was misguided. What many Jews, Christians, and Muslims claimed, therefore, was that Aristotle was only *partially* right. Aristotle had gotten things right as far as he went; he saw rightly that God exists and has certain extraordinary features, but he didn't go far enough. He didn't see, and indeed *couldn't* see God's "personal" features, for those features, they claimed, were knowable only with the help of God's *revelation*, something to which Aristotle had no access.

According to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God is a divine, extraordinary, "other-worldly" being whose special nature exceeds our human ability to understand it. The only way humans can come to know God (and know that God knows and cares about them) is if God *reveals* himself to them through, say, the words and deeds of a prophet or prophets (as Judaism and Islam claim) or by becoming a human being and revealing himself in person (as Christianity claims). This notion of God's self-*revelation* lies at the heart of *revealed* religions: God is a "hidden" God whose extraordinary nature makes it difficult for humans to know, yet God very much wants to be known, and will take extraordinary steps to insure that he is.

Why does God want to be known? Jews, Christians, and Muslims all share a conviction that knowing God is in our best interests, and that God wants to insure we have what is best for us. If, for instance, nothing would be better for us than to share in the unending peace and joy of God's own divine life, and we could share in this life only with the help of revelation, we could count on God to reveal to us everything we needed in order to have it.

In the context of revealed religion, *faith* is the human response to God's efforts on our behalf; most fundamentally it consists in *trusting in God*, and doing so by trusting in his revelation, accepting it, living in accordance with it. It is the sort of attitude exemplified in the *Matrix* most clearly by Morpheus. The Oracle communicates a message to Morpheus, a revelation: he will find the One who will return to the Source and end the war. The encounter changes his life: he dedicates himself to finding the One and doing his part to bring the prophecy to fulfillment.

Trusting the prophecy earns Morpheus misunderstanding and contempt from people like Commander Lock who have no

such trust. From Lock's perspective, Morpheus's decisions seem the epitome of foolishness, a waste of precious time and resources. Similarly, the efforts of many Jews, Christians, and Muslims seem a complete waste to people who have no particular religious commitments. Are critics of revealed religion right? Is Lock right about Morpheus? The answer given in the film is "No!". The trilogy vindicates the perspective of people of faith: Morpheus is right; Lock is wrong; Neo is in fact the only one who can save Zion.

But is *The Matrix* right to vindicate that perspective? Or would a more realistic plot line have vindicated Lock instead? Would it have included, say, a final scene in which Morpheus is proven a fool, his faith in vain: there are no prophecies; there is no deliverance; there is only darkness and death? Should the trilogy have ended that way? Is faith foolishness? Are people who claim to have it fools? To try to answer these questions we first need to consider more carefully what faith is supposed to be.

Faith ≠ Belief ≠ Knowledge

Faith is not the same as belief. Belief in general consists in accepting a certain statement or claim, in thinking that it is true. People believe many things that are not matters of faith. You probably believe, for instance, that $2 + 2 = 4$, that elephants are larger than ants, and that water is wet. You think these claims are true, but you don't think they're true on the basis of faith. Most fundamentally, faith consists in trusting God; it consists in believing *in* something, you might say, not believing *that* something—as when we say, "Believe in yourself": we mean *trust* yourself, *have confidence* in yourself. When we speak of Jews, Christians, and Muslims having faith we are speaking most fundamentally about them having trust or confidence in God—in his power and goodness, in his concern for what is in our best interests.

If faith is not the same thing as belief, however, it might nevertheless involve having certain beliefs, for one of the ways people might trust in God is by accepting God's revelation. Because they trust God, in other words, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are willing to accept the things God reveals—the same way you might accept the claims of a good friend because you trust her knowledge and experience. This brings us to another point

about the notion of faith: faith does not involve believing something in the absence of evidence, but rather believing something in the *presence* of evidence of a certain sort, namely God's say-so, and one's trust in God. Hence, in the Christian scriptures, for instance, the apostle Paul calls faith, "the evidence of things unseen" (*Hebrews* 11:1).¹

If faith involves evidence, however, it should be clear it's not the sort of evidence that could, say, convince atheists they're wrong, for atheists deny there is any evidence of this sort. If there is no God, as they claim, then obviously there can be no trust in God, and hence no basis for accepting the claims Jews, Christians, and Muslims in fact accept. From the point of view of these religions, atheists seem like people who ask for proof that colors exist, but won't accept eyewitness testimony about what other people see. From the atheistic point of view, on the other hand, people who accept things based on faith seem to accept things with no evidential basis at all, to think, feel, and act in ways that are completely groundless.

It's not just atheists who might think this either, but anyone who would deny that faith has evidential value. The seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, for instance, was not an atheist. He nevertheless claimed that all beliefs had to be evaluated by standards independent of faith, that faith had no evidential standing of its own, but was always subject to the "superior" judgment of faith-independent forms of evidence—faith-independent standards. Like John Locke, Jason Lock doesn't think faith is a distinctive form of evidence. He wants Morpheus to provide faith-independent reasons to support his claims: "I don't care about oracles, or prophecies, or messiahs," he says, "I care about one thing: stopping that army from destroying this city!" "With all due respect, Commander," Morpheus replies, "there is only one way to save our city: Neo!" "Goddammit, Morpheus!" Lock retorts, "Not everyone believes what you believe!" From Lock's perspective, Morpheus's beliefs appear to have no "real" evidential backing, no backing of a faith-independent sort, which is the only sort he acknowledges. To him, therefore, Morpheus's beliefs seem no more than opinion, conjecture, or superstition.

¹ The Greek word translated "evidence" here is *ἔλεγχος*. It's sometimes used to designate an argument or proof.

Because of their divergent views on the nature of faith, there is nothing Morpheus and Lock could say to each other that would convince the other he is wrong. Morpheus's claims seem groundless to Lock because Lock denies the evidential value of prophecies and the like. Lock's claims, on the other hand, seem misguided to Morpheus since Lock denies the legitimacy of a very important, perhaps the most important prophecies source of information about the salvation of Zion.

Morpheus and Lock are not alone in thinking as they do. Captain Roland, for instance, would appear to share Lock's mindset. He thinks Neo is "totally out of his goddamn mind," and that Niobe is a fool for lending him her ship. Councilor Hamann, on the other hand, would appear to share Morpheus's understanding of faith. His attitude (and name) recall the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Georg Hamann.

Hamann criticized Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke for what he took to be their uncritical insistence on the alleged "superiority" of faith-independent forms of evidence. According to Hamann, the evidence of faith, although different from that of, say, mathematics or natural science, is nevertheless equally legitimate within its sphere. Consequently, he said, to insist with Locke that beliefs based on faith be discounted unless supported by faith-independent forms of evidence is to insist on an unduly narrow conception of what evidence is. Like Hamann the philosopher, Hamann the councilor refuses to accept what he takes to be Lock's narrow-minded dismissal of oracles, prophecies, and the like, and says as much when Lock demands to know why he's cleared the *Nebuchadnezzar* for take off: "I believe I need every ship we have if we're going to survive this attack . . ." Lock cries, "Why did you allow the *Nebuchadnezzar* to leave?!" "Because," says Councilor Hamann, "I believe our survival depends on more than how many ships we have."

Despite their differences, Morpheus, Lock, and Hamann could agree about at least one thing: having faith is not the same as having knowledge. Knowledge involves being able to grasp or articulate the reasons why something is the case. I know all bachelors are unmarried, for instance, because I know a bachelor is by definition an unmarried man. Likewise, I know the hypotenuse of a right triangle with opposing sides of three and four inches, respectively, must be five inches since this follows

directly from the Pythagorean theorem: $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$. Faith, by contrast, does not involve the ability to say why something is the case, since faith is fundamentally about God, a being whose nature we can only imperfectly understand. We can't grasp God's nature the way we can grasp the Pythagorean theorem, and hence we can't derive conclusions about God from the principles of a divine science the way we can derive conclusions about triangles from the principles of Euclidean geometry.

Because having faith doesn't amount to having knowledge, and yet because it's not totally groundless, Medieval philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas claimed faith was "half way" between knowledge and mere opinion. We see this sort of thing in *The Matrix*: no one who accepts the prophecy *knows* how things will turn out, not even the Oracle: "Did you always know?" Seraph asks her; "Oh no," she says, "no, I didn't. But I *believed*." Yet if Morpheus, Trinity, and the other "believers" lack knowledge, their beliefs and actions are nevertheless not completely groundless, but are based on a certain groping confidence or conviction that reaches for something it can't "see" but nevertheless feels certain is within reach. As Aquinas says in the *Summa Theologica*, "the act of faith is firmly attached to [something] and in this respect the person of faith is in the same state of mind as one who has knowledge or understanding. Yet the believer's knowledge is not completed by a clear vision, and in this respect he is like one having a doubt, a suspicion, or an opinion" (2a.2ae.2.1).

Growing in Faith: Understanding the Erotic God

I've so far talked about the *attitude* of faith and how it differs from knowledge and belief. We now need to consider the *object* of faith, what faith is *about*. I've already said that faith is most fundamentally trusting in God, so this is the object of faith; it is what people have faith *in*.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims claim God's nature exceeds our understanding, and hence faith could never amount to knowing God or grasping God's nature in a "clear vision." Focusing on this aspect of faith, the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (echoing the third-century African Church Father, Tertullian) declared *credo quia absurdum!* I believe *because* it is

absurd, *because* it is impossible to understand. Lack of understanding is not a problem for Captain Soren of the *Vigilant* either, who is the first to answer the Council's call to aid the *Nebuchadnezzar*. His actions in *Reloaded* defy a pessimism Lock attributes to lack of understanding: "Be hard for any man," says Lock, "to risk his life—especially if he doesn't understand the reason!" But lack of understanding doesn't stop Captain Soren, and it didn't stop Søren Kierkegaard. He saw lack of understanding not as an impediment to faith, but as an inspiration.

Lack of understanding is not the last word, however, but only the first. Kierkegaard's statement was meant to recall an earlier statement by the fourth-century philosopher Augustine of Hippo who said *credo ut intelligam*: I believe in order that I might understand. Augustine's point was that any lack of understanding in matters of faith was a product of our limited cognitive abilities and not the subject matter itself, a point that recalls Councilor Hamann's words to Neo as the two overlook the engineering level of Zion: "There is so much in this world that I do not understand. See that machine . . . I have absolutely no idea how it works, but I do understand the *reason* for it to work. I have absolutely no idea how you're able to do some of the things you're able to do, but I believe there's a reason for that as well." God's revelation is fully intelligible and fully rational even if we can't fully understand or discern its rationality. Consequently, it's possible for people of faith to grow in their understanding of it, to come by degrees to understand God more fully than they did before.

The fact that humans can never fully understand God, in other words, doesn't mean they can't *grow* in their understanding of God. Indeed some philosophers have claimed that striving to understand the God in whom we have faith is precisely the way we deepen our relationship with him. Aristotle had claimed that humans by nature desire to understand, that our enjoyment of life is enhanced or perfected through understanding. Some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers extended this idea, and concluded that in seeking to grow in our understanding of God, we seek to enjoy more fully our relationship with him; to grow in understanding, in other words, is to grow in love.

Considerations of this sort led the eleventh-century philosopher Anselm of Canterbury to characterize theology (the "science" or "study" of God), as *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith

seeking understanding. The notion of *seeking* here is key. Faith is not something static, but a dynamic source of growth and adventure. It is accepting God's invitation to have an intimate relationship with him, a relationship the Jewish scriptures characterize in explicitly erotic terms (see, for instance, *The Song of Songs*). Various creeds and doctrines are only so many invitations to deepen one's relationship with God. Their meanings are not visible on the surface, but lie concealed in the beautiful, mysterious depths of our own being and God's, depths which, according to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God invites us to explore together with him.

Similarly, the prophecy communicated to Morpheus in *The Matrix* doesn't wear its meaning on its sleeve; that meaning has to be discovered gradually, in the course of a journey with many pitfalls. Morpheus realizes this only after Neo's encounter with the Architect. When Neo claims the prophecy was a fraud meant to conceal yet another level of machine control, Morpheus's faith reaches a crisis:

"I don't understand it," he says, "everything was done as it was supposed to be done: once the One reaches the Source the war should be over."

"It was a lie," says Neo, "the One was never meant to end anything. It was all another system of control."

"I don't believe that!" says Morpheus.

"But you said it yourself," Neo responds coolly, "How can the prophecy be true if the war isn't over?"

Faced with this crisis Morpheus doesn't lose his faith; he merely reinterprets it. He recognizes he didn't understand the real meaning of the prophecy. What its real meaning is he doesn't yet know; he nevertheless continues to act with that groping confidence characteristic of faith, a humble confidence wedded to a recognition of ignorance and limitation. His faith is challenged and subsequently reinterpreted, but certainly not lost. In the end the prophecy is fulfilled: Neo returns to the Source and ends the war. The way this happens, however, is not the way Morpheus, the Oracle, or anybody else anticipated.

Faith and Human Striving

The prophetic revelation that occurs in *The Matrix* is an invitation to embark on a journey of discovery, the meaning of which

is understood only gradually. The salvation of Zion is part of that meaning, but only a part since it marks the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of the characters, human and machine, who are invited to explore the possibilities of the new peace. Similarly, the claim of revealed religions is that our relationship with God is ever surprising, ever new, that the joy and excitement of new discovery never ends as we grow in our understanding of what God's revelation means—like falling in love for the first time only every day. This brings out another aspect of faith.

Because faith is the way humans have a relationship with God, it is a way humans strive for the extraordinary. Faith seeks liberation from the dullness of human frailty, from the petty, repressive ugliness that can damage and disfigure human life, and that has often asserted itself in human history as a force of fear, misery, devastation, and decay, a force personified in *The Matrix* by Smith, who poses a threat to both humans and machines. He represents the power of death, the threat of ultimate endings, the loss of everything that is lovable, everything that is beautiful, everything that makes life worth living. Faith is a striving against death and for life, a striving for freedom from the oppressive darkness of the evil, the ugly, the dull—the freedom to create and appreciate beauty, the beauty in ourselves that seeks to express itself the way Sati, in the final scene of the trilogy, expresses her creative spirit in the beauty of the sunrise. Faith is a striving for the freedom to explore, to utilize and enjoy all those things that Jews, Christians, and Muslims identify as gifts from God, things that God has created precisely for our enjoyment.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all affirm the hope that death is not the end of the story, a message affirmed in *Revolutions* as well when Smith recognizes, much to his chagrin, that everything that has a beginning has an end, even his power, even death itself. Faith is a striving for something beyond death, an expression of the deepest desire of the human heart for life, for peace, for beauty, for love. It affirms that our deepest desires extend beyond a reality in which murder, corruption, exploitation, and injustice are daily news, in which death and decay are commonplace. Faith reaches for a life liberated from the constraints of this mundane reality, a life of extraordinary joy not cut short or compromised. Jews, Christians, and Muslims claim

that we share in such a life here and now through faith, through having a dynamic relationship of trust with God.

But What If It's All Bullshit?

Are Jews, Christians, and Muslims right? And what if they're wrong? This is precisely Niobe's worry: "I can't help thinking," she says to Morpheus, "What if you're wrong, what if all this, the prophecy . . . everything, is just bullshit?"

Morpheus's answer is reminiscent of the answer given by the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal: "Then tomorrow," Morpheus says, "we may all be dead. But how would that be different from any other day? . . . Death can come for us at any time. Now consider the alternative: What if I am right? What if the prophecy is true? What if tomorrow the war could be over? Isn't that worth fighting for? Isn't that worth dying for?" According to Morpheus, what he and Niobe, Trinity, Neo, and everyone else stand to gain if they're right far outweighs what they stand to lose if they're wrong; it therefore makes better sense for them to believe in the prophecy than not to. Likewise, Pascal reckoned that each of us faces a choice to accept the gift of faith or not. What we stand to gain in accepting it, a life of immeasurable joy, is of infinite value, he said, and therefore outweighs any cost that might be incurred along the way. If, on the other hand, we're wrong, then we're no worse off than anybody else: We die, just like everybody else.

If Jews, Christians, and Muslims are wrong, they stand to lose the same things they would lose if they lacked faith. If the mundane reality we see around us is all there is, if death is the end of the story, then human life is a wash for everyone whether they have faith or not: everyone loses; everyone and everything eventually dies. But if Jews, Christians, and Muslims are right, if faith is what they claim it is, then persons of faith look to gain a lot more than persons without it, for they embark on a journey of joy and discovery that begins the moment they accept God's invitation and that promises never to end. Isn't the promise of such a life, the promise of the freedom, the beauty, the joy, the love we so desperately desire worth fighting for? Isn't it worth the risk we might be wrong? This is how Pascal sought to address someone in Niobe's position, someone afraid to make a "leap" of faith.

But we still haven't answered the original question: Is faith really just foolishness, and are people who claim to have it really just fools? To find an answer we needed to understand more clearly what faith was supposed to be. But now that we know, it's going to be difficult if not impossible to answer the question. The reason is that there is no "neutral" perspective from which we can answer it. If faith is supposed to consist in having a relationship with God, then people with faith and people without it won't be able to evaluate it the same way. Those with faith will claim those without it can't really evaluate it because they don't really know what it is. How could they, the faithful will say, they've never experienced it? Those without faith, on the other hand, will claim there's nothing there to experience, that the claims of the faithful are totally groundless. We reach an impasse, just like Morpheus and Lock.

We haven't been able to answer the original question, but hopefully considering it has been worthwhile. Philosophy, like faith, is a journey, and I hope I've given you some ideas to start a journey of your own.