

Struggling with Doubt and Uncertainty

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Introduction

In this article I want to address something that it is, probably, common to all Christians but something that is not, perhaps, commonly talked about or not talked about enough. This article is about doubt and uncertainty.

I think doubt is something that all Christians experience at one time or another but it is still something that can be a source of shame, or a source of anguish. Perhaps ultimately it can lead to a loss of faith altogether.

I suspect that many of those issues arising from doubt could be lessened or mitigated if we helped pre-empt some of those issues. Furthermore, I think we could support each other as a community better if we were more receptive to helping each other through such periods of doubt.

Aim

In this article I hope to sketch out some of the different ways we experience doubt, explore what might be behind those experiences, and suggest some ways we might respond when faced with such doubts.

Obviously I am coming at this subject from the position that I believe that God exists, I believe that Jesus rose from the dead, I believe that the core propositions of Christianity are true – and I am going to take those as read for this article. Given that starting position, it follows that any experiences of doubt are therefore misleading. For instance, since God does exist, then experiences that might lead us to doubt that fact are untrue and unhelpful, and yet they are also experiences that many Christians, perhaps all Christians, go through.

Therefore, the question is: why do Christians have these untrue and unhelpful experiences, and how might we respond when we do.

Reasons for Doubt

First and foremost, the reason for doubt – or at least the context for doubt – is that the existence of God is less obvious than it could be. What I mean by that is there are plenty of ways that God could have made his existence more obvious than it is. I am thinking of things like: God could have sent an angel to every person to reveal his existence, or God could appear in the clouds, or God gives miraculous signs and wonders to everyone.

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Because God hasn't done those things, the existence of God is less than blatant and that leaves room for doubt. I would find it difficult to ever doubt the existence of the Sun, for example, because it is very much there in the sky. However, we might doubt the existence microscopic particles, or blackholes, or any other of a number of things that I don't directly perceive. We don't directly perceive God (or, at least most people do not), it is possible to ignore God or not think about God, and this makes it possible to have doubts about his existence.

There are, I think, good reasons why God has chosen to keep his existence partially hidden. This is a very detailed topic and there is a lot that could be said about this. Briefly, I think God has chosen to keep his existence partially hidden to allow for morally significant freedom, that is, the freedom for humans to make choices that are either morally good or morally bad.

When I choose to help someone in need because I am motivated by compassion, that is a morally significant choice. On the other hand, if I choose to hurt someone because I am motivated by anger or spite, that is also a morally significant choice (though it is morally bad, rather than morally good.) More freedom to make such choices depends on being motivated by moral considerations.

However, if God's existence was blatant then I would be coerced into certain behaviours for hope of reward or from fear of punishment (or both). I would not then be truly free to make moral significant choices. Therefore if God wants a world where morally significant choices are possible he needs to lessen the immediacy of any threat of punishment or any promise of reward, and the only way to do that is to make them less obvious, which in turn requires making his own existence less obvious.

So it may be crucial to God's plan and purpose that he does stay partially hidden.

Be that as it maybe, the existence of God is less obvious than it could be and that leaves room for doubt. We should be open and honest about that; it is unhelpful to tell someone who is experiencing doubt that their doubts are unjustified because what they are doubting is actually obvious. We need to be fair and even-handed. Whilst I fully believe that there is a God, I also understand why some doubt that, because God hasn't chosen to make his existence obvious.

The unhelpful emphasis on Certainty

Another part of the context for doubt is actually an unhelpful emphasis on certainty. If we insist that some beliefs must be held with absolute certainty then it follows that any doubts, regardless of how small they are, become earth-shattering (or at least very challenging) because they are incompatible with that 100% certainty.

To illustrate this, imagine I tried to quantify my belief in God. Suppose I said it was 80% or even 90%. How would you feel about that? How would you react to that? Perhaps you think that's entirely normal. But perhaps that makes you feel a bit uncomfortable; for a Christian writer to put in a Christian article that his belief in God is 80%.

I'd like to suggest to you that actually, it would be an entirely rational thing for me to write. I'm not sure trying to put a number on the strength of our belief is actually very meaningful but for sake of argument, if we do put a number of our belief, then anything we weight as 50% or higher is something we think is more probable than not. In effect, any weight as higher than 50% is something we believe. Whilst it sounds like it would be lovely to be able to believe something 100%, I don't think that is true of anything. I don't even believe in the existence of the Sun that much (and the Sun is, as we have said, obvious.)

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Think about the things you do in life: getting in your car to drive home, getting on a plane to go on your holidays, starting a new job, getting married. For any of those things, could you say that you have 100% certainty that it'll work out exactly the way you intend? Of course not, but you still do those things. This is because certainty is a mirage – a fantasy – it doesn't exist in life. In our daily lives, we accept that nothing in life is truly certain, and just get on with making decisions with the best evidence available to us. So when we insist on 100% certainty in our faith, or for any of our beliefs we are trying to impose something on ourselves that we wouldn't think realistic for anything else we do.

Unfortunately, that requirement for certainty simply has the tendency of blowing up small doubts out of all proportion. If you think the only kind of acceptable faith is 100% certainty, then as soon as a minor little doubt comes along that might knock your beliefs down to 90%, say, then that seems like a tragedy when actually it should have no impact on your faith at all. The truth is we can live with doubts and uncertainties – we can live with not having all the answers – because unless you discover something that pushes your belief in God below 50%, then the fact is that you still believe in God.

Apparent conflicts of ideas and forms of evidence

Another reason for doubt can be ideas or forms of evidence, that in their presentation or in their substance, seem to conflict with our pre-existing beliefs. To reiterate what I said at the beginning, I believe that God does exist, that Jesus did rise from the dead, that the core beliefs of Christianity are true. I do not think there are sources of evidence that would fundamentally overturn those conclusions. However, I think we have to acknowledge there are many ideas and propositions that would seem to do so. Sometimes this apparent conflict can derive its strength merely from the manner of its presentation.

This was brought home to me by the movie *Denial*, which is about the libel lawsuit brought by the Holocaust denier David Irving. Fairly early in the movie, there is a scene where David Irving stands up in a crowded lecture theatre and confidently proclaims that he will pay \$2000 to anyone who can produce a historical document in which Adolf Hitler orders the Holocaust and, of course, no-one is able to do it. In context, such a gesture seems very powerful; the idea that no-one can produce such a document sounds like powerful evidence against the Holocaust. Except, of course, there is no actual doubt about the Holocaust – the Holocaust happened – as is testified by multiple lines of evidence, not least the testimony of many survivors. The fact that the Nazis burnt thousands of documents before the end of the war (thus removing the written evidence) in no way shakes that historical conclusion. In the same way, the fact that there was a hot summer in 1976 doesn't change the truth of climate change, or the fact that some smokers live into their nineties in no way changes the fact that smoking causes lung cancer. Such arguments derive their strength purely from their presentation, not their substance.

Unfortunately, the remedy to cheap and facile challenges, such as these, is to do the hard work of actually looking at the evidence in detail. Sometimes the best way to counter the challenges to our beliefs is actually to put the work in of discovering what the evidence is, looking again at where the truth lies.

But it is not just presentation that lends weight to such challenges to our faith. Some challenges actually have some substance to them and that's because not everything we were taught in Sunday School is actually true. Take for example the age of the earth. I was taught, and believed growing up, that the Earth was 6000 years old or thereabouts. And – this is an important point – I believed that

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was what the Bible said. Whilst I have no desire to make light of anyone's strongly held beliefs, it is now beyond serious dispute that the Earth is about 4.5 billion years old, not 6000. And again – this is an important point – nothing in the Bible says otherwise. Yet facing this fact about the age of the earth can be a source of disquiet. In fact, facing this proposition for the first time – that you might be wrong about something like the age of the Earth – can be a source of doubt. And I don't mean doubt about the age of the Earth, but doubt about the whole lot: God, Jesus, everything. It is really important that we realise how irrational that would be.

The Bible says nothing about the age of Earth but let us suppose it did. Let us suppose, for sake of argument, that Genesis chapter 1 included a timestamp, a clear and unequivocal statement that the Earth snapped into existence in the year 4004 BC. Suppose we were left to face the stark contrast between that statement and all the evidence that points the other way. Would that mean that God doesn't exist? Of course not. The existence of God doesn't depend on that. Would it mean that Jesus didn't rise from the dead? Of course not. That has nothing to do with Genesis. Would it mean that the Bible as a whole was untrue. No. At most, such a problem would force us to reconsider how we understood the inspiration of that particular part of scripture and that's it. (And, of course, we don't even face that idea because there isn't such a statement in Genesis.)

The point is that we quite often set ourselves for periods of doubt and discomfort because we do not allow ourselves room for honest re-evaluation of our beliefs. We act as though all our beliefs are of equal weight and that you can't unpick one without challenging the whole. That is fundamentally untrue. It is not that such beliefs are unimportant, but we should not fear to evaluate them honestly and follow where the evidence leads.

Emotional Doubt

So far, I have been talking about doubt as an intellectual problem. I'm not sure that's often true. Clearly, doubt can be an intellectual problem and quite often it is intellectual challenges that can be the motivator or the catalyst for periods of doubt, but I'm not convinced they are always, or especially, the cause of such doubt. Certainly, they are not the cause of doubt's intensity.

I have often thought about the intensity of doubt in relation to that worry that many people experience of whether they left the oven hob on when they left the house. This is something I used to experience fairly often. When you're having such a worry, it is not the strength of your belief that is the problem. In such cases, I would fully believe that it is more likely than not that I did, in fact, turn the hob off, because that's what I always do, and because I'd notice fairly soon if the hob was still on. The idea that I left the hob is not something I would strongly believe: it is only a nagging sort of worry. But it derives its intensity, its power, from the fact of how bad it might be if I was wrong. Because in my head I would worry about all those terrible things might happen if the hob was on and the house caught fire and all our belongs were destroyed. It is not that the reason for my worry was particularly strong, but it felt strong because of what I might lose if my worry proved true.

How we value our faith

In the same way, I think that often our experience of religious doubt derives its power and intensity not from the strength of the intellectual challenge but from how we are feeling about the value of our faith at any given time. If, for example, you feel that your faith has actually been quite costly, if you feel you've given up a lot for your faith, or are being asked to do so, or if there is something that you strongly desire that feel that faith keeps you from, or even if you have just general sense that non-

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Christians have it better than you do, then those are going to be intensifiers for any doubts you might have. Because the question is not, is this true? But, what might it cost me if its not true?

No-one wants to feel they've made bad life choices and the idea that you might have cost yourself a lot of really fun stuff by being a Christian can be really powerful. And this isn't helped by those Christians who give the impression that the call of Christianity is to be as miserable as possible. Unfortunately, there are those who think being a Christian means developing a strong victim complex. Or that think that to be a Christian means beating yourself up constantly about your imperfections as though we didn't actually believe in forgiveness. Or that think Christians are supposed to be less happy than non-Christians. Rather than believing, as the Bible claims, that the call of the gospel is about having life to its fullest and having that peace that passing all understanding. The claim of the gospel is that with it your life can be better, more fulfilled, more purposeful, and more joyful, now, in this life, than a life of sin. I think we, as community, should put more effort into explaining why the Christian life is desirable, in addition to explaining why Christianity is true.

When bad things happen

Another source for what we might call emotional doubt is when bad things happen. It is common, and perfectly understandable, that those who experience some sort of tragedy in their life should experience some sort of doubt. It is not just tragedy, but also disappointment of keenly held ambition, or the hard challenges of life can all be sources of doubt.

I describe them as emotional doubts, rather than intellectual ones, because such personal experiences of suffering do not actually change the evidential scales regarding the core truths of Christianity. I have no desire to be glib or to make light of personal suffering. I have experienced loss and heartache, but I also know myself to be blessed in comparison to others who have endured far worse suffering. My point is simply that on a global perspective, any incidents of suffering that I might experience are not unique and if I can reconcile my understanding of God to include the suffering that I know already exists in the world then I have no rational basis for doubting God's existence when I personally experience suffering. If I can reconcile myself to the idea that God allows for famines and earthquakes of vast scale out there in the world, I can hardly be surprised if I suffer personally in my own life,

Our expectations

The problem, I think, is about expectations. All relationships are prone to run up against unspoken expectations. Apparently one of the problems often experienced by newlyweds is that they just assume their relationship will be perfect just like the other good relationships they've experienced, primarily (if that is what it was) that of their parents. Of course they rarely voice these expectations and so invariably end up feeling disgruntled at their spouse when they fail to live up to these expectations.

I think our relationship with God can be much the same. Often we have a subconscious expectation that God will give us special treatment, will protect us from all ills, will generally make things cushy for us - even though that's not what the Bible claims. It is true, of course, that the Bible has a lot to say about God hearing prayer and about the blessings God will bestow, but never actually claims that the life of the believer will be free from suffering or grief or pain. Nevertheless I think we can still feel aggrieved when bad things happen and wish to God that things could have been different. I think it is right to take those things to God in prayer, to explain how let down we feel, and to explore that hurt and pain with God in prayer.

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We just need recognise that those feelings are about our relationship with God, not actually about whether he exists or not.

Feeling disconnected from God

There is one more source of doubt I want to mention. That is the doubt that comes when you just feel disconnected from God. Perhaps because the cares of life are crowding in and taking over your life. Perhaps because things have changed in your life that have disconnected you from relationship with God. Perhaps because you just have general sense of weariness. However it may be, it is possible get to a place where you feel disconnected from the presence of God. And if you don't feel that connected to God then it is all too easy to slip into thinking, or more importantly feeling, that God isn't real at all.

Again, this is not an intellectual source of doubt. There is no evidence or argument that has changed things. This isn't about the truth of God's existence at all; it is all about the state of your relationship with God. But it is nonetheless powerful for all that. Because faith isn't really just about believing something, faith is about a relationship. If that relationship becomes strained or neglected, then it is going to become weaker and may ultimately fail.

Responding to Doubt

If those are some of the reasons why we might experience periods of doubt, how do we respond to such periods of doubt?

Firstly, we must recognise that doubt is not a failure. It is not something we have done wrong. It is not something to feel ashamed about. It is something that probably all believers go through. In Matthew 28, the chapter about the resurrection of Jesus, it says that when Jesus appeared to the disciples in Galilee "they worshiped him, but some doubted". (This would be a ridiculous thing for the writer to have put in if he was making the story up, which adds to the credibility of the gospel.) It is, frankly, an embarrassing detail for the writer to include given that many of the apostles would have still been alive when he was writing. That line is included for our benefit, and for the benefit of all believers from the first century onwards. It is saying that doubt is something that even the apostles experienced, so you're in pretty good company.

Secondly, when experiencing doubt it is fundamental to figure out what kind of thing it is you are experiencing. If you think that you might be doubting God's existence, then ask yourself what piece of evidence has changed, what argument that convinced you before isn't true anymore. If you can't identify anything that has changed then that probably means you're not experiencing an intellectual doubt. It probably means something else is going on.

If you are experiencing purely intellectual doubts then I would be less worried than emotional doubts. I don't know of any objection to belief in God, or belief in Jesus, that has not received thorough and well-reasoned responses. For any intellectual challenge you face, there will, at very least, be a long reading list from Christian authors responding to that issue. I am fairly confident with some good reading you'll probably find a satisfying answer. The one caveat I would add is that this doesn't mean you won't have to change your mind about certain things.

I think one of the biggest catalysts for doubt is an unwillingness to ask honest questions and to change one's mind when required.

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If, however, you are experiencing an emotional doubt then you would need to respond differently. Reminding yourself of the reasons for believing may be helpful and comforting but to really address your doubt, you are probably going to have to address whatever else is going on in your life. That might mean finding peace for unfulfilled desires, finding healing for unspent grief, or finding that spark of enthusiasm again if your faith has grown wearisome.

Thirdly, I think we as a community need to find ways to accommodate doubt and uncertainty. We need to create room for questions and not be threatened by the idea that someone might be experiencing doubt or might have questions that we can't answer. There are always going to be unanswered questions, this side of the Kingdom. Rather than trying to close down discussion, or dismiss questions, we need to find ways to help our brothers and sisters work through their questions and their doubts until they find a position they can be comfortable with.

Faith is about our relationship with God

Most of all, in both the good times and the bad times, we need to keep ourselves connected to God because faith really isn't a purely intellectual exercise. Yes, as Christians we believe certain things to be true and believe other things to be false, but that, in itself, isn't what faith is about. Faith is about relationship, our relationship with God, and, like any relationship, that needs to be maintained. Whilst the methods are different, the basic principles are the same.

We need to spend time listening to God speak, through the Bible.

We need to spend time speaking to God in prayer, and not just asking for things.

Sometimes we need to spend time just being with God in his presence, whether that be through the fellowship of believers or alone in the untamed beauty of creation.

We need to make time for God, to be with him, and to recognise that he is with us.

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