



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

The Spirituality of Doubt

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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One famous definition of faith from the Christian tradition is Hebrews 11:1, “**faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**” Etymologically, the root of the word faith is related to *trust*. Faith trusts that something is (or will be) the case even though there is not verifiable proof. In many cases, the evidence for faith-based claims is internal, subjective, and unpredictable — as opposed to external, objective, and easily repeatable in laboratory conditions, which doesn’t make those faith claims necessarily less “true,” but it does often make them difficult (if not impossible) to either prove or disprove using the Scientific Method.

The rub, however, from our twenty-first century perspective is that **we are almost 500 years into the Scientific Revolution.** In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus's book *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* shattered the Ptolemaic view of the universe as a 3-tiered structure in which heaven is literally up, hell is literally down, and Earth is stationary in the middle — with we humans at the center of “life, the universe, and everything.” The Copernican Revolution — which showed that the Sun, not the Earth, is at the center of our solar system — *decentered* our place (or lack thereof) in the grand scheme of things, a decentering that has become increasingly clear with the paradigm-shifting discoveries of Darwin, Freud, Einstein, Hubble, and so many others.

Some of you may remember when the self-proclaimed “Evolutionary Evangelist” Michael Dowd preached a sermon here in 2014 on “Factual Faith: Religion as if Survival

Mattered.” Dowd likes to contrast “Flat-Earth Faith” with “Evolutionary Faith.” And for Dowd, the problem with “Flat-Earth Faith” is that it is B.C. — **not “Before Christ,” but “Before Copernicus.”**

At the same time, that doesn’t mean we have to throw out all that B.C. (“Before Copernicus”) material. As I say each Sunday, **“We seek to draw wisdom from all the world’s religions *balanced with the insights of modern science.*”** There remain many compelling reasons to take ancient theologies seriously, metaphorically, and archetypally, but we can go dangerously awry when flat-Earth metaphors are taken *literally*.

Indeed, the twentieth-century theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929 - 2003) “has pointed out that **faith without doubt is not stronger, it is simply more *ideological***” (Paul Rasor, Faith without Certainty, xxi). And there are daily examples in the news of ideological leaders who refuse to change their minds despite stacks of evidence contradicting their positions. Along these lines, Anne Lamotte has written, “The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty. It is madness. You can tell you have created God in your own image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do.”

Stephen Colbert calls this phenomenon truthiness: false “talking points” repeated over and over until many people are manipulated into believing the misinformation. This tactic is not new: **ancient Athenian democracy gives us the word demagoguery for politicians who “appeal to emotions, fears, prejudices, and ignorance ...to gain power and promote political motives.”**

To relate ideology, demagoguery, and truthiness back to our commitment to be an Evolutionary Religion that embraces all that we have learned since the Scientific Revolution, it has been said that the Liberal Turn in Religion is an attempt to create meaningful lives and build beloved communities in a world that is diverse and in which the traditional center has fallen out. Note that the word Liberal comes from the Latin root *liber*, meaning “free,” so a Liberal Turn in Religion is a move toward *freedom* in religion. **It is a shift *from* authority grounded in community, hierarchy, and tradition *to* authority grounded in *reason* (what is logical) and *experience* (what one knows firsthand for one’s self or what can be proven through the scientific method).**

Moving to the growing edge of doubt today, there is an emerging field of “Ignorance Studies” called agnotology (related to the word *agnostic*), which is **not only about “What don't we know, and why don't we know it?” in general, but also specifically about “What keeps ignorance alive, or allows it to be used as a political instrument?”** As *The X-Files* tells us, “The Truth is out there,” but “there are also things people don't want you to know.” Perhaps the most dangerous example today is climate change denial; however, another example from recent history is the tobacco industry's spin doctoring of the link between cigarette use and cancer.

As explored in a recent article in *The New York Times* on “**The Case for Teaching Ignorance**,” there can be a lot of virtue in confessing how much we *don't* know: “uncertainty can foster latent curiosity, while emphasizing clarity can convey a warped understanding of knowledge.” To take an example from the medical field, a 1,414-page neurology textbook could *mislead* a student into thinking that we know more about the brain that we actually do. Even if we know hundred of pages of facts about the brain, that's a tiny proportion of all that there is to know about the brain. Moreover, to summarize a point made in Thomas Kuhn's landmark book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, “**The more we know, the more we can ask. Questions don't give way to answers so much as the two proliferate together.**” As the poet Rilke taught, “Live the questions.”

In contrast, the history of Western Civilization has in many ways been biased toward *faith* and *belief* over skepticism and doubt. As a counterbalance, the historian Jennifer Michael Hecht has written an excellent volume titled **Doubt: A History** in which she traces the history of great doubters throughout the ages and across the globe. (The “**Scale of Doubt Quiz**” on the front of your Order of Service is excerpted from that volume.) And in a world where the faith and belief are often the norm, it can be disconcerting to see the framework inverted to favor doubt. But Hecht's goal is to invite us to take a step back and reflect on what we believe (or disbelieve) — and *why*.

Regarding her motivation for writing a world history of doubt, Hecht writes, “**The only thing...doubters really need, that believers have, is a sense that people like themselves have always been around, that they are part of a grand history...**” (494). And in her research she discovered throughout history that there have been, “**saints of doubt, martyrs of atheism, and**

sages of happy disbelief” (ix) — which date to as early as the skepticism of many Pre-Socratic philosophers (4) as well as the Athenian gadfly himself, Socrates, who taught that wisdom is often *not* how much you know (or think you know) but how aware you are of what you *don't* know (11).

There is also strong doubt and skepticism in the Jewish and Christian traditions, two early examples of which are the books of Job and Ecclesiastes (85). But perhaps the most helpful part of a global survey of doubt is a reminder that in contrast to the history of Western Civilization, in the “East, the existence of God was rarely the central question” (86). And there are prominent Eastern traditions in which doubt is revered. Most prominently, the Zen Buddhist tradition teaches, **“Great doubt: great awakening. Little doubt: little awakening. No doubt: no awakening”** (214).

Regarding the “Great Schism” between those believers and doubters, who find themselves on opposite ends of the “Scale of Doubt,” Jennifer Michael Hecht writes:

Great doubters, like great believers, have been people occupied with this problem, trying to figure out **whether the universe actually has a hidden version of humanness, or whether humanness is the error and people would be better off weaning themselves from their sense of narrative, justice, and love, thereby solving the schism by becoming more like the universe in which they are stuck.** (xii)

I will not attempt to resolve that schism this morning. But wherever you find yourself on the spectrum of faith and doubt, I would like to leave you with two quotes.

The first is from the philosopher Peter Rollins, a self-proclaimed practitioner of pyro-theology, “an incendiary faith that courageously embraces brokenness, resolutely faces up to unknowing and joyfully accepts the difficulties of existence.” Regarding what Hecht calls the “Great Schism,” Rollins writes that,

The individual who is able to loose themselves from the notion that there is some ultimate purpose to their life frees themselves from the negative melancholy that comes with being unable to find that purpose (or the naïve optimism that comes from thinking that they will). **The secret...is that there is no secret.** Instead the

challenge is to discover and deepen love. For love not only affirms the world, it produces a surplus in that joyful affirmation: acts that enact liberation.

Likewise, regarding how a spirituality of doubt can ironically produce a *world-affirming love* (for what we know we can do here and now) and *liberating acts* (for the people and places we know we can help once we are free from false presuppositions), I invite you to hear a poem that I first read from this pulpit a few months ago: "From the Place Where We Are Right" by Yehuda Amichai (1924 - 2000) about how doubt (including self-doubt) can open us to new possibilities:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.