

**All Souls Church Unitarian  
May 2015 Covenant Group Guide**

# Doubt

It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.

Fyodor Dostoyevski

Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.

Paul Tillich

Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.

Voltaire

Doubt is an incentive to truth, and patient inquiry leadeth the way.

Hosea Ballou

Fanaticism is ... overcompensation for doubt.

Robertson Davies

## Reflections on Faith and Doubt

I see faith not so much as an intellectual assent to a series of concepts, but as a relationship with a living God. Feelings deeply affect every relationship. For example, I've been married four decades. Name any feeling, good or bad, and I've probably had that feeling toward my wife. Yet the commitment to marriage binds me to her regardless of the feeling of the moment. I confess there are also times when I have to "act as if" I love her when the feeling lags. That's normal, I believe, in any long-term relationship.

You need only read the Book of Psalms to recognize the same pattern in a relationship with God. The psalms used to baffle me because they seemed so contradictory; read Psalm 22 ("My God, why have you forsaken me?") and Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd") back to back. Now I see that collection of poetry as an accurate expression of the vacillating feelings in a faith relationship.

Many Christians are afraid to look too closely at their faith. Like Peter, they're afraid to step out of the boat. And some churches encourage that kind of "I'll do your thinking for you" as a form of control. That's always dangerous. I read the other day that 153 times someone came up to Jesus with a question, and 147 of those times he responded with another question. A good model, wouldn't you say?

I admit that I'm at times a reluctant Christian, plagued by doubts and still recovering from bad church encounters. I'm fully aware of all the reasons not to believe. So then, why do I believe? In my own days of skepticism, I wanted a dramatic interruption from above. I wanted proof of an unseen reality, one that could somehow be verified. However in my days of faith, such supernatural interruptions seem far less important, because I find the materialistic explanations of life inadequate to explain reality. I've learned to attend to fainter contacts between the seen and unseen worlds. I sense in romantic love something insufficiently explained by mere biochemical attraction. I sense in beauty and in nature marks of a genius creator for which the natural response is worship. I sense in desire, including sexual desire, marks of a holy yearning for connection. I sense in pain and suffering a terrible disruption that omnipotent love surely cannot abide forever. I sense in compassion, generosity, justice, and forgiveness a quality of grace that speaks to me of another world, especially when I visit places, like Russia, marred by their absence. I sense in Jesus a person who lived those qualities so consistently that the world couldn't tolerate him and had to silence and dispose of him. I could go on and on. In short, I believe not so much because the invisible world impinges on this one but because the visible world hints, in the ways that move me most, at a lack of completion.

Philip Yancey, editor-at-large of Christianity Today and author of many books,  
*Q&A on Faith and Doubt at PhilipYancey.com.*

### **The Day Zimmer Lost Religion**

The first Sunday I missed Mass on purpose  
I waited all day for Christ to come down  
Like a wiry flyweight from the cross and  
Club me on my irreverent teeth, to wade into  
My blasphemous gut and drop me like a  
Red hot thurible,\* the devil roaring in  
Reserved seats until he got the hiccups.

(\*vessel for incense)

It was a long cold way from the old days  
When cassocked and surpliced I mumbled Latin  
At the old priest and rang his obscure bell.  
A long way from the dirty wind that blew  
The soot like venial sins across the school yard  
Where God reigned as a threatening,  
One-eyed triangle high in the fleecy sky.

The first Sunday I missed Mass on purpose  
I waited all day for Christ to climb down  
Like the playground bully, the cuts and mice\*  
Upon his face a gleam, and pound me  
Till my irreligious tongue hung out.  
But of course He never came, knowing that  
I was grown up and ready for him now.

(\*cuts & scratches)

### **A Quiz about Your Own Religious Doubt**

1. Do you believe that a particular religious tradition holds accurate knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality and the purpose of human life?
2. Do you believe that some thinking being consciously made the universe?
3. Is there an identifiable force coursing through the universe, holding it together, or uniting all life-forms?
4. Could prayer be in any way effective, that is, do you believe that such a being or force (as posited above) could ever be responsive to your thoughts or words?
5. Do you believe this being or force can think or speak?
6. Do you believe this being has a memory or can make plans?
7. Does this force sometimes take a human form?
8. Do you believe that the thinking part or animating force of a human being continues to exist after the body has died?
9. Do you believe that any part of a human being survives death, elsewhere or here on earth?
10. Do you believe that feelings about things should be admitted as evidence in establishing reality?
11. Do you believe that love and inner feelings of morality suggest that there is a world beyond that of biology, social patterns, and accident — i.e., a realm of higher meaning?
12. Do you believe that the world is not completely knowable by science?
13. If someone were to say “The universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason, and all life on earth is but a tiny, utterly inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye never to be judged, noticed, or remembered,” would you say, “Now that’s going a bit far, that’s a bit wrongheaded?”

Excerpted from Jennifer Michael Hecht’s *Doubt: A History*

## **For Reflection and Discussion**

1. Do you believe that doubt is an element of faith? How does that work in your belief system? Was doubt encouraged or allowed as you were growing up?
2. Can you articulate your doubts? Taking the quiz below might provide some insight. Did your answers surprise you? If you're willing, share and discuss your answers. Are you comfortable with your doubts?
3. How do your doubts match up with the things you are sure about?
4. Has there been a day where--like Paul Zimmer in the poem included--that you lost religion? What were the circumstances?
5. How does your experience of All Souls relate to your spiritual doubt?

---prepared for All Souls Covenant Groups by Mary Beth Hatem