

The Evidence-Mapping Illusion

Faith Rebranding, Social Calibration, and the Misdescription of Christian Belief Formation

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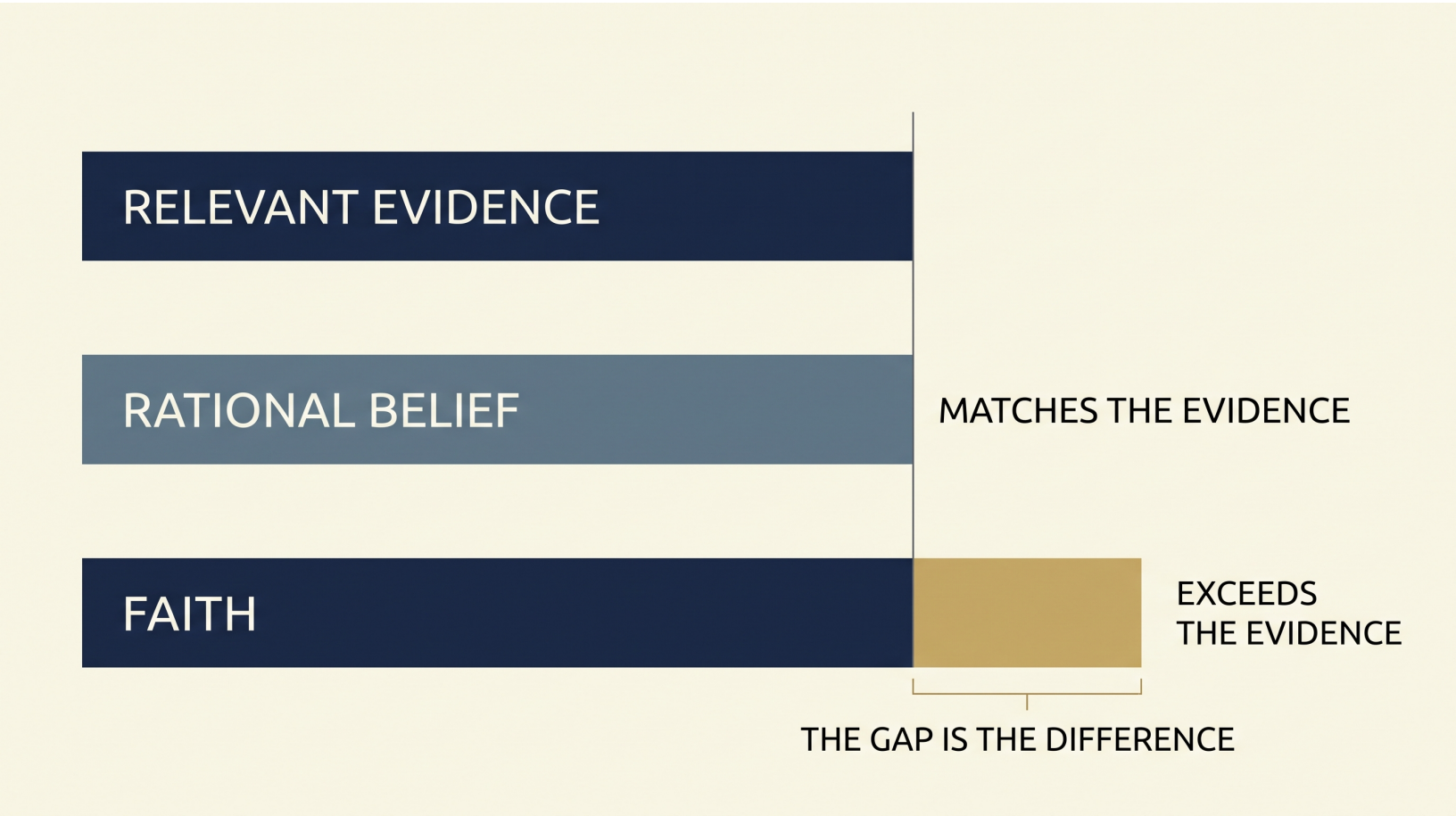
Central claim

A common biblical pattern praises high confidence when direct evidence is absent or appearances point the other way. Whenever the remaining evidence warrants less confidence, the praised state contains a *faith gap*: belief above the level supported by total relevant evidence. Rational belief instead stays within the range warranted by that evidence. Calling both states *faith* hides the difference rather than resolving it.

Preview:

Relevant evidence	Supported belief	Faith gap	Rational belief
All information bearing for or against a claim, weighted for quality and independence.	The reasonable range of confidence warranted by that total evidence.	The amount by which actual confidence rises above the warranted range.	Confidence stays within the range and changes when the evidence changes.

Visual preview:



The evidence level means the confidence warranted by the total evidence. Faith is represented by the extra confidence above that range.

Abstract

Biblical writers commonly commend high confidence where seeing is absent, appearances run contrary, or a promised outcome remains unavailable. This paper isolates the evidential structure of that pattern. Faith need not mean belief with no evidence. A *faith gap* exists when the confidence held exceeds the reasonable range warranted by the total relevant evidence. Rational belief has the contrary structure: it stays within that range and rises or falls when the evidence changes. “Degree of evidence” is therefore shorthand for the degree of belief that the evidence warrants, not a claim that evidence and belief are the same kind of quantity.

This comparison exposes the weakness in the apologetic slogan that everyone has faith. Everyone has degrees of belief, and nearly every belief is held short of deductive certainty. That universal fact does not show that everyone believes above the warranted range, much less that doing so is rational. The slogan succeeds only by thinning *faith* into ordinary belief under uncertainty and then using that weakened meaning to defend the biblically praised gap.

The argument is bounded. Absence of sight does not itself prove insufficient evidence: testimony, experience, memory, and argument may compensate. Nor does the argument show that Christian claims are false, that every biblical use of *faith* has the same meaning, or that exact numerical measures are available. The conclusion is relational and conditional: whenever Christian confidence remains above the range warranted by all relevant evidence, it is not evidence-mapped belief. Social practices matter only insofar as they install or preserve that mismatch.

1. What It Means for Belief to Map Evidence

A person can believe a claim weakly, moderately, strongly, or with near certainty. These are degrees of belief. Evidence bears on which degree is reasonable. One fragile report may warrant little confidence; several independent and accurate reports may warrant more; direct observation may add still more. Contrary evidence may lower the warranted degree. The exact arithmetic can be disputed while this ordering remains clear.

The relevant evidence is the whole body of information that bears on the claim for the person assessing it. It can include observation, memory, testimony, historical records, successful prediction, explanatory fit, religious experience, and information about the reliability of any of these sources. It also includes contrary evidence, plausible alternatives, prior plausibility, and dependence among sources. Ten reports copied from one report do not normally provide the force of ten independent reports. Calling the evidence *total* and *relevant* prevents two mistakes: irrelevant facts cannot raise rational confidence, and favorable facts cannot be counted while contrary facts are ignored.

Evidence and belief are not the same kind of thing. A document, an observation, or an experience is not itself a percentage. In this paper, an *evidence level* means the level or range of confidence warranted by the total evidence after its reliability, independence, alternatives, and counterevidence have been considered. To say that rational belief *maps* evidence is to say that actual confidence stays within that warranted range. This is the familiar core of evidentialism: a person’s believing attitude is rationally appropriate when it fits the evidence available to that person (Feldman & Conee, 1985; McCain, 2023).

Mapping does not require a precise percentage for every proposition. Evidence may warrant a range rather than a point, reasonable assessors may differ near its boundaries, and people with different evidence may rationally hold different degrees of belief. The standard requires two less ambitious things. First, confidence must not exceed the upper end of the range without further support. Second, genuine changes in the evidence must be capable of changing confidence. Stronger evidence will normally permit stronger belief; serious defeaters will normally require lower belief.

A *faith gap* is the positive difference between actual confidence and the upper end of the warranted range. It is not merely belief below certainty, imperfect information, or action before every question is settled. A belief may have substantial evidence and still contain a gap if confidence runs higher than that evidence warrants. Conversely, a weakly evidenced claim need not involve a gap if confidence is correspondingly low.

The Proportionality Rule

For any claim, rational confidence should stay within the reasonable range warranted by total relevant evidence and should remain open to revision when that evidence changes. Confidence above the range is a faith gap, not evidence-mapped belief.

Why accept proportionality? Belief aims at truth. A method that lets favorable evidence raise confidence but prevents unfavorable evidence from lowering it will retain errors that correction should remove. It also creates an arbitrary asymmetry: evidence is treated as decisive when it supports a favored conclusion and insufficient when it challenges that conclusion. Clifford's demand for evidential responsibility expresses a strict version of this idea, while James's defense of certain choices under unsettled evidence shows why the issue must be stated carefully (Clifford, 1877; James, 1896). A choice can be reasonable under risk even when the evidence does not settle its outcome. That does not make an inflated degree of belief evidence-proportioned.

The contrast is therefore not certainty versus uncertainty. Both rational belief and a faith gap can occur below certainty. The contrast is confidence inside the warranted range versus confidence above it.

2. What This Paper Means by Faith

The biblical terms commonly translated as *faith* operate in varied settings, and historical study of *pistis* and *fides* shows that their social and relational uses are broader than a single modern formula (Morgan, 2015). This paper does not propose an exhaustive dictionary definition. It isolates the degree-of-belief component whenever a person takes a claim to be true strongly enough for it to organize expectation or conduct. Any wider practical or relational dimension may accompany that component, but it does not answer whether the confidence fits the evidence.

Contemporary philosophical accounts likewise disagree about whether faith is a kind of belief, a practical orientation under risk, or a perspective that shapes which considerations become salient (McKaughan, 2013; Tweedt, 2024). The diagnostic question here survives those disagreements: when faith includes confidence that a proposition is true, is that degree of confidence within or above the evidentially warranted range? A perspective may itself provide evidence. If it supplies enough, there is no gap. If it merely protects confidence from counterevidence, the label *perspective* does not remove the gap.

Accordingly, the unqualified word *faith* in the argument below names the positive gap, not every occurrence of a biblical word and not every Christian belief. This usage captures a historically important conception in which faith provides a confidence that unaided human reasoning would not reach (Dawes, 2015). It also permits a clean result: a Christian belief fully proportioned to total evidence is rational belief; it need not be defended by calling all rational belief faith.

3. A Recurring Biblical Pattern

The common pattern examined here appears across a Gospel, Pauline letters, Hebrews, and a Petrine letter. These passages praise high confidence when direct evidence is absent, an expected outcome has not arrived, or appearances point the other way. They do not by themselves prove that total evidence is inadequate: a reliable report or experience could compensate for missing sight. They establish the biblical half of a conditional argument. Where no compensating evidence warrants equally high confidence, the commended state contains a faith gap.

The passages do not teach belief with literally no evidence. Thomas's companions report what they saw. John's author says that selected signs were written so that readers may believe. Abraham has what the narrative presents as a divine promise. Early Christian communities have testimony, inherited texts, communal experience, and interpretations of events. The point is comparative: the texts praise maintaining substantial confidence when a stronger form of evidence is absent or when apparent evidence points the other way.

Passage	Evidence condition	Why the gap question arises
Hebrews 11:1, 3, 6	The objects of belief are not presently seen, yet the chapter treats them as settled enough to organize costly action.	High confidence about unseen realities is central to the chapter's portrayal of faith; the remaining evidence must therefore bear that confidence.
John 20:24–31	Thomas receives direct perception; later readers receive selected written testimony rather than his access.	Belief without seeing is blessed, but the written signs count as evidence. The issue is whether they warrant the degree encouraged.
2 Corinthians 5:7	Present life proceeds without sight of the promised condition.	Continuing confidence is identified with faith at the point where direct access is unavailable.
Romans 4:18–21	Abraham faces apparent biological evidence against the promised birth.	Confidence in the promise is praised despite those appearances; its rational status depends on evidence that the source is decisive.
1 Peter 1:8	The audience has not seen Jesus.	Continued belief without that perceptual evidence is commended; testimonial and communal evidence must do the remaining work.

Table 1: Representative passages that commend high belief where direct evidence is absent or apparent evidence points otherwise.

John 20 makes both sides of the issue especially clear. Thomas's eventual belief follows direct perception. Later readers do not have that access, but they are not left empty-handed: they have written testimony about selected signs. The blessing of those who believe without seeing therefore cannot establish a gap merely by contrasting sight with no sight. The gap follows only if the written evidence warrants less confidence than Thomas's perception while comparably high belief is still encouraged. The text praises high confidence under reduced direct access; it does not demonstrate that the evidential difference has been fully replaced.

Romans 4 displays the pattern through contrary appearances. Abraham's age and Sarah's condition make the promised outcome look unavailable. The narrative praises Abraham for keeping high confidence because he treats the promise as decisive. A genuine divine promise could be overwhelming evidence. Inside the story, the narrator grants that status. For a contemporary reader, however, the status of the narrative, its interpretation, and its source are among the claims requiring evidence. They cannot be assumed in order to prove that present Christian confidence is already proportioned.

Hebrews 11 generalizes the pattern. Its examples repeatedly present confidence about unseen or future realities as the basis for costly action. Unseen objects can be well evidenced, so invisibility is not the argument's decisive premise. The chapter matters because its rhetorical force comes from maintaining confidence across the distance between what is presently available and what is believed. Whether that confidence is rationally mapped depends on the other evidence.

The inference can now be stated without equivocation:

1. The passages commend high confidence.
2. They do so where direct evidence is absent, fulfillment is delayed, or appearances point otherwise.
3. If the remaining evidence does not warrant equally high confidence, the warranted range is lower than the confidence commended.
4. In those cases, the commended state contains a faith gap.

The third premise carries the evidential burden. The biblical language supplies a recurring model of confidence under evidential limitation; it does not calculate the total evidence for every character or present reader. A defender

can defeat the gap charge in a particular case by identifying enough compensating evidence. What cannot defeat it is the bare claim that believing without seeing is automatically evidence-proportioned.

The claim is therefore structural rather than lexical. Other biblical passages appeal to signs, eyewitness reports, remembered deliverance, and public events. Those appeals confirm that the Bible is not uniformly hostile to evidence. They also give the right method: count them. If they close the alleged gap, the resulting belief is rationally proportioned. If they do not, the recurring biblical praise of confidence beyond what is directly available does not close it by itself.

4. Why “Everyone Has Faith” Fails

The slogan that everyone has faith usually begins from something true: every person holds beliefs without deductive certainty. We rely on memory we cannot continuously verify, accept much historical and scientific information through reports, and act while outcomes remain uncertain. These facts show that everyone has degrees of belief. They do not show that everyone places confidence above the range warranted by relevant evidence.

The slogan compresses three steps:

1. Everyone believes many propositions short of certainty.
2. Any belief short of certainty is renamed *faith*.
3. Christian faith is then declared no different in rational standing from ordinary belief.

The second step removes the very relation under dispute. A physician may believe that a treatment will help because repeated controlled studies support that degree of confidence. A historian may believe an event occurred because several independent records converge. Both remain short of certainty. If new studies fail or the records prove dependent, rational confidence falls. Calling these states *faith* adds nothing. Their rational standing comes from the degree to which belief changes with evidence.

Christian faith, as represented in the passages above, is praised for a different reason. Belief persists without direct perception, against apparent prospects, or before the promised result appears. The slogan can make this state universal only by discarding the possible excess that makes it distinctive. It can preserve the gap while claiming universality only by showing that everyone believes above evidence—a much stronger and unsupported premise.

The False Equivalence

Everyone has degrees of belief under uncertainty. It does not follow that everyone holds belief above the relevant evidence, or that a belief becomes rational merely because other beliefs also fall short of certainty.

This yields a cleaner analysis. There is no need to multiply categories. Ask only two questions: What range of belief does the total relevant evidence warrant? How strong is the actual belief? If actual belief lies within the range, it is rationally proportioned. If it lies above, the difference is the faith gap. The burden is then visible rather than hidden inside a word.

5. Social Calibration in the Same Terms

The title’s phrase *social calibration* refers to a simple process: a community can teach its members what degree of belief they are expected to display and preserve. This is not automatically bad. Communities can transmit

genuine evidence and teach sound standards for evaluating it. The concern is whether the expected degree is allowed to fall when relevant evidence weakens.

Three familiar practices can hold belief above evidence:

1. **Early placement.** A high degree of belief is installed before a child can compare the claim with serious alternatives. Later reasons may be added, but they may explain the inherited conclusion without having caused or calibrated it.
2. **Costly reduction.** Belonging, status, family peace, or moral approval may depend on displaying high belief. Lowering confidence then carries costs unrelated to whether the claim is true.
3. **One-way evaluation.** Favorable evidence raises belief, while unfavorable evidence is reinterpreted so that belief need not fall. Questioning is permitted only if the expected endpoint is restored confidence.

Research on cultural transmission shows how committed models can make religious claims compelling, especially when their conduct visibly signals conviction (Gervais & Najle, 2015; Henrich, 2009; Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017). Work on social identity and motivated reasoning describes more general ways in which group membership and desired conclusions can shape evaluation (Kunda, 1990; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). None of this proves that a socially transmitted belief is false. A true belief can be learned early, shared by a group, and defended badly. To infer falsity from origin alone would be a genetic fallacy.

The social evidence has a narrower role. It helps explain how a degree of belief can remain fixed while the evidence warrants different levels of confidence. A conversion account, a powerful communal event, or an admired teacher may give a person genuine evidence. The problem begins only when the resulting confidence becomes immune to later evidence. Empirical work on religious doubt likewise shows that reassessment is socially situated and consequential; it does not establish that every loss or recovery of belief is rational (Krause & Ellison, 2009).

This reduction prevents a common overreach. Childhood teaching, identity, ritual, emotion, and community are not separate refutations. They matter only when they raise or preserve belief above the warranted range. If a community encourages open comparison, permits confidence to fall, and does not penalize evidentially warranted revision, social formation can coexist with rational mapping.

6. What Counts as Evidence Mapping

Evidence mapping is not shown by listing arguments. A person may possess many arguments while holding a conclusion more strongly than those arguments warrant. The question is whether each consideration supports the precise claim, survives its strongest alternatives, and contributes enough to place actual confidence within the warranted range.

This matters because Christian belief includes many claims. An argument for a first cause does not by itself establish that a personal deity acted in Israel, raised Jesus, guided a canon, or favors one denomination. Evidence for one claim should not silently inflate confidence in the entire bundle. The same requirement applies in the other direction: evidence against one doctrine need not settle every other religious claim.

All relevant sources may enter the assessment. Public arguments, historical reports, personal experience, moral perception, memory, and the observed effects of religious practice can raise belief. Source dependence, failed prediction, competing explanations, contrary experience, base rates, and the success of rival accounts can lower it. The source of evidence affects its weight: several reports dependent on one tradition are not automatically independent confirmation. A fair assessment includes both directions and avoids counting the same support twice.

The table does not require instant change after every objection. Evidence can conflict, a new objection may be weak, and background knowledge can justify resilience. Nor must a believer invent in advance every discovery that would matter. The test is whether unfavorable evidence is assessed by the same standards as favorable

Test	Evidence-mapped belief	Faith gap
Direction	Favorable evidence can raise belief and unfavorable evidence can lower it.	Favorable evidence raises belief, but unfavorable evidence is prevented from lowering it.
Degree	Confidence stays within the reasonable range warranted by the support.	Limited support is made to carry a stronger or broader conclusion.
Specificity	Each reason is connected to the particular claim it supports.	Support for one claim is transferred to a whole doctrinal bundle.
Comparison	Rival claims face the same quality of evidence and the same update rules.	The favored claim receives exceptions unavailable to rivals.
Revision	Possible losses of confidence can be stated before a challenge arrives.	Every challenge is absorbed by a new explanation after the fact.

Table 2: Observable differences between evidence mapping and preservation of a faith gap.

evidence and whether serious defeaters can genuinely lower confidence. If no possible finding is permitted to do so, confidence is not mapped to evidence even when evidence is repeatedly cited in its favor.

7. Objections and Replies

7.1 Evidence and belief are different things and cannot be measured on one scale

Correct: evidence consists of considerations, while belief is a degree of confidence. The paper does not place a document and a percentage on one literal scale. It compares actual confidence with the confidence warranted by the evidence. Exact measurement is unnecessary. Many rational comparisons are ordered rather than numerical: one case is better supported than another, a new report weakens a conclusion, or direct observation adds more than a repeated rumor. The result can be a reasonable range. A faith gap exists only when confidence is above that range, not merely when assessors disagree within it.

This qualification makes the charge harder, not easier, to establish. Marginal disagreement is not enough. Clear cases arise when confidence is held near certainty despite acknowledged evidential weakness, or when strong counterevidence is not allowed to reduce it. There the problem is not missing arithmetic but a visible failure of fit.

7.2 Not seeing is not the same as lacking evidence

Agreed. Testimony can warrant high confidence about events never personally observed, and inference can warrant belief in entities never seen. That is why the biblical argument is explicitly conditional. The passages establish that high belief is praised under diminished direct access or contrary appearances. A gap follows only after the rest of the evidence is counted and found insufficient to warrant the same degree. John 20 itself identifies written signs, so reading it as a demand for belief without any evidence would be a mistake.

7.3 A divine message or religious experience could supply decisive evidence

Yes. If a person has strong evidence that a message is divine, the message may greatly raise rational confidence. Religious experience may also be evidence for the person who has it, and non-inferential accounts of Christian warrant deserve separate evaluation (Alston, 1991; Plantinga, 2000). The present argument does not exclude such evidence. It asks whether its total force, including source reliability, possible defeaters, and rival explanations, places the resulting confidence within the warranted range.

This reply also shows why the argument is person-relative without being arbitrary. Two people can rationally hold different degrees of belief because they possess different evidence. What neither may rationally do is set confidence independently of the evidence actually available to that person.

7.4 Faith is broader than a degree of belief

Often it is. The paper neither denies the wider history of the word nor reduces every religious practice to one attitude. It isolates a necessary question whenever Christian faith includes treating claims as true strongly enough to guide conduct. Action, emotion, identity, and participation can accompany that confidence without determining whether its degree fits the evidence. Philosophical accounts that defend faith as a practical stance under acknowledged risk may explain why commitment is reasonable before evidence settles an outcome (Buchak, 2012; McKaughan, 2013). They do not turn belief above the warranted range into evidence-mapped belief.

7.5 The Bible also presents signs and reports as evidence

It does. John explicitly connects written signs with belief, Paul appeals to witnesses, and Hebrew narratives repeatedly treat remembered events as reasons. The claim here is not that the Bible always opposes evidence. It is that biblical writers commonly give special praise to high confidence where direct evidence is absent, fulfillment is delayed, or appearances are contrary. Evidence can be present while confidence still exceeds the warranted range. Alternatively, the available evidence may fully warrant the confidence, in which case that instance has no faith gap under the paper's definition.

7.6 A religious perspective can supply its own evidence

A perspective can change which facts a person notices and how those facts fit together. Recent perspectival accounts argue that this can make faith responsive to subject-relative evidence rather than contrary to evidence (Tweedt, 2024). This is a serious alternative, but it applies the same test at a different level. If the perspective reveals genuine evidence and survives comparison with rival perspectives, that evidence belongs in the total and may close the gap. If the perspective merely raises the favored explanation's weight while insulating it from counterevidence, it reproduces the one-way mapping under dispute.

7.7 The social analysis commits a genetic fallacy

It would do so if social origin were used to infer falsity. It is not. The truth of Christianity must be assessed by the evidence for its claims. Social formation is relevant only to the further description that Christian confidence was calibrated by that evidence. If confidence was fixed first and protected from reduction, later argument can support the belief without having mapped its degree.

7.8 Some permissions allow action beyond settled evidence

James argues that certain live and unavoidable choices may be made when evidence cannot decide them (James, 1896). Even if such permission succeeds, it concerns what a person may choose or pursue under uncertainty. Buchak similarly distinguishes features of decision from ordinary evidential support (Buchak, 2012). Permission to act does not show that a high degree of belief was warranted by the evidence. Rational action under unsettled evidence and rational belief proportioned to evidence are different judgments.

8. Conclusion

The argument can be stated without a large vocabulary. Total relevant evidence warrants a reasonable degree or range of belief. Rational belief remains within that range and changes when the evidence changes. A faith gap is the positive difference when actual confidence rises above it.

A common biblical pattern praises high confidence when direct evidence is absent, fulfillment remains future, or appearances point otherwise. That pattern creates the possibility of a gap; it does not make every instance guilty by definition. Testimony, experience, argument, or some other source may compensate. The decisive question is whether the total evidence actually warrants the confidence. This conditional form preserves both the biblical evidence language and the paper's central criticism.

Saying that everyone has faith does not answer that criticism. Everyone has degrees of belief, and everyone acts short of certainty. If the word *faith* is stretched to include every uncertain belief, it becomes too weak to identify the distinctive biblical praise. If it names belief above the warranted range, it is not universal and cannot be made rational merely by relabeling ordinary belief.

Social formation belongs in the argument only at this point. A community misdescribes its practice as evidence mapping when it teaches a high degree of belief and prevents unfavorable evidence from lowering it. The claim is conditional and correctable. A Christian person or institution can answer by showing that all relevant evidence has been counted, that confidence lies within the range it warrants, and that real downward revisions occur when support weakens.

The paper does not conclude that Christianity is false or that no instance of Christian belief is rationally proportioned. It concludes that two relations should not be confused. Belief within the warranted range is rational belief. Belief above it contains a faith gap. Renaming both *faith* hides the gap; only adequate evidence can close it.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Terms

- **Degree of belief:** how confident a person is that a claim is true.
- **Total relevant evidence:** all available considerations bearing for or against that claim, assessed for reliability, independence, alternatives, and counterevidence.
- **Warranted range:** the degree or range of belief made reasonable by that total evidence.
- **Evidence-mapped belief:** a degree of belief within the warranted range and open to revision when relevant evidence changes.
- **Faith gap:** the amount by which actual belief exceeds the upper end of the warranted range.

Syllogistic reconstruction

1. Rational belief lies within the range warranted by total relevant evidence and remains open to evidential revision.
2. Therefore, actual confidence above the warranted range is not evidence-mapped belief; the excess is a faith gap.
3. A common biblical pattern praises high confidence when direct evidence is absent, fulfillment remains unseen, or apparent evidence points against the believed claim.
4. In any such case where the remaining evidence does not warrant equally high confidence, the state praised contains a faith gap.
5. The premise that everyone believes many things short of certainty establishes only that everyone has degrees of belief under uncertainty.
6. It does not establish that everyone believes above the warranted range, nor that doing so is rational.
7. Social practices can install or preserve a faith gap when they fix high confidence and prevent serious unfavorable evidence from lowering it.
8. A process that preserves confidence independently of downward evidential change is not evidence mapping.
9. Therefore, redescribing every uncertain belief as faith fails to defend the biblical gap, and any Christian process that preserves confidence above the warranted range is misdescribed as evidence-mapped belief.

Validity, burden, and limit

The principal inference is conditional. Premises 1 and 2 define the rational standard and the gap. Premise 3 is supported by the cited biblical pattern. Premise 4 applies that pattern only when compensating evidence does not warrant equally high confidence. A defender therefore has four direct routes: reject proportionality as the standard for rational belief; show that the passages do not praise high belief under reduced direct evidence or contrary appearances; identify further evidence that closes the alleged gap; or stop describing the resulting state as evidence-mapped belief.

The argument does not infer that Christian claims are false. It does not infer a faith gap merely from lack of sight, childhood teaching, social identity, emotion, or participation. Those features matter only when total evidence fails to warrant the confidence or when they keep belief fixed despite changing support. The conclusion concerns the fit between belief and evidence and the accuracy of the label applied to that relation.

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