


# Faith envy

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With this article, I wish to introduce the concept of 'faith envy'. From time to time, both believers and non-believers envy those who have faith or more faith. People envy, for example, Muslims or Charismatics for the significance and certainty of their convictions in their lives. I propose using 'faith envy' as an angle to investigate faith and religious language. This perspective opens up important new questions about faith. If we look at faith from this angle, we see aspects of faith that remain obscure in many debates on religion, aspects beyond historical or factual matters. Firstly, I explore what it is exactly that is envied in faith envy. Secondly, I argue for the use of the concept 'envy' rather than 'jealousy' or 'admiration' in this context. Thirdly, I indicate how using the concept of faith envy may open up new theoretical perspectives on faith and in particular the nature of religious language. I show how the lives and works of Sören Kierkegaard, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Simone Weil are illuminated by looking at them as people who envy faith. I conclude this article by providing some impressions of what novel perspectives using the concept of faith envy may bring to light.

**Keywords:** faith envy; religious language; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Sören Kierkegaard; Simone Weil.

## Introduction

One pastor claims to raise people from the dead. Another prophet sprays the insect repellent Doom on his followers to drive out demons. A pastor makes a phone call with God during the church service. Another one asks his congregants to eat grass, or snakes, or rat poison. How is it possible for anyone to believe in these things?

Some scholars connect people's belief in these practices with the rapid changes in our society at the moment, and the insecurities that these changes cause (Ashforth 2011; Frahm-Arp 2019). Others highlight the long traditions from which these prophets derive their ideas; this kind of Christianity provides a different and possibly more African approach to God than the one that has become mainline in South Africa (Van Wyk 2014, 2019). If you look at these traditions and ideas, and if you look at people's challenging circumstances, then it is actually quite understandable to follow these prophets. So why does it shock me again every time a prophet is in the news?

The answers do not seem to address what I find so terrible and so fascinating about these strange practices. They seem to miss the point. On the one hand, we find ourselves asking why people believe in the practices of these prophets; on the other hand, if somebody gives us an answer, it does not satisfy us. The problem is not that there is something wrong with these particular answers – I find them quite convincing – but maybe our dissatisfaction shows that we were not looking for answers in the first place.

The question 'why do people believe this?' often cannot be answered by historical or anthropological data because it is not really a question but an expression of the fact that we do not yet know how to position ourselves with respect to these phenomena. We find ourselves looking for a way to respond to the practices of these prophets that we find at once terrible and fascinating. The question is asked to express our bewilderment about the fears and desires that these strange stories evoke in us; fears about our own gullibility, for example, our desires for something in life to hold on to, no matter what. My suggestion is that it often feels as if scholarly explanations miss the point because they miss the feeling behind these questions; they miss the phenomenon of what I would like to call 'faith envy'.

With this article, I wish to introduce the concept of 'faith envy'. From time to time, both believers and non-believers envy those with faith or more faith. People envy, for example, Muslims or Charismatics for the significance and certainty of their convictions in their lives. I want to propose

using 'faith envy' as an angle to investigate faith and religious language. Faith envy explains why much research into strange religious practices, such as the ones referred to above, seems to miss the point. If we look at faith from this angle, we see aspects of faith that remain obscure in many debates about religion, aspects beyond historical or factual matters. In this article, I want to suggest that this perspective opens up important new questions about faith.

Firstly, I explore what it is exactly that is envied in faith envy. Secondly, I argue for the use of the concept 'envy' rather than 'jealousy' or 'admiration' in this context, and thirdly, I indicate how using the concept of faith envy may open up new theoretical perspectives on faith and, in particular, the nature of religious language.

## Absolute certainty

In literature on religion the concept of faith envy has been used only for a few times so far. Essayist Joseph Epstein, in a book on the phenomenon of envy in general, describes faith envy as one of the few positive instances of envy. Epstein (2003) gives the example of his own faith envy, when he was listening to beautiful rendering of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*:

[H]ow much more would I have been moved, I could not help wonder, if I were in a state of full religious belief [...]. Faith envy is envy, alas, about which one can do nothing but quietly harbour it. (p. 5)

It is significant that Epstein (2003) takes faith envy to be a benign form of envy because, as we can see, envy is most often considered to be a sin or something morally bad.

In a recent book on the spiritual state of Australia beyond belief, social researcher Hugh Mackay mentions faith envy as well. In *Beyond Belief: How We Find Meaning without Religion*, Mackay (2016) sets out to investigate how people deal with the contemporary religious situation in the West:

Over the past twenty-five years, our yearning for 'something to believe in' has become increasingly obvious, as people look for ways to fill the gap left by the mass retreat from traditional religious faith and practice. (n.p.)

People have left the churches and they cannot imagine themselves going back, but Mackay still finds many 'people who, even if only half seriously, have expressed faith envy'. Mackay (2016) quotes some people who reflect upon the faith of their parents:

I saw the look on my mother's face when she died – she was utterly confident she was going to see her father again, and it's hard to argue that that was anything but a good way for her to die. I kind of envy her that. (n.p.)

Or about the faith of their friends, Mackay (2016) states:

I definitely call myself an atheist. Well, maybe an agnostic. But I don't believe. On the other hand, I sometimes think wouldn't it be good if I could? In some ways, it would make everything easier. One of my friends is quite devout – sometimes I want to

attack her for being so weak-minded, and sometimes I wish I was devout, too. (n.p.)

Or they simply reflect upon what they are missing themselves (Mackay 2016):

I admit I'm frustrated by my own lack of faith. I'm quite angry with God for not existing, as a matter of fact. I'm sure life would be better if I had something to believe in – to rely on. (n.p.)

If you have faith, then it is supposed that you have something to rely upon, something to hold on to even in dark days or when you feel the end of life is coming. In spite of the fact that these people cannot even imagine having faith in themselves, they regard faith as something positive, for faith is supposed to solve one's insecurity.

Mackay (2016) summarises his examples of faith envy by saying that he found:

[P]eople who still hanker after the consolations of religion, the confidence enjoyed by believers and the peace of mind they associate with women and men of faith – or, at least, the best examples of women and men of faith. (n.p.)

Faith is supposed to give significance and certainty to one's life: You know what you have to do and that, ultimately, you are safely in God's hands.

Yet, I found that faith envy is present amongst those who have faith as well. When I once asked students of theology – most of whom were having training to become pastors in the church – to give some examples of faith envy, many of them gave examples about themselves. They mentioned as their own faith envy, their envy of people 'who keep faith in difficult times, who hold on to the hope that there will be a way out' or 'when someone close to you loses someone to death and they still have faith God'.

They envy people who have stronger faith than they themselves have: 'I have become envious of his faith and consistency, [for he is] only becoming stronger in faith lately'. The reliability and steadfastness of other people's faith is envied.

Neo-Pentecostals or Charismatics, like the ones with whom I started this article, were mentioned as well: 'I sometimes envy my charismatic friends' "naïve" and experience-based faith. Because their faith is based on experience, they seem immune to thought of doubt'. Others connect their own doubts with studying theology: they feel envy 'seeing a simple childlike faith that a friend has in God and the Bible as the Word of God. This is because he has not studied theology'. Being certain without suffering the doubts that come with theological reflection is considered as something to be coveted, although it called slightly diminutive 'childlike' as well.

Thirdly, several students mentioned their envy of the faith of Muslims: 'I am a Christian and yet I envy the Muslim community in their dedication to word/wisdom and prayer and fasting', wrote someone.

Someone else mentioned, '[t]he steadfast devotion of Muslims is very captivating'. And yet another said, '[m]y Muslim friend, her devotion to practices that [sic] reveal[s] or reminds her of her faith'. The dedication and conviction of Muslims seems enviable to these students, and the way in which through practices their faith determines their entire life. In the Netherlands, I noticed a renewed interest in the practice of fasting in some Christian churches inspired by the Islamic practice of Ramadan.

Faith envy does not only exist outside of faith, in the ways demonstrated by Mackay (2016), but it exists within faith as well. People having faith sometimes envy those who seem to have a stronger faith, both within and outside their own tradition. There is much debate, conflict and misunderstanding between believers and non-believers in society today, but faith envy, surprisingly, seems to be one of the things that both of these groups share.

Recent books discussing concepts that look very much like faith envy are written by both believers and non-believers. On the one hand, there is the idea of 'holy envy': theologian Krister Stendahl made this phrase popular, describing a way of finding beauty in other religions than in one's own. In 2018, Stendahl's colleague Hans Gustafson edited a book in which this concept is used as an opening for inter-religious learning: *Learning from Other Religious Traditions: Leaving Room for Holy Envy* (Gustafson 2018). And in 2019, theologian Barbara Taylor wrote the book *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* with a similar purpose.

Holy envy refers to an attitude for Christian believers looking outwards. In 2012, the professor of English and American literature and talk show host Michael Krasny wrote the book *Spiritual Envy: An Agnostic's Quest*, which looks from outside religion inwards. Krasny (2012) describes his own personal journey, being outside faith but sometimes longing for faith nonetheless:

When I write of spiritual envy, I mean envy of the consolation of faith, of the elevating power of knowing a force or forces beyond the physical, observable world or past the finite limits of self, of knowing a higher purpose, or possessing answers, or even being convinced that they can be discovered. To have answers and certainty, to possess spiritual anchoring or spiritual authority and purpose, is to have comfort, a release from the entrapment of life's suffering. (p. 5f.)

What Krasny (2012) looks for in religion is the security, the consolation of knowing absolutely certain that your life and what you do has meaning. To know without a doubt that whatever happens, whatever you may go through in your life, it is a part of something bigger.

Anthropologist Luhrmann (2018) notes:

As an observer of the faithful, I want to point out that the most fundamental observation about faith is not that divine stuff exists, but that moral purpose in the face of uncertainty will change the world as we know it. (p. 81)

Faith is not believing in particular objects, but about feeling secure because there is something more, and ultimately you trust completely that life is meaningful. Luhrmann (2018:81) continues, '[f]aith is about having trust that the world is good, safe, and beautiful'. The world may not look like a beautiful place, but faith is a belief in 'the possibility of radical hope: that in the face of the absence of any positive knowledge that hope can be delivered, one still hopes' (Luhrmann 2018:81). One is completely and undoubtedly convinced that there is some higher significance to everything.

In the same line, Luhrmann's colleague Adam Ashforth proposes to shift from analysing religion in terms of beliefs to a paradigm of security. Religious people are not first of all concerned with what exists or what does not, but with finding security in their lives, and at this point enters religion, as '[f]or most humans [...] the ultimate source of security is to be found in relations with spiritual powers of various sorts' (Ashforth 2011:135). These relationships make one feel safe, absolutely secure, and that is what makes religion distinct, that is what makes it enviable.

As the earlier anthropologist Beattie (1966:238) states, '[r]eligious and magical beliefs and practices [...] provide satisfactory answers to otherwise insoluble questions: they fill gaps in the human knowledge and so diminish areas of doubt and uncertainty'. The answers that religion provides are not theoretical answers – theoretical answers can always be doubted, but these cannot. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1998:38), who does not consider himself a believer, reflects as follows: '[w]hat inclines even me to believe in Christ's resurrection? I play as it were with the thought'. Even a non-believer such as Wittgenstein (1998) would somehow wish that Christ's resurrection is true, for otherwise we would:

[H]ave to make do with wisdom & speculation. It is as though we are in a hell, where we can only dream & are shut out from heaven, roofed in as it were. But if I am to be REALLY redeemed, – I need *certainty* – not wisdom, dreams, speculation – and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what my *heart*, my *soul*, needs, not my speculative intellect. (p. 38)

I return to Wittgenstein's (1998) reflections below, but for now it could be concluded that what is envied in faith envy – by both believers and non-believers – is certainty, a certainty that goes beyond what we ordinarily take to be certain. The certainty of faith that is coveted is absolute; it is a certainty that cannot be shaken by whatever may happen in one's life.

Both Mackay's (2016) non-believing interviewees and the theology students I spoke with described the certainty as something that could help someone through tough times; it could even help someone to face the final trouble of death. It is an absolute type of certainty without doubts, without even contemplating the possibility of doubt. It is a sugar-coated version of faith that even most believers realise they lack. However, the faith envied in faith envy is not just a high unreachable ideal but it is also something that is looked down upon at the same time – it is described as 'weak-

minded', 'childlike' and 'naïve'. It is admired, often even desired in some way, but that is not all, it is being brought down at the same time, and that is what makes faith envy a form of *envy*.

## Mixed feelings

Many people – outside and inside the church, more and less seriously – have expressed something of a desire to have faith or have more faith: if only I had had faith, or a stronger faith, then I would have known what to do, then I would have known for sure what is right, I would have understood why this is happening and so on. However, people's feelings about faith are often not only feelings of positive admiration.

We have all kinds of images about what faith is or what it is supposed to be that does not apply easily to our reality of everyday life. When I lived in Zambia, every year in churches and on TV and radio, pastors promised us that this was going to be our year of breakthrough, now prosperity and success in every aspect of life would be awaiting us. I never understood how people could be so enthusiastic about this promise – did they not remember that they had been promised the same thing last year? And whenever something went wrong in people's lives – an illness, an accident, no job or no husband – they would look for a powerful man of God to bind the evil spirits responsible. Did they really believe that everything in our lives is caused by spirits? And if they believed this, then how come I hardly ever noticed this in living and working with these same people? If spirits cause you to pass or fail an examination, why study, for example? Or did they not really believe in the spirits and breakthroughs as much as they said they did?

Then again, in the very secularised Netherlands where I come from, people may have asked similar things about me as a Christian. I claimed that God called me as a pastor to a particular congregation, so why was I nervous about the job interview? I say, someone I bury is now in the hands of God, so why am I sad? Faith is not always what it is assumed to be. In Zambia, I struggled with my own expectations about the faith I saw in others; in the Netherlands, I had to deal with other people's expectations about my own faith. In both cases it was clear that what was at play was not just admiration and desire: I may have wanted to believe that this would be the year of my breakthrough, but I could not even imagine taking the actual leap of believing it; others may have wished for some guidance like a calling from God at particular points in their lives, but they would not want to do the work it takes to be a believer.

If I dream of being an Olympic medal winner, it is clear what I want and what not. I wish I could share the experience of winning the race, I wish I could share the glory that comes afterwards. I am not jealous, however, of the discipline, the single-mindedness and the years of monastic living that precede winning the medal. If I envy faith or stronger faith, it is much less clear what I wish and what I am not jealous of. I desire to know what is right and wrong, but I cannot

imagine being as sure about this as some people of strong faith seem to be. To me it feels like having given up really thinking about right and wrong. I sometimes wish to be relieved of the burden of responsibility, yet without responsibility would there still be a me who is free now? I try to understand why things are as they are, but I cannot see how knowing the answers could be anything but simply blocking out alternatives, blocking out a real concern for the truth. What I desire in this case is also what I do not want to sacrifice. What I envy is also what I wish to avoid at all costs. The absolute certainty of faith would be nice, but, then again, would it or could it really be as satisfying? Faith seems to have the answers to all our questions, but, then again, does it, and/or at what cost? Faith envy is often ambiguous, showing that what faith is and is not is complicated.

If you have a strong faith, you do not need to worry about death, for you know already what happens afterwards. If you have faith, you do not need to worry about whom to marry, what career to choose, or whether to start a war: you simply read the Bible and follow its counsel. You do not have to carry the burden of responsibility. You know why what happens is happening – it is God's will – and you know everything would turn out to be alright in the end. If you have faith, you know what is right and what is wrong, whatever anyone else may say about it. You know that it matters what you do: God cares about you and you can fall back upon him when times are tough. Yet, it is most often not only seen as wonderful to have faith, not even the kind of faith described in these terms.

Renowned historian Yuval Noah Harari describes faith in terms similar to these in his bestseller *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. Harari (2016) writes from an extremely secular perspective. He considers faith to be something of the past, and not just the recent past: ever since Modernity started a few centuries ago, faith was no longer a viable option. Faith belongs so much to the past that Harari (2016:346) does not even bother to argue against it; his only problem is that even humanism, which followed faith, also turns out to be a 'religious fantasy'.

In spite of Harari's negative evaluation of faith, he describes it in quite positive terms, terms in line with what in the previous paragraph has been introduced as faith envy. Harari (2016) says things like this:

[P]remodern humans believed that their lives gained meaning. It really mattered whether they fought bravely on the battlefield, whether they supported the lawful king, whether they ate forbidden fruits ... it gave humans psychological protection against disasters. If something terrible happened – such as war, plague or drought – people consoled themselves that 'We all play a role in some great cosmic drama devised by the gods or by the laws of nature ...' (p. 200)

And '[w]hen people didn't know whom to marry, what career to choose or whether to start a war, they read the Bible and followed its counsel' (Harari 2016:390). Faith has been very helpful and positive, according to this description.

Harari does not say it, but it would not be farfetched to say that he envied it. The problem he sees with faith, however, is that it comes at a price: faith is won '[i]n exchange for giving up power' (Harari 2016:200). God determines what is meaningful, God determines what happens in nature, and the price for human surrender to faith is that they give up striving for power in these areas for themselves. This price is too much for people nowadays (Harari 2016):

Modern culture rejects this belief in a great cosmic plan. We are not actors in any larger-than-life drama. Life has no script, no playwright, no director, no producer – no meaning. (p. 200)

Faith may provide answers and absolute certainty, but what it asks in return is unbearable in the way Harari portrays faith.

I propose that the exchange that Harari speaks about is not just added onto his apparent picture of faith, it is already implied in it. Harari (2016) describes faith as simply checking the Bible to know what to do or whom to marry – this is a very simplified, caricature-like portrait of faith. It is hard to imagine anyone really living like that, and how it would be possible: what to read from the Bible, for example. All questions are solved in this picture of faith maybe, but only because human beings have been already exchanged for robots following a list of instructions. Harari describes faith as something positive which comes at a price, but this exchange is already a part of the picture of faith itself. The positive side of faith is clearly at the same time the negative side as well.

Anthropologist Adam Ashforth spent many years in the South African township of Soweto. In *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (Ashforth 2000), he describes the lives of his friends over there, and how important their belief in the spirit world is for them. In his final reflections, Ashforth (2000:249) considers his own lack of faith as follows: '[d]ivine Providence and witchcraft are, to me, equally abstract and empty hypotheses'. For Ashforth (2000) personally, the spiritual realm has no significance, although he admits to a certain envy in this respect:

As far as I am concerned, there are no invisible forces or beings that shape the lives and destinies of the living, although I sometimes feel a sort of envy, a feeling of tone deafness, when witnessing others communicate with beings beyond my ken. (p. 249)

Ashforth (2000:251) admits feeling a bit of envy sometimes: '[f]or Madumo, like everyone else I know in Soweto, the world is full of meaning, of signs of the presence and purposes of invisible powers'.

Ashforth considers to have found himself a good bargain after all: he is not aware of destiny and purpose, he does not strive after the absolute certainty, the quest that governs the lives of the people surrounding him in Soweto, but this sets him free of much less positive things as well. Ashforth (2000) does not need to fear witchcraft and evil spirits, or anything spiritual:

I've no need to wonder why God tolerates Evil in the world. I am thus spared the problem of identifying whether the invisible forces that are busily shaping our destinies are agents of Good or forces of Evil, and I never have to wrestle with the problem of interacting with such beings and entities. (p. 250)

Faith in a spirit world may give someone's life meaning and purpose, but without faith one is free from all the negative side effects of faith as well. The faith that Ashforth (2000) himself admits to envy sometimes is itself the source of what is wrong with it. Faith is good and bad at the same time. And that is why I propose, we must speak of faith envy instead of faith jealousy or faith admiration. People covet faith or a stronger faith for its absolute certainty, but their very positive picture of faith is the negative picture of faith as well. This ambivalence is something that fundamentally belongs to what we call 'envy'.

In everyday use of language, envy is often used as a synonym of jealousy, coveting or greed, but more specified definitions bring out some distinct characteristics of envy. Especially some distinctions made by the renowned psychoanalyst Melanie Klein have been taken up in the future envy research. Klein (1988) says:

Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it. Moreover, envy implies the subject's relation to one person only. (p. 181)

Jealousy focuses on both the desired object and the person who has it or threatens to take it, whereas envy focuses especially on the person who has it. This fits the double feeling of people with faith envy: they want the certainty and trust that faith provides for believers, but they are at least unsure about whether they want the object – faith – that gives this security. Faith envy often consists of both sugar-coated idea about faith as complete peace of mind and being repelled by the dogmatism, simple-mindedness and so on, associated with it at the same time. The focus of faith envy is on what faith supposedly brings believers – security and absolute certainty – and not on the faith that is supposed to give this, for that one might even find repugnant. Harari's (2016) descriptions of faith are a typical example of faith envy in that on the surface it seems to describe a positive, helpful phenomenon, but it phrases it in such a way that it is immediately clear that it is nothing more than a misguided fantasy. Both individual believers and the church as a community of believers are often placed in a very negative light.

This fits with Klein's (1988:230) emphasis on 'the spoiling and destructive quality of envy'. Klein gives as an example of the patient who feels the need to devalue the analyst's insights out of envy. The patient desires the clarity of the analyst for himself or herself, but at the same time diminishes its worth because he or she knows that he or she cannot have it. This destructive element makes envy itself something to feel guilty about (Klein 1988:189), and therefore more than jealousy, envy is something to be hidden away.

Kierkegaard (2004:118) describes envy as ‘concealed admiration’, someone who is envious, ‘speaks another language. In this language of his the thing he admires is said to be nothing, something stupid and humiliating and peculiar and exaggerated’. By portraying faith as something childish and for the weak-minded people may express their envy and therefore their hidden admiration. In the case of jealousy or coveting, emotions are clearly distinguished: one wants the object and therefore one feels ill will towards the person who has taken it or threatens to take it. In the case of envy, like in the case of faith envy, mixed emotions are in play: one wants what the other has, and because one does not have it oneself, one depreciates the object that was admired in the first place and still is admired at the same time.

Because of its destructive character, envy is often considered to be something bad, even one of the seven deadly sins. In modern envy research, however, a distinction is being made between ‘benign’ and ‘malicious’ envy (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg & Pieters 2009). Benign envy may help someone to strive for something genuinely good. For this, one would need to filter through one’s emotions, see what is worthwhile and desirable, and also keep an open mind for the way in which the devaluation implied in envy has a point. If we use faith envy in this way, it may open up new perspectives on faith and, in particular, the nature of religious language, as we will see when we apply the concept to some intriguing scholars who reflected upon religion.

## The strangeness of religious language

In archaeology, an artefact is identified as religious or ritual in nature if it does not have a clear socio-economic or practical function. In language, a statement is often identified as religious if it does not describe plain facts. ‘God helped me’ or ‘God sent the earthquake’ does not make sense in a straightforward explanatory sense, so these are probably to be taken as religious statements. Instead of looking for a way to turn religious statements into some kind of descriptions after all, I propose to investigate the distinctive nature of religious language.

Religious people make statements about God’s rules and God’s plans; they refer to a different reality behind what is clearly visible to everyone, and to a kind of safety that does not seem to match what we see in reality; they speak of sin and spirits and sacrifice, of prayer and powers and prophecy. How can we make sense of religious language? Instead of debating the truth or falsehood of religious statements as if they must be intended as descriptions of the world, we should pay attention to the practice which gives these words their sense. As soon as we identify a particular statement as religious, we place it in a particular category, a strange category. The special character of this category of language becomes clearer if we look at it from the angle of ‘faith envy’.

The double attitude – considering it to be something positive and negative at the same time – would be interesting from a psychological or sociological perspective, but here I wish to emphasise that it is also interesting from a philosophical or

conceptual angle. What does faith envy say about the concept of faith – a concept apparently shared by believers and non-believers alike? The envier feels himself or herself to be uncertain compared to the envied. The envier feels himself or herself to be searching compared to the envied who has made his or her choices in life. Certainty and knowing what you want from life apparently belong to the concept of faith, together with ideas of inflexibility and limitedness. Exploring this perspective allows the investigation of religious language to move beyond traditional deadlocks such as between critical realism and postmodernism, realism and non-realism or apologetics and new atheism. The angle of faith envy may open up questions about faith and the meaning of religious language in an interesting and innovative way.

We might, for example, elucidate faith envy further and bring out what it tells us about faith by reflecting upon the lives and writings of three thinkers: Søren Kierkegaard, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Simone Weil. The lives and works of these authors are illuminated by looking at them as people who envy faith. I conclude this article with providing some impressions of what novel perspectives using the concept of faith envy may bring to light.

Kierkegaard, or, more precisely, his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, notes that in his days most people think that faith is easy, and that faith is the default position if you cannot reach the heights of philosophy.

De Silentio himself, however, considers faith to be something great and marvellous. With *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard 1994), he writes a book on faith envy par excellence. From afar he admires the father of faith, Abraham, although he expresses mixed feelings involved in envy as well: ‘[t]hough Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appals me’ (Kierkegaard 1994:51). De Silentio describes the knight of faith: on the one hand, he lets go off all worldly concerns, he surrenders all his desires into the hands of God, so he cannot be hurt by anything that happens anymore; on the other hand and at the same time, he waits, in faith, for the world to be returned to him, to enjoy again fully what he has given up wholly and completely.

Kierkegaard himself, as a theologian and fervent defender of Christianity within Christendom, clearly has faith, yet he has faith envy as well. During the time he wrote *Fear and Trembling*, he broke off his engagement with Regine, feeling that he has to sacrifice this relationship to be able to fully devote himself to his writing. But in his diaries, Kierkegaard (1978:233) writes, ‘[i]f I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regine’. Not only De Silentio envies faith, Kierkegaard himself as well.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham knows what is right – he has to sacrifice Isaac – but he cannot defend it ethically, he cannot explain why this is right; in the end, he cannot even speak about it. On the one hand, faith is to know what is right; on the other hand, this knowledge is so personal in nature that one cannot explain it, you cannot even fall back upon the confirmation given by others that what you know is right is

indeed the right thing to do. The faith to envy is to be certain about what is right and wrong, but always merely as a witness, never as a teacher, as expressed by De Silentio (Kierkegaard 1994:70).

Wittgenstein was brought up as a Christian but was quite indifferent to faith. At the age of 21, he saw a play in which the idea was expressed that nothing can happen to you, no matter what occurs in the world. Later, Wittgenstein looked back at this idea of absolute safety as the first occasion in his life that he perceived the possibility of religious belief (see Kroesbergen 2018). Nonetheless, for his whole life he remained outside of faith, once explicitly stating, 'I am not a religious man', although adding, 'but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view' (Rhees 1981:94). The exact meaning of this statement has been debated widely. Another time Wittgenstein (1998:63) confessed, 'I cannot kneel to pray, because it's as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of dissolution (of my own dissolution) should I become soft'. He felt faith would require him to give up something that he was unable to do. He remained an outsider, but continued to admire something in faith. He seemed serious when he said, 'I seem to be surrounded now by Roman Catholic converts. I don't know whether they pray for me. I hope they do' (Rhees 1981:163).

In Wittgenstein's work, there is an important shift from the *Tractatus* (1922), where it is argued that one cannot speak about faith, to the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009), where words are just as applicable to religion and ethics as to anything else, but we need to pay close attention to how these words are used. Desirable faith is still something about what is beyond the ordinary world, but words taken up in a particular way in a particular life could be a part of it. You cannot tell someone's faith – whether it is worth envy or not – by looking at his or her words alone. As quoted above, what matters is the difference that words make at different points in your life because practice gives words their sense.

Simone Weil, during her entire life, moved along the borders of faith. She had long discussions about whether or not she wanted to be baptised (Weil 2002a). She wished to follow Christ whom she regarded as the truth, but her love was not limited to Christ as she found parts of the same truth in the Bhagavad Gita or Marxism as well. She was worried that as a member of the church she would be obliged to follow the teachings of the collective even if she did not find truth in these. She envied the comfort of belonging to a collective, but the risk that it might compromise her relationship with the truth led her to decide to remain a Christian outside the church.

In her personal life and in her writing, Weil (2002b) struggles with the meaning of faith and the truth: faith offers the truth and one merely needs to accept it in obedient submission. Weil (2002b) states:

Obedience is the only pure motive, the only one which does not in the slightest degree seek a reward for the action, but leaves all care of reward to the Father who is in secret and who sees in secret. (p. 49)

Yet, how do we know the truth that we should obey? Weil describes how she is glad that she never read the mystics before she had her own mystical experience, otherwise she would have doubted her own sincerity: maybe she is only imagining having a mystical experience because she has read about it? How to distinguish one's own imagination from the truth?

Weil (1951) criticises Pascal's recommendation to start praying even when you are not sure that you believe:

During all this time of spiritual progress I had never prayed. I was afraid of the power of suggestion that is in prayer – the very power for which Pascal recommends it. Pascal's method seems to me one of the worst for attaining faith. (p. 15)

If you pretend to have faith, at some point you yourself may be unable to distinguish between pretending and really having faith: determining the truth has become impossible for you. To truly find God, Weil (2002b:115) decides that she has to give up all claims to knowledge about God, even the claim that he exists. Only by emptying herself completely she can open herself up for a revelation that truly comes from the other side, open for the real truth, open for God.

When we envy people with faith or stronger faith, we envy their apparently immediate access to all the answers, to the truth, and, at the same time, we are aware that we ourselves could never receive those answers simply as the full and complete truth. Weil (2002b) struggled with and reflected upon this ambiguity like no other. She warns against committing oneself too easily – out of faith envy, for example, because if we do so, we can no longer distinguish between true or genuine faith and deceiving ourselves. We would no longer have a trustworthy criterion to discern desirable faith worth commitment.

The personal struggles of these great thinkers with their own faith envy show us important aspects of what faith is and could be. I have provided these few suggestions to show how the concept of faith envy provides new ways to mine the works and lives of these thinkers for innovative perspectives on faith envy and the nature of religious language.

## Conclusion

People both inside and outside religion often share an ambiguous kind of envy for having a strong faith: would it not be nice to have all the answers and feel absolutely certain? Nowadays, the envy is directed, for example, towards Charismatics, who seem to have such a strong conviction that they never seem to doubt at all. Envy is also directed towards Muslims, who next to their strong conviction have practices such as the Ramadan or wearing a headscarf that guide their entire lives. Thirdly, envy is directed towards those whom faith helps to remain calm in suffering, illness or in the face of death. I argue that we call the attitude towards these people 'envy' instead of 'jealousy' or 'admiration', because the admiration is often mixed with negative feelings. One admires those of strong faith, but one

also looks down upon them, belittles them or ridicules them to some extent. The faith is often considered to be 'childlike', both in the positive sense – its strength – and in the negative sense – something we ourselves have outgrown. We would want it, but, of course, we could never have it – not anymore – so we do not even really try. We devalue and admire faith or stronger faith at the same time.

Faith envy explains why we ask how it is possible for people to believe in all of those things mentioned at the outset of this article without really being interested in the answers: we are not looking for explanations but for ways to deal with our mixed feelings of admiring the absolute certainty these people have, and the need to look down upon it. And if we use faith envy as a perspective to re-examine classical scholars such as Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Weil, we discover how Kierkegaard shows that in religion you can only be a witness to this truth, never a teacher. Teachers or experts are of no help in finding the truth, because as soon as one thinks to possess the truth, one has lost it, as shown by Weil. If we envy faith, we should not stare at the statements and pictures used by believers but pay attention to how these are used in people's lives, in the commitments they live by.

To have faith may indeed be wonderful and enviable, but it is a part of having faith that nobody can teach you, nobody can confirm that you are doing the right thing, for it is ultimately something between every individual and God or whatever higher power one may believe in. The personal character of religion turns religious language and practices into something very peculiar. Using faith envy as an angle is important if only it brings this significant characteristic of religious language and practices.

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### Author contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article

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