

Faithful Doubting

By Phil Woodward



When, nearly two decades ago, I sensed a calling to become a Christian academic, I pictured a career in which I helped to replace people's doubt with intellectually stable faith. God was calling me, I thought, to explain the Christian worldview to those who were unsure of its cogency. I did not anticipate that I would myself struggle with doubt, sometimes intensely and for protracted periods. These struggles have been exacerbated by the feeling that I am failing at the role I am called to play—that of a confident, intellectually sophisticated defender of the faith in an era of increasing unbelief.

But I have gradually changed my thinking about doubt. I no longer see it as vocationally paralyzing. Doubt, I have become convinced, has been a destabilizing force in our culture because it has not been permitted to do its proper job, and so it rebels and works mischief.

So I am trying to learn how to doubt well—that is, in ways that are compatible with, even conducive of, vibrant spiritual life and commitment to the church. What follows are my reflections, both

autobiographical and philosophical, on what doubt is, what good it can do, and why it sometimes goes wrong.

The Anatomy of Doubt

Doubt, in my experience, is no simple psychological phenomenon. It consists of many different dimensions.

Intellectual Doubts

The first and most obvious is an intellectual dimension. Doubt, that is, involves a suspicion that certain theological claims aren't true after all. This intellectual dimension comes in different varieties, depending on the scope of doubt. Local intellectual doubt is an attitude of skepticism toward this or that theological claim. It manifests as the thought that some claim or other doesn't make sense, or that one isn't sure whether there are sufficient grounds for believing it, or that it seems inconsistent with something else one believes—some other aspect of one's theology, or from science, or from experience, or whatever.

These sorts of doubts are, I think, the natural result of living in an ideologically pluralistic society. And such ideological pluralism is not just a matter of there being non-Christian worldviews that compete for our allegiance. It is also a matter of the separated Christian churches coming into closer communion with one another—as well they should, even if the process is bewildering.

But intellectual doubt doesn't have to be localized. It can be *global* as well, calling into question the Christian worldview as a whole. Now, there is a whole range of doubts between the most local and the most global (just one theological claim, a quarter of one's theology, half of it, three quarters of it, etc.) But nevertheless I think that global intellectual doubt is a beast of a different kind. While localized intellectual doubt is often a rational response to one's epistemic situation (when one encounters Christians who think differently, for example), global intellectual doubt is not similarly rational. It comes on all of a sudden. The whole system suddenly seems, or feels, implausible—not for any reason that would warrant such a drastic revision of one's beliefs.

In the context of my own bouts of global intellectual doubt, I have been able to witness my own irrationality. About a year ago, I had been reading Richard Bauckham's classic study, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, in which he provides extensive evidence that the Gospel writers were drawing on eyewitness testimony as they wrote their accounts of Jesus' life. I was also reading an extraordinary book called *Wounded by Love*, the autobiography of a 20th-century eastern Orthodox monk and spiritual father,

known today as St. Porphyrios. His story is astonishing: a man with a second-grade education, who as a boy ran away to Mount Athos where he acquired humility and joy in equal measure and was graced with gifts of clairvoyance and discernment. He then moved to Athens to serve as a chaplain in a large hospital for several decades. (According to a physician at the hospital, he gave preliminary diagnoses for a thousand ailments that were later confirmed by medical professionals.) His spiritual children said that being in his presence was akin to Thomas touching the nail-holes of Christ. He was, in short, something of a modern-day apostle: a living witness to the power and presence of Christ. His testimony provided me with an especially powerful assurance of the truth of the Gospel.

Shortly afterward, I cracked open a book by a secular intellectual historian. In a discussion of the origins of Christianity, he makes the offhand remark that historically reliable information about Jesus is very limited. And suddenly I was seized with fear that it was all false! Now, this scholar's only source is a certain ex-fundamentalist New Testament scholar with an axe to grind, whose work I do not trust. Nevertheless, I was completely unsaddled, and it took me several days to recover.

Why would a secular academic who has only ever read one sloppy, anti-religious New Testament scholar make me doubt the whole of the Christian witness? The cause of my global intellectual doubt was *not*, clearly, an accretion of good evidence. There was no *rational* connection between this one academic's dismissive statement and the effect it had on me. Rather, its psychological effect had to do with the other, non-intellectual dimensions of doubt that were afflicting me simultaneously.

Existential Doubts

The first of these non-intellectual dimensions is an existential dimension. What I mean by this is that doubt can be rooted in fear of losing the thing that we care about most, the thing that gives our lives meaning. To the extent that we have embraced the Gospel with joy and it has become our hope and our life, then it is a dreadful thing to worry that it might be false. Existential doubt, that is, is not so much thinking the Christian doctrines false as fearing them false.

In my experience, such fears can snowball, as follows. A narrow intellectual doubt comes to mind. I recognize it as a crack in the foundations of my faith. This cues existential doubt, including an outsized emotional reaction to that initial skeptical thought. But if my faith had firm foundations, I wonder to myself, why would I feel so scared that those foundations are weak? And now I am confronted with not one but *two* skeptical thoughts: the narrow intellectual doubt I started with; my own shaky confidence as a sign that my faith is not well-founded. These two thoughts jointly cue another bout of existential doubt, and so the snowballing continues. Existential doubt can thus be its own driver of skepticism—despite the

fact that existential doubt is essentially emotional rather than intellectual, and that its underside is joy in the goodness of the Gospel.

Paradoxically, existential doubt afflicts those who are intellectually invested in the Gospel and passes over those who are less invested. I met a scientist recently who had lost his faith over the course of the previous year. He told me his reasons, and they amounted to intellectual doubts in the narrow sense—a handful of questions about how science and theology could fit together, questions which to my mind had ready answers. But for him it was easy to let go of his faith, because, as far as I could tell, his existential investment in his faith was relatively superficial.

Social Doubt

A third dimension of doubt is the social dimension. In general, what seems plausible to us is shaped by the people we want to fit in with and the people whom we trust. Our brains are wired not so much to find out what is true, as to find out who is trustworthy—and then to let their beliefs populate our own heads. This is all to the good: almost everything we know we know on the basis of what trustworthy people have told us.

If the people we trust and wish to fit in with are all confident Christians, their confidence bolsters our own confidence, in a totally non-intellectual way. But, for many of us, that's not our social situation anymore. Not only do we live in a pluralistic society, but we live at a time when friends and neighbors have been *losing* their confidence in Christianity at an unprecedented rate. We live at a time also when (it is rumored, at least) that the intellectual experts are not people of faith.

My panicky response to the dismissiveness of the intellectual historian I mentioned above can be explained by the existential and especially the social dimensions of my doubt. I wasn't attending to his reasons so much as calibrating my credence-level to someone I perceived as smart and credentialed and well-informed. If *he* thinks the evidence for the reliability of the Gospels is that bad...

Social doubt, like existential doubt, can snowball: people lose faith *because* other people have lost faith. The intellectual pedigree of the claims of Christianity might not come into the equation at all.

As a professor, I hear the stories of students who have lost their faith. As an academic, I read a lot of otherwise good scholarship by secular academics who are thoroughly dismissive of faith. I can testify that, by and large, for both of these groups of people, *their reasons for rejecting faith are very bad*. They are largely ignorant of the central claims and intellectual foundations of the Christian worldview. I know all of this, and yet the social dimension of doubt can still have its effect on me, cuing existential fears,

which then raise the intellectual stakes, making my local intellectual doubts feel more significant than they otherwise would seem.

Spiritual Doubt

A final dimension is the spiritual dimension of doubt. Christianity is above all a way of life: a way of being in the world that is open to God's grace, presence, and guidance. This mode of living is how faith gets experientially confirmed: by participating in the spiritual life and the life of the church, one is drawn into the life of God. But doubt can start to call the various actions of the spiritual life into question, even sabotaging them when they're happening.

If I am praying, and I begin to ask: *Is this real? Am I experiencing God's presence right now? Is anyone there on the other end?*, I have not only begun to question my prayer-practice, but I have actually *suspended* that practice, replacing it with a different activity, viz., the activity of theorizing about the spiritual life.

This kind of self-sabotage is familiar to insomniacs (among whose number I have periodically been counted). Falling asleep is not the sort of thing one can do by struggling to do it. The very act of struggling to do it disrupts the doing of it.

This is perhaps the most frustrating aspect of doubt. For when one is doubting, one craves experiential confirmation that one is not fundamentally misled. (Think of John the Baptist's appeal to Christ: "Are you the one who was to come?") But doubt can block immersion into God's presence of the sort that could provide one with such experiential confirmation. Doubt can seem to close off the various avenues through which God's confirmatory presence could come pouring in, obstructing them with intruding thoughts and worries.

The psychologically complex phenomenon of doubt has at least the foregoing dimensions, then: locally intellectual, globally intellectual, existential, social, and spiritual. It is worth noting here that psychological struggles that have nothing in particular to do with doubt can amplify doubt's oppressiveness. Anxiety and depression can make it seem that there is something wrong in oneself, in one's community, or in one's worldview, whether or not there is anything wrong—setting off the whole psychological cascade I have described above.

Becoming aware of these different dimensions is very important, because they are not to be handled in the same way. Intellectual doubt is not assuaged by immersion in vibrant Christian community, but social doubt might be. Spiritual doubt is not assuaged by theological reading, but intellectual doubt might be.

And so on. Doubt is a soul-malady in need of a remedy. But the remedy varies depending on which dimension is taking the lead.

Working all of this out on one's own is not likely to go well. But in conversation with wise counselors and friends, the result can be growth in all sorts of unexpected directions.

The Excellence of Doubt

I have said that doubt is a soul-malady. But it is not the invasion of the soul by a pathogen. It is more like an auto-immune disorder. The soul's own faith-maintaining systems have begun to operate in a destructive way. Those systems are nevertheless indispensable. Doubt of a certain sort is, I want to propose, a powerful gift in the life of the Christian.

There is such a thing as healthy, productive doubt. Healthy, productive doubt is the manifestation of an underlying passion: *the passion for the real in place of the merely comfortable*. It is the conviction that what tickles one's ears may not be what one's soul needs.

Now, it does not come naturally to feel uncomfortable with comfort! A felt discomfort with the merely comfortable can only be, therefore, a learned habit of soul—a spiritual excellence, even.

Doubt, when it is rooted in the passion I have been describing, is the great safeguard against idolatry. What is an idol, after all, but a comforting object of worship, in place of the living God? Doubt, so understood, is one the essential components of the gifting of the prophet. The prophet monitors the beliefs and practices of his familiars, reflects on them at some remove, and then concludes: this is not the Kingdom of God, but a comforting substitute. We have gone astray.

Consider intellectual doubt (in its narrow dimension). Christian faith is packaged and delivered to the faithful via relatively short, memorable formulas, which can over time come to seem trite or thoughtless if they lack significant thought or understanding behind them: "We live in a fallen world." "Jesus went to the cross so I wouldn't have to." "No matter what happens, we can all rest in the confidence that God is control." And so forth. Someone with a passion for the real in place of the merely comfortable will feel a measure of discomfort with such sayings. He will want to know if there is deep Christian wisdom behind the sayings, or if wisdom has been traded for something superficial and ultimately foolish. He will doubt.

But he won't merely doubt; he will also *search*. He will ask and seek and knock, in the quest to find real wisdom from the real God.

These sorts of searches are unnerving, because the searcher doesn't know where he will wind up. Existential doubt has its proper place here: if you pull on a thread, maybe the whole sweater will unravel. But my own experience is that such searches have been very, very fruitful. Time and time again, I have found myself dismantling a piece of superficial theology only to have it restructured with deeper foundations. I have come to understand the profundity of the Gospel as I would not have if I remained content with comforting slogans. Sometimes it took days, other times years for the key insight to come to me that brought an end to my search.

Here is an example. I was in my twenties. I found myself increasingly bewildered by what I read in the Gospels. Jesus, God incarnate, had come to suffer the penalty for our sin so that we could be reconciled to God. So much I understood. But the Jesus of the Gospels does not talk much about paying the penalty for our sin. What he *does* talk about struck me as, at worst, morally troubling (like the bit about gouging out your eye) and at best culturally alien: stories about goats and sheep, bound strong-men, shrewd stewards, and so forth. I had expected my study of the Gospels to reveal the Jesus of atonement theology, and instead it revealed a peculiar Jewish rabbi who did and said strange things.

I mentioned my confusion to a seminarian who was serving at my church at the time. He immediately recommended *Jesus and the Victory of God* by N.T. Wright. This book transformed my thinking about Jesus' mission. Jesus' activities in the Gospels, I came to understand, are not so much declarations of timeless truths as actions in a drama, a drama that is only intelligible in light of what came before (Israel's repeated rejection of God as their king) and what would come after (the founding of the church as the locus of renewal of creation). Jesus' mission was not in the first instance to die for us, but rather to announce and spearhead God's Kingdom. Hence the parables, declaring the upside-down ways of the Kingdom; hence the triumphal entry and cleansing of the temple, enacting his authority as the true king; and so forth.

This episode started with felt tension between, on the one hand, a doctrinal formula I had been given (Jesus came to die in our place) and, on the other, some fact I had come to know (the Jesus of the Gospels does not often preach 'the Gospel', understood as atonement theology). I needed to figure out whether the tension was real—a genuine inconsistency between Christian theology and facts known elsewhere—or merely the product of an incorrect or superficial understanding of Christian theology. It turns out that the latter was the case. Not only did I discover that Christian wisdom is not inconsistent with the facts, I learned to appreciate Christian wisdom at a deeper level.

This pattern has repeated itself over and over. I keep finding ways of thinking about God that are different from what I was taught in Sunday school but that are deeply faithful. Worldview-shaping insights have

come to me suddenly, unexpectedly, from Christian writers of every era and persuasion: Augustine on sin, Hadewijch on struggle, Soren Kierkegaard on faith, C.S. Lewis on hell, Simone Weil on affliction, Josef Pieper on hope, Dallas Willard on inspiration, Kallistos Ware on salvation, N.T. Wright on scripture. Not that all of my doubts have given way to insight. They have not. I am often bewildered. But my bewilderment has given way to insight often enough that I am encouraged in my current searches.

This status report would be much less positive, I suspect, were it not for all of the wise conversation partners I have had over the years, who have been able to direct me to the right resources at the right times. I have come to believe that I have lived a charmed life in this regard; not everyone has the privilege of knowing such intellectually savvy guides on their search for understanding. These people had been shaped by the best of the Christian intellectual tradition and so could point me toward the best of it.

I think that evangelical Protestants are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to engaging in the search for a deeper understanding of Christian wisdom. Protestant churches, from the Lutherans to the Pentecostals and everyone in between, are so many splinter groups. Each was essentially a reform movement within the larger Christian body, each had some special insight that was being lost in the mainstream church. But when they split off, they tended to frame their whole theology in terms of that special insight, as though it were the centerpiece of the Christian outlook. This is not how the Church was meant to function. Christian wisdom is distributed over the whole church: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and dare I say, liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning. The whole church is supposed to think theologically together.

Protestants, because of their factional origins, are not well-positioned to be able to tell the difference between (a) the idiosyncrasies of their home traditions, and (b) the universal Church's witness of God's salvation. I have seen this handicap play out in the lives of more friends of mine than I count. Driven by what I have been calling a 'passion for the real,' they begin to doubt what they were taught in Sunday school, but they aren't aware of any orthodox Christian alternatives to it. Intellectual honesty impels them to loosen their hold on the teachings they have come to doubt, but because they identify those teachings with Christian teaching *simpliciter*, the only option available to them is a liberal form of Christianity that is not very different from secular humanism, and devoid of spiritual dynamism. Many of these friends no longer think of themselves as Christians of any kind. But I can attest that it doesn't have to go this way. A passion for the real can give rise to doubt that animates a search for true Christian wisdom, in all its breadth and depth, if one knows how to look outside of one's home tradition.

I have been talking about doubt—as passion for the real vs. the merely comfortable—as directed toward particular teachings of the church. There is an even more central role that this passion can play in a

vibrant Christian life. It manifests as a refusal to think of God as in any sense commonplace, ordinary.

The reality of God contrasts with the ‘reality’ of the pagan gods—Zeus, Thor, Molech, etc. These gods, were they to exist, *are* commonplace: they are like us, but more powerful. But God is in a totally different category from the gods of the pagans. It seems to have taken awhile for the Israelites to realize this, but once they did, they could not forget it: the gods of the nations are nothing but idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Yahweh is *I am that I am*—being itself. There is a finite distance between me and a pagan deity, but there is an infinite distance between me and God himself. (Which renders all the more extraordinary the infinite condescension of God coming to us in Jesus, promising to indwell us and make his home with us eternally.)

It is proper to a finite creature like me to continually doubt the adequacy of my conception of God, lest I worship a comfortable idol of my own making in place of the living God who “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” There is, then, an element of doubt in every act of true worship.

The Corruption of Doubt

I have been describing how intellectual doubt, when rooted in a passion for the real in place of the merely comfortable, can be a great force for good in the life of the believer: it propels a search for a deeper and broader understanding of Christian wisdom, and it sustains a proper regard for God’s transcendence. Doubt is thus both a cause and a concomitant of faith.

But doubt obviously can also undermine faith. We live in an era rife with such doubt. Wherein lies the difference between salutary and corrosive doubt?

I think there are two assumptions widespread in our culture that have a corrupting effect on doubt, which turn it into a cause of unbelief. The first assumption is *secularism*, the second is *individualism*.

What I mean by ‘secularism’ is the assumption that a secular worldview—a worldview devoid of anything transcendent—is *neutral*. The idea is that you can either be religious, and thus peculiar, or you can be secular, and thus neutral or normal. (The secular attitude toward religion is thus a lot like the attitude of someone who thinks that everyone has an accent except himself.)

The assumption of secularism corrupts doubt by prematurely halting the search for deeper understanding. Here is how this can go. A believer begins to have global intellectual doubt, so she divests from her religious commitments. Where does that leave her? According to the surrounding culture, the default

alternative is secularism, so that is what is left when she divests of her religious commitments. She can enjoy the freedom of neutrality in contrast to the partisanship she had succumbed to when she was religious.

But it is simply false that a secular worldview is a neutral worldview. On the contrary, it is as peculiarly committal as any religious worldview. It makes the following partisan declarations: (1) there is no horizon of value or meaning that extends beyond the natural order; (2) the natural world provides everything humans need to flourish; (3) there is no transcendent cause that explains why there is a world or why it is ordered in the way it is. Those are contentious claims, worthy of scrutiny, worthy of *doubt*, just as much as any other vision of reality.

Once the assumption of secularism is given up, a doubter will be able to see the secular worldview for what it is: a peculiar picture of reality with its own commitments, which themselves must be questioned as part of the search for understanding. That search *could* result in the adoption of a secular worldview, but certainly not by default.

The second assumption is *individualism*. I have in mind a distinctively modern wisdom tradition that advises us to be true to ourselves, or, as Kacey Musgraves memorably puts it, to ‘follow your arrow wherever it points.’ The idea is that one should turn inward and trust oneself as one’s best guide. This idea is rarely stated explicitly, but its influence can be felt everywhere.

Such advice has its proper place. It has encouraged many a righteous misfit to disregard what others are saying and to do what he knows is right instead. (A children’s book about Louis Pasteur’s perseverance in the face of ridicule as he developed his rabies vaccine is titled ‘The Value of Believing in Yourself.’) But one is not always one’s own best guide, and this is certainly true of someone in the throes of religious doubt.

It is telling that a common framing of the spiritual quest is the question “What do *I* believe?” The quester starts by asking herself this question—what intuitively makes sense to her, what strikes her as plausible—and then derives her worldview from it. Now, what strikes you as plausible or intuitive is certainly an interesting psychological fact about you. But it is subject to all sorts of non-rational influences: your upbringing, your temperament, your broader culture. There certainly should be a tight connection between *what you believe* and *what there are good reasons to think is true*. But the former should conform to the latter, and not the other way around.

I suspect that many doubters, under the spell of individualism, turn inward right at the crucial moment when they should turn outward. They ‘trust themselves’ precisely when experiencing their deepest

confusion. They take their own belief-instincts as Gospel.

There is a sense in which I would encourage a doubter to trust himself: he should not do violence to his own intellect by blindly trusting the authority figures around him. He should, that is, trust his doubt as a sign that greater understanding is out there to be discovered. But his next step should not be to shrink the scope of his trust (to include only himself), but to broaden it. In any arena, after all, in which I discover that I lack understanding, the right question for me to ask is not, *what do I believe?* But *who can instruct me?*

Evangelical Protestants are, again, at a disadvantage, because most of them have cut ties with the traditional authorities that they could otherwise fall back on. In particular, they have distanced themselves from the tradition of the saints. If there are any experts in the spiritual life, these are they. In my own experience of navigating doubt, it has been invaluable to recover the tradition of the saints. When I read the saints, I am struck by the power of their witness to God's grace at work in the world. But more than this, I am struck by just how foreign their experience is, compared to my own. They see what I do not, and as I read their lives, they make what they see available to me, so that I can see it, too. In short: the doubter shouldn't just trust his pastor, but neither should he trust only himself. He should trust the saints, the ones who see the light.

When one finds oneself doubting, a genuine passion for the truth should give rise to a search for deeper understanding. Secularism prematurely halts this search: the doubter illegitimately defaults to a worldview every bit as committal as the religious worldview the doubter has been doubting. And individualism misdirects the search: the doubter looks inward for answers rather reaching outward toward whomever has wisdom.

The assumptions of secularism and individualism are not easily dislodged. To name them *as* assumptions is already to start that process of dislodging them. If they can be dislodged, in the minds of particular people who are prone to doubt, then I think that doubt in the Christian life will become much less of a threat to faith. Doubt will be free to do what it was always supposed to do: loosen our attachments to idols and local ideologies and clear the way for dynamic encounter with the transcendent mystery of God.