

Religious Doubt: Faith-Shaping Tool, or Instrument of Destruction?

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Abstract

Tennyson (1850) declared, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” Critical thought, doubt, and skeptical inquiry are central to modern higher education, no less so when the scholars are people of faith (see, for example, Myers, 2007). It is impossible to deny the importance of doubt in normal human development; Piaget’s formal operations stage includes the ability to evaluate hypotheses, and to doubt, or even disregard, those that fail to meet the test. The possibility has been raised--indeed, in research in which one of the authors has been extensively involved--that religious doubt reflects greater integrity than does its avoidance (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993).

Yet the very theme of this conference reflects one of the chief concerns regarding pursuit of religious doubt.. That which fails to meet with the approval of admittedly limited human thought processes may simply be disregarded. The empirical, the sense-verifiable, once subject to expert scrutiny, is regarded as the defining standard for what is true and good. Bloom (1987) warned that “almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative”.

We argue that both of these lines of reasoning may indeed apply to religious doubt; but that true scholarship requires the acknowledgement of two additional principles. The first is motivational: doubt must be servant, not master; it must be a tool in pursuit of truth, not an end in itself. (see Barr, Schoenrade, & Holt, 2004). The second is more theological: human reason, along with every other human tendency, is limited and distorted, for no aspect of human nature entirely escapes the impact of sin. The search for truth must be practiced in the humility

of service to our Creator. When it is so, then, as George MacDonald (1880/1991) writes, “Every doubt is a door.”

Religious Doubt: Faith-Shaping Tool or Instrument of Destruction?

Tennyson (1849) declared, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” No Christian--and especially no Christian scholar--walking through life with eyes open can be any stranger to the experience of doubt. The prevalence of religious doubt calls forth works like those of Lee Stroble’s *Case for Christ* and *Case for Faith*, or that of Josh McDowell. Nor were the ancients any stranger to doubt; Job cries out with honest heart to God as he seeks to understand what some would call his ‘misfortune’ (Job 3:1-26, *NIV*). David appeals to his God in the psalms over a sometimes deafening roar of a life that does not always makes sense (Psalm 73, Psalm 130, *NIV*), and Paul wrestles with the moments when his own evil heart would threaten to triumph (Romans 7: 23-25, *NIV*).

The Dilemma Posed by Religious Doubt

Doubt, particularly for the scholar, is not inherently an experience to be avoided. Doubt--of conventional wisdom, of widely held assumptions, of cherished folklore--has been a part of the processes bringing about numerous discoveries, advancements, and inventions. Doubt, an inherent part of critical thought--helps to form the very basis of higher education, the more so in that which has a liberal arts emphasis. Doubt is hero more oft than villain in the educational world. Is the case any different for doubt whose focus is the truth of some aspect of the Christian faith?

Most of us can cite examples of students--and sometimes colleagues--who state that, as a result of intellectual inquiry, they have ceased assent to important cornerstones of the faith, such as the resurrection or the incarnation of God in Christ. Christian parents of

17-19-year olds often see themselves faced with a dilemma: to offer a son a daughter a well-rounded college education is to expose him or her to values, teachings, and beliefs that may refute core beliefs. To the parent, it may seem at worst a choice between preparing the young scholar for life in the 'real world' and enabling the young soul to maintain an eternal perspective.

The Christian scholar on the secular (or nominally Christian) campus is also faced with a dilemma. Were we to close our ears to all voices other than those sharing our faith, the impact would be far more than simply being thought 'narrow' by our colleagues, for we would be ill equipped to address the very problems our students frequently encounter, and would be unable to participate fully in the conversations with in our disciplines. Yet if we adopt a stance of being open to every possible kind of evidence, if everything is 'up for grabs,' there is little in the way of a basis to allow us to recognize truth.

Common Sources of Religious Doubt

There are, of course, multiple possible sources of religious doubt. It may emerge through formal challenges in classroom and academic study, as a result of stressful life experiences, from the opinions and arguments of friends, and no doubt from other sources. Our roles in the college classroom will at times predispose us to think that the questions arising in formal study are especially powerful in engendering religious doubt, sometimes a byproduct of critical thought.. But classroom discussion and reading may, in fact, have less impact than more informal sources. In a recent study of college students at a liberal arts college, Barr, Schoenrade, and Holt (2004) found that nearly half reported having experienced significant religious doubts as a result of conversations with

friends, while slightly more than one quarter encountered religious doubt as a result of their classes. For these students, the friend who declares agnosticism, the roommate who is angry after learning that her parents are divorcing, the invitation over lunch to attend a Baha'i informational meeting may afford more occasion for doubt than the caustic philosophy professor who makes her opposition to Christianity known in the classroom.

The Voices of Psychology of Religion

Within the psychology of religion, a parallel conversation has been underway for several decades. Gordon Allport, among leading early researchers in the psychology of religion, sought to help address a disturbing finding. As evidence began to appear that correlated prejudice with religious involvement, Allport's work cried "Wait a minute! Not all religion is the same!" (See Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967). He described mature and immature religion, which he later renamed intrinsic and extrinsic religion.

Intrinsic religion is devotion that is practiced and valued in its own right. The intrinsically religious individual is inclined toward active religious practice, has service to God as a central motive, and is willing to endure hardship for the sake of the faith.

For the extrinsically religious individual, religion is a means to other, non-religious ends. Apparently religious practices may be evident, but the goal is aside from what most would call religion. The individual may seek social recognition, friendship, even assistance with life's difficulties, and the practice of religion affords a means of meeting these needs. Extrinsic religion could include patterns such as attending church because one finds good friends there, or praying because one's needs are met--or perceived to be so--through prayer. Allport explained that this was where the confusion had lain as earlier findings on prejudice were evaluated. Religion--at least intrinsic religion--does not, in

fact, incline one more toward prejudice. And, indeed, evidence initially supported Allport's supposition that the extrinsically religious are prejudiced, but the intrinsically religious are not. Moreover, the intrinsically religious seemed more likely to place value on socially supportive behaviors such as helpfulness.

Comforting though the notion was, it received a challenge slightly more than a decade later, from the pen of C. Daniel Batson, (See, for example Batson, 1976) who argued that, in designing the measures of intrinsic religion, Allport had left out an important feature that he had originally intended to include. Originally in describing mature religion, later renamed intrinsic religion, Allport had included a component of willingness to confront ambiguity, complexity, and doubt. Yet in the scale that had come to measure intrinsic religion, these components seemed largely absent. Representative items include "I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life" and "Quite often I have been keenly aware of the presence of God or the Divine Being."

In response to this omission, Batson designed a third scale to measure a new construct, religion as quest. (Actually, he designed several new scales, but it is the Quest scale that, for a time, took center stage within the psychology of religion.) The Quest scale included items such as included "I have been driven to ask religious questions out of a growing awareness of the tensions of my world and in relation to my world" and "It might be said that I value my religious doubts and uncertainties". Individuals scoring high on quest see religion as a process of doubting and searching, rejecting simplistic answers. (Batson, Schonrade, and Ventis, 1993; Batson and Schoenrade, 1991a, 199b). Quest depicts an individual wrestling head-on with the problems and uncertainties life poses.

Batson's diligent research included another important strength. Self-report measures of prejudice, helping, and other such constructs were popular at the time, but these tend to be responsive to the desire of individuals to present themselves in the best possible light. Batson chose instead, wherever possible, the measure behavior. It was around this time that one of us became a part of Batson's research team. As he worked, and several of us who were then graduate students joined in the search, a picture began to emerge. Intrinsic religion correlated with endorsing helpfulness, but religion as quest correlated with active, altruistic helping. Intrinsic religion correlated with stated rejection of prejudice, but religion as quest correlated with non-prejudicial behavior. Intrinsic religion correlated with devotion and faithfulness; religion as quest correlated with openness to information. (See Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis, 1993, for a review.) Arguments have arisen around the specifics of the Quest orientation, but the construct has continued to raise an important question. Is the believer, indeed, proceeding with greatest integrity when doubt is at the forefront?

Human Perception and Reason: Reason to be Cautious

Overestimating objectivity. Before attempting to respond directly to this query, we believe several cautions are in order regarding limitations on human observation and reason. First, a common assumption is that one is either biased by religious views or proceeding objectively. This apparent dichotomy is inaccurate. As scientists, and, perhaps, particularly as social scientists, we study what we care about. We do not, and cannot, set aside our core values. We can, of course, reason 'as if,' we did not hold the beliefs we do, but even then the progress of our reasoning is likely to be shaped by our values and/or the theories we begin to construct. Freud, perhaps, is a vivid example, as

his allegiance to his views increasingly guided his interpretation of observations through the development of psychoanalysis. But the distortion occurs at a more basic level, and fairly frequently. Leon Festinger (1957), in describing his theory of Cognitive Dissonance, illustrates the human tendency to seek out information that bolsters one's existing opinion. New-car-owners will often peruse the positive reviews of the car they have just bought, and individuals who make statements at least mildly contradictory to their actual attitudes will often shift those attitudes in the direction of the statements they have made.

Selective attention, attribution, and organizing principles. Second, if it were indeed possible to set aside all external (faith based or other) standards for evaluating truth, human reason would be left to stand on its own; but human reason as an ultimate standard builds on shifting sand. Biases, errors in judgment, and potentially distorting processes are so common that social cognition research has assigned specific names to some of the most frequently observed.

We are, of course, all subject to selective attention--for what a confusing world it would be if we were required to attend to all incoming input with equal frequency! (Indeed, the unsettling process of 'cognitive flooding' is described as one of the symptoms of some types of schizophrenia. (See Holmes, 2001.)) We are inclined to make these attentional selections along dimensions including perceived importance, intensity, and potential cost of error. One who wishes to be sure that students are paying attention need only announce 'Now, this is going to be on the test.' We cannot attend to everything; and so we will, of necessity, miss some information.

The process of attribution--figuring out why something occurred--is fertile ground for variations in judgment. To illustrate with a simple example, last year on my way to this convention, I drove my car into the ditch. My son and I differed in our interpretation of why this happened. In my view, it was because I was in a hurry; in the view of my son, it was because I am a driving klutz. Which conclusion one embraces will make considerable difference in one's willingness to get into a car that I am driving.

The attribution process is readily acknowledge be subject to several specific biases. The self-serving bias, for example, leads us to attribute our successes to our own efforts or characteristics and our failures to external forces. We did well on the exam because we are capable in the subject area; we did poorly because there was not enough time to study. Another common bias, the fundamental attribution error, leads us to assume that others' actions are representative of their character more often than is probably the case. The winner of a lottery--by definition a matter of a random process (at least humanly)--is often credited with some sort of wise choice.

The principles of organization described by Gestalt psychology in the 1930's and 1940's offer an especially clear example of heuristics of perception that, while generally adaptive, also lead not infrequently to inaccurate conclusions. Chief among these principles is the law of *pragnanz*, describing our tendency to organize perceptual stimuli in the simplest possible way (Koffka, 1935). At a basic level, it is the reason that camouflage is effective; the eye sees 'leaves and trees' and incorporates the camouflage pattern into the surrounding forest. In an effort to make information manageable, we again of necessity miss or misunderstand some of the information. While useful, this process is also behind stereotypes and overgeneralizations. It is, perhaps, most readily

apparent in academia when we characterize those who oppose our views as ignorant or, at best, as missing the point.

Human perception and human reason, then, while powerful tools, are not wholly trustworthy, and definitely do not suffice as a standard for the final evaluation of truth or falsehood. Were a measurement instrument or a directional device so beset with inaccuracies, we would probably hasten to return it to the place of purchase. But such devices are concerned with just one or just a few dimensions; human perception and reason, of course, confront considerably more complex problems. And, in part because of the difficulties we have just discussed, the process must be approached with a measure of humility.

Tool for Discernment, or End in Itself?

This, we would argue, is the place at which doubt plays a critical role. Doubt arises when a respected other challenges our views; when circumstances do not unfold as planned; in times of crisis beyond our control. And doubt at such times is a potentially useful tool for discernment. It can cause us to take a step back, to reexamine potentially faulty assumptions or reasoning,

Yet the process of doubt can go much further, becoming a goal rather than a tool. Barr, Schoenrade, and Holt (2004) described a difference between doubt employed as a means to further discovery and doubt practiced as a primary value. Rokeach (1979) distinguished between instrumental and terminal values. Instrumental values help us to reach a place that is inherently beneficial, while terminal values define that place. If one assumes that no absolute truth can ever be known, then doubt takes center stage. Indeed, we have heard the phrase ‘deification of doubt’ cited as describing the modern

educational system. Bloom (1987) warned that “almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative”. And C. S. Lewis (1960) warns us that “Loves ceases to be a demon when it ceases to be a god.” We would argue that the same can apply to the scholar’s doubt.

The question of when doubt is asset versus liability, then, is one we see as motivational in nature. As we reexamine and question, are we, in fact, seeking truth--and, if so, for what purpose? Swiss Psychiatrist Paul Tournier has written of the delight of a child seeking, and then finding, a lost object. When the object is found, the child does not go on searching , but rejoices in the finding. The sincere search process will have little use for doubt for its own sake.

Certainly the subject matter in each of our fields is sufficiently complex that a discovery or insight raises further questions. But in our drive to reduce processes and outcomes to their component parts, we may lose sight of the larger context. For our doubting and searching, we are inclined to assume, bears fruit when it meets with a tangible, observable affirmation. Within psychology, for example, a number of psychological disorders can now be partially explained--and to some degree treated--with reference to physiological processes. But once these physiological processes are identified, the hopes, dreams, and failings of the individual coping with the psychological disorder are still in need of understanding and response.

In a similar manner, we who examine religious behavior from the perspective of social science may tread on particularly treacherous ground. For if we can begin to explain religious behavior through the observable, measurable components of genetic forces and

environmental influences, we may be all the more inclined to dismiss matters of faith as purely human creations.

Yet doubt, we suspect, does not carry much faith-imploding power unless accompanied by another component. A second impediment to the earnest seeking of truth lurks at the door of the scientist, philosopher, or other academician. For though we would hope that the search for truth is earnest, we cannot pretend that it is generally altruistic. Academic tracks require research productivity, publication, and recognized excellence. And these, when achieved, all too readily nourish the familiar enemy of pride, against which CS Lewis (1940, 1960) repeatedly warns us. As we seek to be the first with an idea, complete the project in time to meet a publication deadline, or argue publicly a colleague, that part of our zeal that is focused on personal success will surely also blind us to some features inherent in the search for truth. And when we seek truth in the hope of a measure of recognition, our motivation may well lead to some spurious conclusions, and cause even our doubt to be selective.

A further issue impinges on the question of doubt as an avenue to truth, and it is particularly central to the calling of the scholar whose faith is in Christ: this is the issue of accountability. We are accountable, to be sure, to our professional organizations, reviewers, and others with authority to define our respective fields. We are accountable to the colleges, universities, institutes, and corporations for whom we work, and to supporting organizations that help to send us there. In the case of grants and special projects, we may be accountable to federal, state, and local governments. But for the scholar serving Christ, the far greater accountability is, of course, to Him.

With startling frequency, we encounter individuals who would understand such a statement to suggest that we consider only data or conclusions that are favorable to our own religious outlook. On the contrary, our Lord would have us meet challenges and contradictions with considered boldness, just as He did while walking the earth. Often our accountability to Christ will demand primarily that we do the best possible job in research and teaching as our field defines it. But always it will demand that we seek His truth and acknowledge His guidance throughout our endeavors.

Scholarship and Doubt in Service to Christ

Doubt, then, can be a powerful, even holy, tool of the scholarly inquiry, yet has the potential to become an instrument of spiritual destruction. It is, we believe, in the motivational issues described here that a large part of the distinction between these two possibilities lies. If the scholar under Christ is to use doubt as a tool in His service, then several specific practices are necessary. Though none will be very new to any practicing believer, these are, we think, too little applied to the scholarly life.

First, we must approach our work daily with a motivation to seek God's glory in what we do. The immediate topics of our study may appear to have little to do with matters of faith. *Yet to the degree that they reveal truth, they reveal something of the character of our God.* This means, then, that the scholarly life cannot serve Christ apart from an active devotional life, one that regularly sets the mind and heart on the things of Christ.

Second, prayer must become a central feature of our scholarly endeavors. We are, of course, called to 'pray without ceasing.' Among these prayers must be prayers for the hearts and minds of our students, prayers for wisdom, humility, and insight as we proceed, and prayers for direction in teaching and research. Classes, research endeavors,

and internship opportunities brought before our God in prayer will be more fully open to the truth He would reveal.

Third, we must serve as role-models for our students in the matter of religious doubt. This will require a measure of humility, for it entails admitting struggle, acknowledging failure and misdirection, and at times struggling openly with an issue along with our students. But to the degree that we are willing to allow those we teach to glimpse our own time in the valley of uncertainty, they gain confidence in their own ability to meet such challenges, as well as some of the tools to do so, and are reminded of the centrality of the search for real truth.

A Precursor to Wonder?

Religious doubt in the life of the scholar is not, then, an explosive device to be defused before it can have impact, but a package marked 'handle with care.' For as the fear and foreboding move off from the experience of doubt, often we will find that, if we do not rush too quickly to convenient closure, wonder is often the byproduct of doubt. And wonder, writes Thomas Carlyle, "is the basis of worship." George MacDonald, mentor in pen to C. S. Lewis, summarizes the process succinctly, "Every doubt is a door."

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