

Progressive Christianity Study Series

Study Number 006

A Question of Doubt

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For many years I have felt that I was a bad Christian...because of...*doubt*.

Now I am starting to question...*what is doubt?*

I wonder if doubt might be analogous to physical pain. Physical pain, though unpleasant, is often a helpful warning to us: for example, that something is too hot to pick up, or that a joint or muscle should not be stretched beyond a particular point.



What has lack of doubt done? Well, a complete lack of doubt in religious leaders has led to atrocities like the Inquisition, where doubters were tortured for being heretics. And, of course, the “unholy” Crusades where it was thought noble to go and kill Muslims because of their different beliefs.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What other harms might lack of doubt cause?
- What are some of the benefits of doubt as you see it?

DOUBT AND FAITH

Is doubt the opposite of faith? Or can the two cohabit?

I’ve come to the conclusion that the two *have* to cohabit, in order to moderate the evils that arise from having no doubts whatsoever, as in churches thinking they “own” the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and then persecuting those they consider to be wrong. No one knows everything about *anything*, let alone everything about *everything*; there are always some doubts in a balanced mind.

The more evangelists “preach”, especially on one’s front doorstep, the more doubting I become. In such situations, my mind tends to just shut off, but is this automatic response perhaps shutting me off to new concepts that might progress my understanding?

Many years ago, Billy Graham came to Australia and had his mass crusades. I absolutely hated anything to do with them. To me, conversion by mass hysteria, in which doubt is not allowed, is anathema.

Perhaps belief can be represented as a spectrum between the positive and the negative: what is *positively* believed, what is (*negatively*) rejected, and the many “iffy” areas in between.

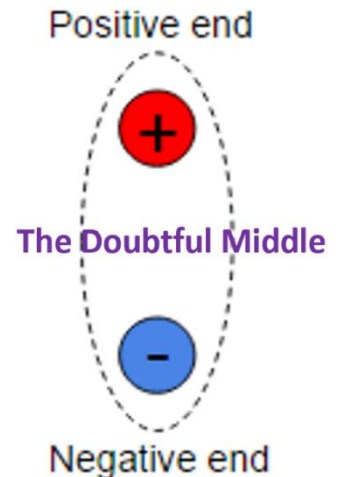
THE “POSITIVE” POLE: Strongly held:

My cornerstone: By definition, God is good.

Therefore, by definition, anything that is not good is *not God*, including depictions of God that are not good: for example, depictions of God in the Old Testament as an autocratic tyrant, commanding the slaughter and genocide of Israel’s enemies.

THE “NEGATIVE” POLE: Strongly rejected:

- Genesis understood as a literal account of how God created the universe and living creatures.
- A literal Adam and Eve.
- The doctrine of “Original Sin.”
- Jesus dying to save me from my sin, with others damned for not believing “the right things.”
- The Bible being literally the word of God (it was written by many different people, often many years after the events depicted; I accept that the writings were inspired by belief, but I cannot bring myself to say, after doing a Bible reading in church, “this is the word of God”)



THE DOUBTFUL MIDDLE:

- I am agnostic about the afterlife and miracles.
- If we insist on a distinction between the “natural” and the “supernatural”, such a distinction renders the “supernatural” unscientific and, in my view, probably untrue.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Is this way of classifying what is (positively) believed or (negatively) rejected helpful?
- Where would you place your own beliefs in this spectrum?
- What do you do with the Bible’s many contradictions and its violent depictions of God?
- Are religion and science at odds? (Note: there continue to be scientists who are people of religious faith.)
- How can scientific understanding, and First Nations understanding, be integrated with Christian and biblical beliefs?

Martin Luther King Jr, in his book *A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart*, says that “life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony.” King quotes the philosopher Hegel, who said “truth is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.”

Jesus once told his disciples “Be ye therefore as wise as serpents, and as harmless as doves.” Perhaps this advice parallels the spectrum of belief and doubt.

APPENDIX: Some possible topics (or choose one of your own creation!)

