



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The Gospel of Doubt

Clay Nelson © 13 October 2019

In a sermon preached to the Oxford Unitarian congregation, the Anglican bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, opens by quoting the writer Julian Barnes, “I don’t believe in God but I miss him.” Barnes goes on to say: “God is dead and without him human beings can get up off their knees and assume their full height; and yet this height turns out to be quite dwarfish. Religion used to offer consolation for the travails of life, and reward at the end of it for the faithful. But above and beyond these treats, it gave human life a sense of context, and therefore seriousness... But was it true? No. Then why miss it? Because it was a supreme fiction, and it is normal to feel bereft on closing a great novel.”

If Bishop Pritchard, an unabashed doubter, had been my priest when I was 16, my spiritual journey may have taken a different course. At the time I was the chaplain of my youth group. As chaplain, my primary duty was to write a column for our youth newsletter. Previous chaplains had written brief items that had little meat on them, but my first one was a response to the most recent April 1966 issue of TIME magazine with “Is God Dead?” in large typeface on the cover. The story by TIME religion editor John Elson — and the gut-punch question on the cover, inspired countless angry sermons and 3,421 letters from readers. (For example: “Your ugly cover is a blasphemous outrage.”) The *National Review* responded by asking whether TIME was, in fact, the dead one. Bob Dylan even criticized it in a 1978 interview with *Playboy*: “If you were God, how would you like to see that written about yourself?” Those three words that had stirred debate among a few radical theologians and most of Europe’s philosophical community had suddenly captured the imaginations — and fears — of the nation.

You’ve met me. How could I not respond to such a furore? I wrote a lengthy response that basically agreed with Nietzsche’s position that God was dead, but I could still affirm my faith in the man Jesus. After submitting it for publication I eagerly awaited receiving the newsletter. It came, but my article was not in it. It turns out that the church’s superintendent of Sunday school was appalled and chose not to print it, lest, like Socrates, I corrupt the youth by instilling doubt. I was filled with teenage self-righteous anger. I remember my father going to the priest to rectify the situation. It was agreed it would be sent out separately. When it came it was an insert in an article by the priest trying to explain away my conclusions. If I was angry before, I was now infuriated. Little did I know it then, but he had set me on a course that would eventually lead to my being a Unitarian Universalist. For as time would tell, I needed a spiritual home less afraid of doubt than of certainty.

Doubt can be a tool that will lead us to deeper places, deeper understandings, deeper insights into how we can live in the world in the midst of life’s uncertainty. But doubt doesn’t always function this way. There’s a story of the Buddha’s enlightenment that tells of his sitting under the bodhi tree doing battle with Mara, Lord of Illusions, who tried to distract him. After reaching enlightenment, he spent seven more days offering his thanks to the tree for sheltering him. Then, as he stepped away from the tree and onto a nearby path, he met a man in the road. The man, seeing this odd look on the Buddha’s face, asked him, “Are you a

god?” to which the Buddha replied, “No, I’m awake.” After hearing the Buddha’s reply, the man said, “Huh, we’ll see” — and walked away. So, the first person the Buddha met was a doubter.

UU minister Brian Eslinger, notes that this doubter of the Buddha represents a particular aspect of doubt that we now call cynicism. His doubt didn’t lead him to ask the Buddha any questions: “Whattya mean, ‘awake’?” Instead, his turning away represents a refusal to engage with his doubt. Doubt can be a tool or a road block. Doubt can be an excuse to keep us from digging deeper, learning more, engaging with the multiple ways of being in the world. Doubt can be a wall — or it can be a candle. It can either block us from learning or light our way into unseen places.

From its beginning, doubt has challenged those who purported to know the world through both religion and science. Doubters questioned the ability of both divine revelation and human observation to really know what was true. But during the earliest stages of human history, doubt wasn’t a very big threat to society or to the lives of the doubters. For instance, many schools of doubt existed in ancient Rome and Greece, giving us many great doubters, whose names and works would surface in the future to renew doubt’s influence. Theological consistency wasn’t demanded, but adherence to authority was. Doubters weren’t persecuted for their questioning, except when they went afoul of the civil authorities. While accused of atheism, Socrates was really executed for being disruptive of the social order. Socrates used questions to illuminate the truth, believing that doubt, rather than certainty, was the better path. The lesson of Socrates’ trial is that doubt can challenge established social order.

Many of these ancient doubters resolved how to live with doubt in what are called graceful-life philosophies. These philosophies centre on living lives of moderation but enjoying life as well. These graceful-life philosophies, usually the alternative to the religion of the state, offered doubters the ability to continue to question and live creatively within the tension of their uncertainty. Uncertainty was accepted, even valued, as part of a philosophical life.

Official attitudes toward doubt changed with Christianity’s rise to power. In her weighty book, *Doubt: A History*, philosopher and poet Jennifer Michael Hecht describes the difference Christianity introduced into the realm of doubt. While still having some wonderfully ambiguous books in its canon, such as Ecclesiastes (which reads like a treatise on living with uncertainty), Judaism of the second century B.C.E. increasingly adopted certainty of faith as a criterion for God’s grace. In Christianity, not doubting became a central tenet of faith. Doubt was a sign of weakness and a threat to salvation. Acceptable doubt was expressed as one’s inability to fulfil the human side of the God–human relationship. Augustine’s *Confessions* eloquently speaks to this struggle. Once he settled on the truth of the Christian faith that his mother had called him to, he didn’t doubt God’s existence or Jesus’ salvific powers; instead, he doubted his ability to live up to those expectations.

In this new milieu of doubt, the stakes were high. When Christianity became the official church of the sprawling Roman Empire in the fourth century, the new definition of acceptable doubt changed the range of persecution. Hypatia of Alexandria exemplifies this change. A teacher and graceful-life philosopher in the early fifth century, she caught the attention of the local bishop, Cyril. To Cyril, Hypatia’s philosophy and understanding of doubt was a threat. After he had her murdered, teachers and philosophers left Alexandria, and the graceful-life philosophies were banished from Europe.

The great works of doubt from the past were burned or became Latin grammar tutors in the monasteries. There, they were not to be studied — but copied for calligraphy practice. In the Western world, the tradition of doubt was not lost, but severely stifled. To doubt any component of the church's teaching or theology was seen as doubting it all. While Christians had earlier been persecuted not for their beliefs but for failing to render unto Caesar. Persecution now focused on their doubt. Christianity is not unique in this tradition. In varying degrees, most religions have engaged in persecution of those who doubt and those who threaten civil order.

As the power of the church became the only thread holding together the old empire, doubt changed again. People such as Luther and Calvin doubted the integrity of the church of their time. Now it was the institutional church and some of the practices it required that were in doubt. So, these doubters formed new conclusions and then started their own religions. Once the new religions were formed, their doubt was sated, and they built walls.

Many times, doubters are those who question the prevalent worldview of their societies, which is why doubt differs in different parts of the world. Many of these doubters assert alternative views with equal certainty. They may have begun with doubt, but they often end with certainty and become as dogmatic as those whose views they rejected. This has even been true within Unitarian Universalism. When William Ellery Channing and his

contemporaries in the early 19th century were faced with the next generation of doubters, led by transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker, they reacted with a fundamentalism that would surprise us today. Reformers who doubt the truths of those they seek to reform often become equally unyielding when they establish the new truth.

In the Western tradition, one philosopher who unflinchingly followed his doubt was David Hume. As he was one of my father's heroes, I feel like I grew up with him. During the 18th century, Hume questioned the growing confidence of all other philosophies. He didn't deny the existence of an outside world but pointed out the fallacies in others' certainties about how to describe it. Reason and religion both fell to Hume's doubt. Using his doubt to purge his mind of misconceptions, Hume sought to create an ethics based on how human beings really acted as social animals whose interests are best served by working together. His impact on modern doubt is significant, as he challenged the validity of understanding reason without emotion and our own bias in our perceptions. Hume wanted us to see that doubt can lead us somewhere, can be that candle. Many times, doubters' questions have led them to see injustice, especially in the roles of women and treatment of our fellow human beings. Now we are seeing questions about humanity's perception of being at the top of the evolutionary chain, leading us to seek environmental justice.

How we doubt matters. This was evident in the difference between two 10th century Islamic doubters, Ibn al-Rawandi and Abu Bakr al-Razi. They both questioned Mohammed's exclusive prophecy and the concepts of how Allah could be omniscient and just, among other details of Islam. But the difference lay in how they channelled their doubt. Ibn al-Rawandi was hated for his sarcasm and chose the role of the outsider. Abu Bakr al-Razi, on the other hand, chose to create a better world. He was known for his kindness and generosity and was called one of the "most creative geniuses of medieval medicine." Just as Abu Bakr al-Razi's questions led him to seek a better world within his doubt, so, too, these questions have influenced Unitarians. Our questioning of salvation for the few and our belief in the inherent

worth of people led to our engagement in the women's suffrage movement, in making conditions better for the mentally ill, in education for children, and in abolition movements.

Our challenge is to seek a balance between certainty enough to act and doubt enough to continue learning. As UU theologian Paul Rasor writes, "Religious liberalism often involves a willingness to affirm faith without certainty. This is not the same thing as faith without conviction. It does mean that religious liberals tend to hold faith claims with a certain tentativeness. This is partly a result of a mindset that is always testing and second-guessing itself and reflects a commitment to open-ended inquiry and the realisation that truth is not given once and for all." My faith convictions tell me with certainty that how we act in the world can make a difference. My doubt reminds me that truth has at least three forms: what I think, what you think, and what actually is. This means we must follow the candle of doubt, not allowing our scepticism to wall us off, but following the illumination our questions provide.

It's hard work to think for ourselves; it's hard to follow the questions in our own lives. That's why Augustine was so torn, wanting security rather than doubt. That's why people kept returning to a Hasidic rabbi who had told them to think for themselves. He grew so tired of their going to him for answers that he wrote a sign: "Any two questions answered for \$100." One of his richest followers had two questions that he just had to get the answers to, so he went to the rabbi. As he handed over the \$100, he said, "Hundred dollars— isn't that a bit steep?" "Yes," said the Rabbi, "and your second question?"

This is the Gospel of Doubt: our questions are beyond price. They do not negate our convictions to live lives of meaning but encourage our connection to what is and our striving to reach for what is possible. Let us cherish our doubts by following the prophetic light they provide, allowing that light to lead us toward a deeper sense of faith in what is possible, as well as stronger conviction to make it so.