Canadian pop star Justin Bieber’s fans are known as “Beliebers.” According to Wikipedia, this pun, based on Bieber’s name and the word “believer,” refers to his most rabid fans. These fans go beyond typical actions, such as covering their bedrooms with posters and constantly playing, his music to sending death threats to women who date Bieber; defacing Wikipedia when he failed to win a Grammy; and (horror of horrors!) putting “biased content on Justin Bieber-related pages on Wikipedia.”

The online Urban Dictionary reveals a debate about how dedicated fans must be to call themselves Beliebers, but the most fanatical distinguish between wannabes and “true Beliebers.”

What can we learn about the nature of belief from Beliebers?

Obviously, there is a difference between knowledge and belief. I know that Justin Bieber is a singer. I even know that he is a wildly popular singer among young teenagers (usually female). But I am not a fan and certainly do not believe in him. People know facts, but they do not believe in them. I know that 2 plus 2 equals 4. I don’t believe it. I know I own a red car. I do not believe it.

People, thus, believe things they do not or cannot know. These may be possible future events: I believe the Colorado Rockies will win the pennant this season. They may be views about the world: I believe the United States is the best country ever. They may be personal decisions: I believe so-and-so is the best candidate for president, or I believe the best way to invest my money is by buying property.

The language of religion is the language of belief. Christian evangelists ask potential converts whether they “believe.” Christianity’s historical confessions of faith consist of statements of belief. The Apostles Creed begins “I believe in God the Father almighty… and in Jesus Christ, his only Son,” and later states “I believe in the Holy Spirit.”

Similarly, a person converts to Islam with a statement of belief, the Shahadah, “There is no god but God, and Mohammad is his prophet.” Furthermore, the definition of an atheist is one who does not believe in a god.

In his book “Witches Abroad,” fantasy satirist Terry Pratchett plays with this concept of religious belief. “Most witches don’t believe in gods. They know that the gods exist, of course. They even deal with them occasionally. But they don’t believe in them. They know them too well. It would be like believing in the postman.” The satirical jab is that, in our own world, a god is not as solid a concept as a mailman.

“True Beliebers” reveal a second point about belief. Namely, belief inspires action. Beliebers listen to Justin Bieber’s music; they talk and Tweet about their devotion to Justin; and they take actions in favor of Bieber and against those they perceive as his enemies.

Devoted fans who believe in their favorite sports team, likewise, act according to that belief. They wear team-branded shirts and hats; Green Bay Packers fans will even put on “cheeseheads.” They watch their team play on TV and attend games, often paying large sums for tickets if the team makes the playoffs. They cheer and chant for the team.

Religious belief motivates people as well. Belief in Jesus Christ often inspires people to attend church and worship every week. Religions teach their views on moral behavior, which are then practiced by their followers. Sometimes, belief stimulates deeper commitment: nuns dedicate their lives to Jesus rather than to a family; missionaries travel to foreign lands to convert or minister to non-believers, and so on.

Sometimes believers work to reify their beliefs. That is, they take steps to give beliefs a factual character and make them realistic. One way to do this is through law. We can see this in our society’s moral debates. For example, when does a fetus attain the rights of a human being? The answers are a matter of belief and different groups try to put their beliefs into law, or prevent others from doing so. If beliefs are not facts, law can still make people act as if they are.

Justin Bieber’s Beliebers, then, may be silly in the eyes of many people, but their name and behavior provide us insight into the character of what it means to know and to believe.