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Our Religious Doubts and How to treat them.

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The late George Müller of Bristol—whose work for poor children is one of the noblest things in the religion of nineteenth-century England—was once asked whether he had ever doubted in religion. After a little thought, Müller replied: 'Yes, I once doubted for five minutes.'

Was his experience an enviable one? Before answering, we should like to know first of all precisely what Müller meant by 'doubt.' If, as is most probable, he had in his mind doubt regarding the very foundations of Christian faith and character, then we may well covet his lot. It is a great thing never to have felt uncertainty about the existence of a Heavenly Father, about Christ being mighty to save, about the reality of goodness, or the hope of immortality. To have assurance unbrokenly upon these central things will make a man strong and a cause of strength in others. But 'doubt' is a word often applied to tolerably small points. Some people would say that to read the Book of Jonah as drama, not history, was to be a doubter, or even to question the inspiration of the printing of the Hebrew Bible. I do not think that to pass one's life untroubled by doubts of that sort is to be envied. It is a mental calm worthy of a vegetable.

The first counsel to be offered to those who are worried by doubts is this: Face them openly. Compel yourselves to have them up into the light and submit them to scrutiny. Refuse to drift on at random. Determine that you are going to have it out with your own mind, and discover what your doubts really amount to. An English statesman of the eighteenth century, much given to neglecting his correspondence, is said to have held that if only you left a letter unanswered for six weeks, it answered itself. But we cannot deal with our doubts on that plan. A man dare not ignore uncertainties which conceivably may be undermining his sense of God and his best power for life. That would be like shutting his eyes to the gravest symptom in his health and believing that if he said nothing about it, and acted as if it were not there, the pain or the lameness or the failing eyesight would vanish of itself. Not that every doubt can be solved. It may quite well be that God will show it to be a man's duty to go through life bearing the load of uncertainty on this or that point. But if that should be the case, he will know it. He will have met the doubt and forced its meaning.

But if we must not ignore our doubts, or try to conjure them away by taking no notice, just as little have we the right to suppress them violently. If we do, our love of truth will never be the same again. Besides, the policy of stifling doubt and choking it into silence presupposes that all doubt is wrong, but clearly this is far from being the case. Indeed, there is a profound sense, as students of mental life know, in which doubt is an essential condition of all progress. To discover new truth we have to be dissatisfied with the old view, not necessarily because we think it totally unsound and misleading, but at least because we now see it to be partial, one-sided, or ambiguous. If Copernicus had never doubted the Ptolemaic astronomy, the earth might still be regarded as the centre of the universe. If the Reformers had never doubted the Divine character of the Romish system, the vast benefits of the Reformation would have been lost to man. If scholars had never doubted a certain view of Scripture, and had failed to apply the idea of development of religious life of which Scripture is the deposit, we might still be at the point of viewing every Old Testament command—for example, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'—as perpetually incumbent upon ourselves. If theologians had not had doubts, people might still take seriously the moral atrocities to be found in some creeds with reference to the faith of unbaptized infants. Doubt—which here is just the spirit of questioning—has been the parent of untold good. America would never have been inhabited by white men, if it had not occurred to some one that the world must be bigger than his European contemporaries had supposed.

No one, then, can possibly use his mind and not be visited by doubts of some sort. The doubts need not go far down or be fundamental, but this at least can be said, that since the human mind is more than a lumber-room into which anything and everything can be jumbled without the contents affecting each other, and is rather a living intelligence, comparing one thing with another and inevitably choosing between them—because what we think depends on all the facts that have been put before us—fresh knowledge will react somehow

on our old beliefs. The old beliefs will change because we are changing. There is no reason why the change should not be for the better. It is only the dead, the stagnant, that retains the same old form from year to year unalterably. And the man who, on the last day of December, could stand up and say: 'I can gladly testify that no new views of Christian truth have entered my mind in the last twelve months,' would deserve commiseration. His words would mean that in his case the Spirit of God had so far been quenched.

The second counsel for the doubter is: Take your doubts calmly. There is no need to get into a panic about them, as if they mean either that you have abandoned God, or—still worse—that He has abandoned you. Once in a past century, when things were at a grave point in France, a statesman was heard to say: 'Let us take everything seriously, but nothing tragically.' It is a wise word for men who are tasting their first experience of religious questionings and inward fermentation of spirit. Be calm, and give yourself time. Remember that you have the love of God behind you in it all.

One reason for calmness is that thousands of other people have gone through our trial, and they have won through to victory. The doubter always is tempted to suppose that he is unprecedented. That implies a good deal of simplicity, and perhaps a little pride. Disraeli used to say that every boy of fifteen imagines himself the most extraordinary being that has ever lived, and a man whose mind has begun to get upside down in religious matters may yield to the temptation of thinking that no one has ever been where he is. But while of course there is something original in every case of doubt, otherwise it would be an affectation, yet the chief types of doubt, as is proved by history and biography, recur over and over again. Therefore we say, Be calm; others have been in battle-line like yourself and have been given the triumph. You are not fighting the fight alone. There is a Holy Spirit, there is a Christ who lived and overcame. If God has placed you in danger, it is because He knows His own power to strengthen you inwardly. You are treading where many have trodden before. Adapting the words of the Apostle about temptation we can say: 'There hath no doubt taken you but such as is common to man, but God is faithful.'

A second reason for calmness is that doubt never cancels knowledge. Nothing that I am uncertain about affects what I am sure of. My doubts, that is to say, spring from my ignorance, but they cannot neutralize what I know. I may be in doubt whether my friend was born in Great Britain or in America, because I am unacquainted with his early life; but this in no way impairs my present trust in his character or my belief that he would prefer death to dishonour. No man, therefore, should allow himself to become obsessed by doubt or let it loom too widely over the landscape, forgetting how much less important it may be than his certainties. I may have various perplexities about the Divine government of the world, exactly as a little child may be in complete ignorance as to how her father gets his income, or what his political sympathies are, or what clubs he belongs to; and yet she may know that he loves her fondly. Similarly, I may be quite sure about the really crucial thing, that God the Father is my Friend. There are scores of things which I don't know, and which nobody knows, regarding the life of Jesus: how long it lasted, what filled up the long years of waiting before His public ministry began, precisely what happened to His body after it was laid in the tomb and in what order, exactly what He meant by some of the recorded statements concerning His Second Coming. I may have doubts on all these points; none the less, I am sure that He is the Son of the Father as no one else has ever been, that there is life for the sinner in His Cross, that He revealed Himself after death to His disciples as the Living One. I can bear calmly what I do not know because of what I do know. Let us keep our sense of proportion. Take a shilling and hold it close enough to the eye, and it will blot out the sun. And if we concentrate attention on some minor obscurity, it will hide great and all-important facts. If through Christ we are learning how to live in fellowship with God, we have enough to be going on with.

A further reason for calmness is that we may only have heard one side. Our doubt may have been put into our mind in discussion by some one who had a most imperfect knowledge of the subject. Twenty-five years ago, people who had read certain books and nothing else might quite naturally go about saying that no such person as Jesus ever lived. It might be difficult to find a seriously-minded person who would take the responsibility for any such statement to-day, but of course some people got a painful shock at the time. They forgot that by leaving out all the facts on one side, you can make out a case for anything. By exactly the same means it could be proved that Robert the Bruce never existed, or Oliver Cromwell, or George Washington. If we get troubled by diffi-

culties of this kind it is a wise thing to hear the other side before getting worried overmuch. Nor must it be forgotten that it is the easiest thing in the world to make game of a weak statement of Christian truth, whereas the objections have no force at all against a better and stronger statement. Long ago the Atonement used to be explained by saying that Christ cheated the Devil out of his prey —the souls of men—catching him like a fish on a baited hook; and any one can imagine the triumph of the sceptic over a theory of that sort. But the Church did not abandon the Atonement because a poor explanation had broken down. The Church felt that when we speak of Atonement we are speaking of a great inestimable reality—a great redeeming act of God in Christ—and she forthwith set about thinking her way to a better explanation. She did, in short, precisely what science has done in the case of Light. One early theory of Light was to the effect that small particles fly out of luminous bodies to our eye, and so give us the sensation of seeing; after a time that was felt to be inadequate. But because it was felt to be inadequate no one dreamt of saying that Light did not exist. They proceeded to find a sounder and more comprehensive theory, and to-day scientific men are trying to combine the corpuscular theory of Light with the wave theory. Thus, when a man's doubts are awakened by hearing some doctrine knocked over, he may reasonably say to himself: 'Very well, granted that this form of doctrine may be imperfect, what is the truer and worthier form of doctrine that ought to replace it?'

Now this, I think, suggests a valuable principle. It is the principle that doubts of an intellectual character must be dealt with intellectually. There is no use in holding up devout hands of horror at objections raised, as we say, by unbelief; nor in drugging ourselves with cant, or insinuating that all doubt is due to the doubter's evil life. Of course a man who wants to be quit of God in order to go in more freely for self-indulgence will not have much trouble in collecting arguments for atheism. If you have not made up your mind for goodness, it is wonderful how strong a case can be made out for negation. Christ promised life only to the morally sincere. 'If any man willeth to do God's will, he shall know'; 'to the upright there ariseth light in the darkness.' Therefore none of us has a right to assume easily and cheaply that our doubts have no connexion with our moral unfaithfulness. One fairly good test is this: 'Do my doubts about God and Christ make me sad, or do they make me glad?' Am I relieved when some old ground of faith disappears, or am I sorry? If I am unfeignedly happier because the reasons for trusting God seem to be growing less, then I have good cause to be anxious.

Hence we must try to think the questions out to the end. Now and then a man settles down in his doubts, acquiescing in them and perhaps getting rather proud of them as if they constituted his real spiritual capital for life, and all this for no better reason than that he is too lazy to use his brains. One has known a boy take more trouble to learn whistling than some people expend in getting a mental grip of their religious creed. They will not pay God the respect of thinking about Him with all their might. Yet everybody knows that people who conducted business on the same slack methods would go bankrupt in six months.

But some one may say: 'I am not a philosopher, or an historian, or a theologian; how then am I to master these hard problems?' Clearly the most sensible thing is to talk them over with the right person. We ought of course to choose our confidant wisely, and not show our wound to any but one who we really believe can help to heal it. There are people who *can* give guidance; they have been through it all before us and have found the way out. Even if they can't satisfy us themselves, they know the right sort of books to read. There are good books on virtually every difficulty, written by authors full of the modern spirit, up to date in knowledge, books which those in perplexity would certainly find helpful. To read them would at least dispel one fear which it is probable haunts many people—the fear that to the worst difficulties of all there are no answers of any kind, and that faith, as the schoolboy said, is holding on to what everybody knows not to be true.

But while we may believe unhesitatingly in facing the difficulties of faith and working through them with intellectual fearlessness and optimism, one thing ought to be said emphatically. It is vain to suppose we can explain everything, in religion, in intellectually transparent terms, any more than we can completely explain everything in science or in history. In every department mysteries are to be found. Who can tell for certain what is the ultimate constitution of matter? Who can say precisely how mind is related to brain? Are there not various conflicting views, held by equally competent historians, as to the character of Henry VIII. of England, or Napoleon, or the causes of the French Revolution? So we find, with the best will in the world, that certain things

remain obscure. We may arrive at no satisfactory explanation of how God answers prayer. We may have to put up with uncertainty as to how human suffering can be in harmony with His love. Is there, then, no help but mere blind trust? Yes: what we cannot see through we can live through by immediate insight, by spiritual intuition. Life is a bigger thing by far than logic or formal reasoning. We could not, if challenged, give an absolutely unassailable proof even of the existence of our friend's soul; none the less we have the certainty of living experience, of daily communion and fellowship with our friend, and that is enough. Similarly, as we grow older and as the gospel proves and vindicates itself year after year, and as our sense of fellowship with God becomes a thing so assured that He is as indubitable as our own existence, we find that intellectual difficulties fall into their proper place. They are still there; perhaps they will always be there. To the end we are called to fight the good fight with our minds against unworthy doubt, exactly as we are with our wills against temptation. But precisely as in the struggle with temptation, life prolonged in faith brings us an ever-increasing assurance of being in league with God—a league that never can be broken and that no temptation can destroy—so, doubts and uncertainties come to be submerged in the greater certainty, bred by deepening experience, that He is ours and we are His. The fact is religious difficulties often cease to vex us, not because we have solved them, but because we have risen to a higher plane. 'The eagle flying through the sky is not troubled how to cross the rivers.'

It is of the first importance that religious doubts should be handled in God's presence. Let us take our doubts to God in prayer, with the certainty that He will sympathize. Christ was invariably gentle with the doubter. Nicodemus was treated with consideration and given light upon his difficulty. There was no indignation on Christ's part, no accusation of wickedness, no harshness, even though there was more than a suggestion that Nicodemus should cease to be a mere spectator; every word was full of understanding and encouragement. Or take John the Baptist, sending from prison his pathetic message of half-unbelief and anxiety. Did Christ speak of him with reproach? So far from that He used words of extraordinary praise: 'Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist.' And with Thomas—the doubter among the Twelve, as he has been called—it was still the same. Our Lord's tone with them all was manly feeling for their difficulty, not yielding to it, but aiding them through it with sympathetic power and insight. Let us therefore conduct all our thinking over doubt face to face with the Christ of the Gospels. Let the light of His love and holiness fall upon all our thoughts. Let us ask ourselves, at every point, whether we have not in Christ better reasons for believing than we can have anywhere else for doubting. The two greatest forces urging men to faith are conscience and Jesus Christ. And our doubt must be stronger, more convincing, more satisfying to mind and spirit than both of these put together, before we are entitled to yield to it.

Again, doubt must never be allowed to paralyse action. There is a suggestive incident in the Gospels when men came to Jesus with the question: 'Lord, are there few that be saved?' They were anxious regarding a point over which multitudes have brooded ever since. But observe Jesus' reply. He does not embark upon the theoretic discussion; He does not set out the arguments for and against. He answers: 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate.' Throw yourself into action, is His counsel. Keep to the duty which is clear and which concerns yourself. Refuse to allow the positive and self-evident to be overshadowed by any number of negatives. Henry Drummond used to say that the best cure for doubt is to go out and help another man.

If these lines should fall under the eye of younger men and women, their attention may be called to one concluding point. Keep by you the memory that you once had doubts, and let it make you charitable. Some day you will be older than you are now, and if you are like the rest of the human race, you will be tempted to forget your youth. There are people who don't at all like to remember that they once dressed like lunatics for a students' torchlight procession, or sang uproarious songs, or danced war-dances on the last night of term. And in the same way there are those who, when they have become ornaments of society or of the Church, forget that they once had doubts, and are very severe with young people who in turn are going through the mill. I want to say that if you become like that, if you harden, you will lose a real part of your power to serve God. Those who are troubled with perplexities will never dream of coming near you. But there is no reason why this should be our lot. All Christians are called to be priests, and, in their calling, to follow in the steps of Him whom they name their Lord. Our High Priest is One who can be touched with a feeling of

our infirmities because He was tempted in all points like as we are—doubts amongst the rest—and that experience He has not forgotten. It explains His Divine sympathy. Let us, when our youth lies behind us, resolve that we will be mindful—humbly, wonderingly, gratefully mindful—of what we underwent, of the shadowed places in which God gave us light; praying that thereby we may be the better fitted to guide others whose feet are stumbling on the mountains of darkness.

An Urgent Need.

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There is a dangerous separation at the present day between the theologian and the ordinary educated public, between the intelligent preacher and those who listen to him. The theologian regards the Bible as a collection of documents, written at widely varying times, and from many points of view, inspired indeed, and the source of our highest knowledge about things divine, but differing greatly in their degree of inspiration and of exactness. To the great mass of the public, the little educated majority, the Bible is still just the Bible, an undifferentiated solid, or perhaps we should say an unrelieved superficies: such people fall easy victims to the crudest secularist, and having never learnt to regard the sacred books historically, they cannot distinguish between primitive and developed ideas of morality or between the poetry and the prose of the Old Testament. I doubt, indeed, whether the large multitude that reads the inferior newspapers—and nothing else—has greatly departed from the Biblical ideas of a century ago, except that a large and increasing number has acquired a vague notion that the Bible (and therefore religion) is not quite true. This, of course, is partly due to the failure of preachers to speak out plainly enough: they do not want to upset the older members of their congregations; and, when they do treat the Bible in a modern way, they often do so with so much discretion that only a brother theologian would know what they meant. What the public notion was a few years ago—and I fancy is still to-day—was shown by the newspaper headings when Dr. Barnes, as a Canon of Westminster, preached before the British Association—'Courageous Utterance of a Canon,' was the way they ran, 'The World not Made in Six Days.' Nobody worth mentioning had thought it was, for half a century; and for my own part, I had never heard a preacher say that it was; but I must confess at the same time that I had seldom heard a preacher explain with unmistakable vigour that it was not.

All this is an old story; but I do not think the difficulty has yet been met in a practical way; and there is another problem, that of the well-educated layman, which has not yet been met either. Able men, famous and brilliant novelists (and it is the novelists who do the most successful part of the world's preaching nowadays), as well as other writers, continually touch on matters of religion without apparently understanding the Synoptic problem and its solution in modern times. The educated laity have generally a rough idea of the development of Hebrew religion and of the relation of the Old Testament to the New; but they seldom exhibit any idea of the difference between the Gospels and the Epistles and between one Gospel and another.

Now all students of the New Testament know that the criticism of the last thirty years, by separating later first-century reflections from the actual teaching of Jesus Christ, has enormously increased our knowledge of His character and message. The difference can be compared with that which is seen in a picture which has been carefully cleaned and restored by a skilled expert. The portrait we have of Christ is far more vivid, and more adorable. The touches of sententiousness have gone, the suspicion of self-praise, the disturbing element of phrases here and there that seemed fierce or cruel—such things an impartial and strictly scientific scholarship has shown to be the natural additions of editors of different temperaments. Some were due to quite late alterations in the manuscripts, and disappeared in the Revised Version (a momentous example being the omission of the word 'fasting'); though, indeed, the Revisers were over-conservative, and it may