

“MOTHER TERESA’S DOUBT”
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Call to Gather “Cherish Your Doubts” by Robert T. Weston

Cherish you doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth.

Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery.

A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every doubt.

Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away at doubt.

Let no one fear for truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief.

The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing;

For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.

Those that would silence doubt are filled with fear; their houses are built on shifting sands.

But those who fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on rock.

They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of their hands shall endure.

Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help;

It is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the attendant of truth.¹

Reading from Mother Teresa’s writings

For the last almost fifty years of her life, Mother Teresa experienced a prolonged “dark night of the soul.” This experience has only recently become public with the publication of her private writings. The following are snippets from her private writings—mostly from letters to her spiritual directors.

Since 1949 or 1950 (I have had) this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart.—Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason.—The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me.—When the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there.

(God) is destroying everything in me... There is much contradiction in my soul.—Such deep longing for God—so deep that it is painful—a suffering

¹ Responsive Reading #650, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

continual—and yet not wanted by God—repulsed—empty—no faith—no love—no zeal.—Souls hold no attraction—Heaven means nothing—to me it looks like an empty place.

...There is no hope...In my heart there is no faith—no love—no trust—there is so much pain—the pain of longing, the pain of not being wanted...I don't pray any longer—I utter words of community prayers.

Holy Communion—Holy Mass—all the holy things of spiritual life—of the life of Christ in me—are all so empty—so cold—so unwanted.

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me?...I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One.—Alone. The darkness is so dark—and I am alone.—Unwanted, forsaken.—The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable.—Where is my faith...I have no faith...So many unanswered questions live with me—I am afraid to uncover them—because of the blasphemy.—If there be God, please forgive me...When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven—there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul.—Love—the word—it brings nothing.—I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul...What are You doing my God to one so small?

Pray for me—for the life within me is harder to live. To be in love & yet not to love, to live by faith and yet not to believe. To spend myself and yet be in total darkness.—Pray for me.

If I ever become a Saint—I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth...²

Sermon

In her book *Doubt: A History*, Jennifer Michael Hecht asserts that the history of doubt has been as distinguished and important as the history of belief.³ From its roots 2600 years ago in the philosophical incubator that was ancient Greece, doubt has been engaged in a complex dance with belief. Certainly at times this dance has been dangerous and, as some of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors who ended up on the execution pyre discovered, potentially deadly. But when believers have willingly joined in the dance with doubt, their faith has tended to grow stronger, deeper, and more inclusive. In my judgment, dancing with belief is good for non-believers, too—as long as the dance is open and accepting.

² Brian Kolodiejchuk, editor, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pp. 1-2, 163-164, 186-187, 193, 230, 232, 248.

³ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 493.

Doubt comes in many varieties. As Hecht points out, “Whether you are a non-believer, or you belong to a religion without God, or you are a believer troubled by dark nights of the soul, we are all part of the same discussion.”⁴ One of the beauties of this particular spiritual community is that we have these and many other varieties of belief and doubt all mixed together within these sacred walls. In this place, belief and doubt can continue the swirling dance in creative and wondrous ways, to the benefit of all of us.

There have been a lot of notable doubters all over the world during these past 2600 years. One of my personal favorites is one I encountered in Hecht’s book: the sixteenth century Italian Giordano Bruno. He was excommunicated by so many denominations that the progression of them, in Hecht’s words, “chimes like a musical scale.” He was ordained a priest, and within four years faced charges of heresy. He left Italy and Catholicism and moved to Geneva, where he converted to Calvinism. In spite of later denying before a Catholic tribunal that he had converted, there is written record that his new church excommunicated him and kicked him out of Geneva. He went to France and presumably enjoyed a quiet few years. Then it was on to England where he counter-attacked orthodox Oxford theologians who had gone after him—in print. He left England before the Anglican Church could excommunicate him and headed to France for a little more respite. And then he moved on to Germany, became a Lutheran and—you guessed it—was in short order excommunicated. From there he was sent to Rome where he was imprisoned for six years before being burned at the stake in 1600. Here’s a guy who couldn’t keep himself from dancing with believers even though doing so clearly was not in his best interest.⁵

Another of my favorite doubters is a more mythical character: Job, in the Hebrew Bible. Job’s doubt focused on a question that has long fueled the fires of doubt: Why do bad things happen? In the story, Job unknowingly finds himself the victim of a not-so-friendly (at least for him) wager between God and Satan. It seems that one day up in heaven, God brags to Satan about Job’s righteousness. (Yes, in those days, it was believed that God and Satan *both* hung out in heaven.) Satan tells God that Job is righteous only because of all the “gravy on his plate.” Take away his beautiful wife and children, his good health, his prosperity, and he’ll change his tune. “Wanna bet?” God asks. Satan agrees to the bet.

So Satan begins methodically destroying everything that is good in Job’s life: first his animals, then his herdsmen, then his children in a sudden whirlwind and finally his health. Even as he’s covered with boils Job continues to praise God. Disgusted with God and her husband’s continued faith, Job’s wife begs him to “curse God and die.” At last his belief finally begins to crack. Ruined, ill, standing on a dung heap, he blames God. God he concludes, simply does not care. God is not just: “God murders both the pure and the wicked,” he says. At wits end, Job asks God for a hearing. He wants his day in court. God agrees to this request and then launches into a ferocious, sarcastic “How dare you question me?” verbal assault during which he ducks every one of Job’s accusations. The attack leaves Job momentarily speechless, and then he caves in, sort of. Later editors

⁴ Hecht, p. xi.

⁵ Hecht, p. 292.

slapped on a “corn-ball” Hollywood ending where Job gets everything he lost back.⁶ In spite of Job’s cave-in and the Hollywood ending, the Book of Job is truly a powerhouse declaration of doubt and rebellion against God. And there it sits: right smack in the middle of the Hebrew Bible!

Turn the pages of the Hebrew Bible forward through the Psalms and Proverbs, you will come to another monumental work of doubt: Ecclesiastes. This book is not as edgy as the Book of Job; instead, as Hecht puts it, the Ecclesiastes author responds to the world’s cruelty and injustice with “a soulful wink and a shrug.” The writer looks around and concludes that there is no such thing as divine justice, the afterlife, or deep meaning in life. “Under the sun, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the learned, nor favor to the skillful: but time and chance happeneth to them all.” Tweak the language a bit and these could be the words of a twentieth century existentialist! So how should we live in such a world? Live in the moment and enjoy life’s small pleasures, Ecclesiastes answers. The author believes in God, but only a God who is very distant from life on earth and should by and large be left alone. Hecht summarizes the message of the book:

Don’t pray much; we all die pretty randomly; it does not matter if you are good or bad; beasts and human beings take part in the same death; we all are dust and return to dust; no one is remembered for very long; there is no plan; and nothing ever changes. Love your spouse. Get some work to do, do it with all your might; enjoy the simple pleasures of food, drink, and love. Everything else is vanity.⁷

Moving forward several millennia, we come to another Jewish doubter more in the Jobian vein: Eli Wiesel. Wiesel was raised a religious boy. He lost his faith during his first night at Auschwitz as he came face-to-face with the crematoriums in which his mother and sister would soon perish. In his memoir *Night*, he writes, “Never should I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live...Never shall I forget these moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.”⁸ At Auschwitz, Wiesel witnessed a trial of God during which three rabbis indicted God for allowing the massacre of children. The trial, which took several evenings to unfold, ended in a guilty verdict against God. And then the rabbis conducted their evening prayers and worshipped the God they had just convicted.⁹ It seems to me that one could not help but engage with a most profound doubt in the concentration camps. Some, like the three rabbis, somehow ended up in a place of affirmation; others like Wiesel lost belief in God for all eternity.

Today I add a new person to my list of inspirational doubters: Mother Teresa. Only a few years ago this would have seemed completely absurd: Could there be any more devout and committed believer than Mother Teresa? I suppose she gave some hints

⁶ Hecht, pp. 62-74. Archibald MacLeish, *JB* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), pp. 44-52; Steven Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1986); William Safire, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today’s Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 20, 26, 47.

⁷ Hecht, pp. 44-46, 74-84.

⁸ Hecht, p. 463.

⁹ Eli Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), “The Scene,” p. vii.

about trouble in her spiritual life that we missed, like when Dan Rather asked her what she says to God when she prays. “I just listen.” And what does God say to you? Rather asked. “He doesn’t say anything. He just listens.”¹⁰ In hindsight, this seems like a pretty clever way to admit that basically she didn’t have a prayer connection with God. The publication of her private correspondence in 2007—something she probably would have objected to since she repeatedly begged her correspondents to destroy her letters¹¹—brought the public spotlight to her barren personal spiritual life.

I know that some will object to the inclusion of Mother Teresa on a list of inspiring doubters. After all, she never lost her belief in God—just her connection to God. She made it abundantly clear that she retained her blind trust in God all through her interminable dark night of the soul. She repeatedly made the point that she never experienced a moment of doubt about the existence of God or Jesus.¹²

So why include her? I certainly acknowledge her doubt is of a very different sort from that of Giordano Bruno. But the depth and the length of her spiritual crisis cries out for the label “doubt:” with the exception of one month—October of 1958—she suffered God’s complete absence for the final forty-eight years of her life. Dark nights of the soul are nothing new in Catholicism,¹³ but they don’t typically last for nearly fifty years! And typically dark nights end at some point with the breaking of daylight and a reunion with the divine. Not for Mother Teresa: for her the light went out and stayed out. And she even feared that she was likely to end up in hell for all eternity.

Mother Teresa’s doubt seems akin to that of Job and Eli Wiesel. Although she does not claim this in her private writings, the source of her doubt must have been at least to some degree the nature of her work with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. Her dark night of the soul commenced almost exactly at the same time she started her mission in Calcutta. It is a stretch to believe this was merely coincidental. The daily horrors she experienced in Calcutta were not as horrific as Wiesel’s experiences in Auschwitz, but they must have been close at least on some days. How could she see all of the suffering in Calcutta and not have some seeds of doubt planted?

In the years prior to starting her mission in Calcutta, Mother Teresa felt extraordinarily close to God and Jesus. Indeed, she heard God directly and unambiguously call her to help the desperately poor in Calcutta.¹⁴ So she started the work—and then immediately God abandoned her. It’s as if God said to her, “I have this terribly difficult yet extremely important assignment for you. Will you accept it?”

“Yes,” she replied with all her heart.

“Great!” God exclaimed. “Good luck. And good bye!” With that, God rode off into the proverbial sunset, never to be felt by her again. And there she was, heartbroken and stuck caring for the suffering in Calcutta.

How in the world did she make sense of this? It could not have been easy. But slowly she worked her way toward a framework of understanding. At first she attributed God’s absence to her own sinfulness and weakness. But over time, she came to see that her suffering was connected to the Passion of Jesus. His thirst on the cross mirrored her

¹⁰ http://www.christiancentury.org/article_print.lasso?id=4204.

¹¹ Kolodiejchuk, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 139, 187, 191.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

own thirst for Jesus' and God's presence in her life. And then she realized that Jesus' pain and suffering also was mirrored in the suffering of the poor and the sick for whom she was caring. All of them—the poor, the sick, Jesus on the cross, and her in her arid spiritual life—all of them felt unloved and unwanted. Recognizing this connection helped her become more empathetic to the poor; it helped her do her work better. So her spiritual desolation became for her an integral part of her call to compassion. She eventually decided that this was such a gift that given a choice, she would have willingly traded her union with God for the insights and compassion that made her work more effective.¹⁵

As her journey of darkness and loneliness continued, she began to realize that she was in contact with Jesus after all: he came to her in the guise of the people she was helping. "Jesus," she wrote, "comes to us in the hungry, the naked, the lonely, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the prostitute, the street beggars." She served the poor "because they *are* Jesus."¹⁶ With that realization, she moved from the tormenting pain we heard reflected in the readings to a more serene and peaceful acceptance of her endless dark night of the soul. She sums all of this up in the wonderful, paradoxical affirmation: "With me the sunshine of darkness is bright."¹⁷ This is the Mother Teresa whose personality and mission so captivated the world.

I know that some people—including some in this room perhaps—have steadfastly refused to jump on the Mother-Teresa-was-a-saint bandwagon. One notable example is the writer and social commentator Christopher Hitchens, who was invited by the Vatican to speak against Mother Teresa in an early phase of the canonization process. I'm not going to spend a lot of time reviewing the case against her, but Hitchens' critique is important to acknowledge. In his book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (the title gives a hint that he's not inclined to hold back in his attack), Hitchens forcefully lays out the case against her. He portrays her as an ultra-reactionary, fraudulent, cynical, calculating CEO of a multinational missionary operation. She is "a religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer and an accomplice of worldly, secular powers." He blasts in particular her crusade against contraception and abortion which led among other things to her publicly denouncing abortions for women in Bosnia who were raped and impregnated during the genocide there. In her speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, she called abortion "the greatest destroyer of peace today."¹⁸ And Hitchens notes that it is difficult after seeing the problems of Calcutta up close to conclude that "what it most needs is a campaign against population control." He casts doubt on her motivations for her work and the medical effectiveness of her mission.¹⁹

While I believe he has over-stated his case—not an uncommon thing for Christopher Hitchens to do—some of his charges do trouble me. I would even add to his list another charge: in her efforts to put band-aids on the problems of the poor, she neglected the systemic causes of persistent, generational poverty. This is part of why I

¹⁵ Kolodiejchuk, pp. 3-4, 146, 176, 216-218.

¹⁶ Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words*, compiled by Jose Luis Gonzalez-Balado (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), pp. 29-30.

¹⁷ Kolodiejchuk, pp. 200, 274.

¹⁸ Kolodiejchuk, p. 292; Mother Teresa, p. 26.

¹⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. xi, 11, 24, 32, 38-39, 50, 52; <http://www.slate.com/id/2090083/>.

find her absolute opposition not only to abortion but especially to contraception to be so disturbing.

My conclusion is that Mother Teresa was, well, no saint. I don't mean to single her out: I don't believe anyone is truly a saint. I don't believe in saints. I do believe that there are good—though no doubt imperfect—people. She may fit into this category. But saint? No.

I do value her commitment to serving the poor even if it wasn't always exercised in the most positive way. But even more, I am struck by the story of her doubt-leavened belief. Or is it her belief-leavened doubt? Sometimes I feel that we religious liberals believe we have a corner on the market of doubt. This is not true: doubt comes from many and sometimes unexpected sources. I personally find doubt particularly powerful when it comes from “believers.”

Anthropologists like Victor Turner and Mary Douglas have lifted up the wisdom and creativity and power to be found in those aspects of our lives that are “betwixt and between,” those border areas of one kind or another. Turner, for example, writes extensively about rites of passage as such a power-laden zone. Transitioning from childhood to adulthood or from single to partnered or from living to dead, we find ourselves in places full of spiritual opportunity and danger.

I believe that the borderland between belief and doubt is just such a zone. This is the spiritual area where Job and Ecclesiastes and Eli Wiesel and Mother Teresa all found themselves. They danced the creative dance between belief and doubt. They each came to different conclusions, but in each struggle I find nuggets of wisdom.

As a self-proclaimed agnostic, polytheistic metaphorical Christian Unitarian Universalist with a special interest in Buddhism and American Indian spirituality, I guess it's not a stretch to say that I find myself in the same borderland between belief and doubt. So I am grateful to add Mother Teresa's unique journey as another guidepost, helping light the way as my journey continues to unfold.

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