

Belief in an Age of Doubt

Introduction

Art imitates life compelling us to look deeper in to the significance and meaning of human experience. For this reason Roger Lundin, author of *Believing Again*, felt studying literature was vital to our well-being—books weave experience and sensation together giving expression to certain underlying truths about human existence. When Lundin was thirteen years old he read Jack London’s short story “To Build a Fire.” After finishing the story he felt like his life was taken away momentarily—measured and judged—and then returned to him in the form of an alienated majesty (a realization his own situation, and that of the main character in London’s story, was essentially identical).

“To Build a Fire” is a story about a man lost in the Yukon wilderness. He must build a fire or perish. Everything that can go wrong goes wrong. When the nameless man’s efforts eventually fail, he submits to fate by falling asleep and slipping into death. London’s story of a hapless man freezing to death made perfect sense to a young impressionable Lundin: life was not directed by any divine being towards some sort of greater purpose; on the contrary, life appeared governed by purposeless accident and blind necessity. Things, sometimes terrible things, simply happened to people for no particular purpose or reason. The death of his older brother, in Lundin's grade ten year, during routine surgery reinforced this sense of life's purposelessness. To Lundin everything was either random or the workings of a God so distant and indifferent the thought of submitting to it was unbearable. So for the final two years of high school, he poured himself into reading books; and the poets and novelists he encountered during this time placed him on a path towards eventually returning to God.

In his book *Believing Again*, Roger Lundin describes his personal journey from unbelief to belief. He traces his journey using the thoughts and paths followed by various 19th century writers. Writers like Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Fyodor Dostoevsky provide a fruitful context for a discussion on the origin and consequences of doubt for people living in the 21st century.

A Changing *Zeitgeist*

Lundin takes the beginning of the 19th century as his starting point: the Enlightenment was in full swing. People were buoyed by a sense of hope and optimism about the future. They believed reason, and education in particular, was the solution to all of humanity's problems. There was a scientific renaissance in fields like geology, biology, chemistry and physics successfully challenging old assumptions about the physical world (and God). Emerging sciences like sociology and psychology added further fuel to the fire challenging traditional beliefs and religious claims about the world in particular. The increase in scientific knowledge contributed to the development of a new more modern *Zeitgeist*.¹ Where once we thought ourselves special, advances in biology (e.g. theory of evolution) indicated we were not; where once it was believed the Earth was only thousands of years old advances in geology pointed to the planet actually being hundreds of millions of years old. More than one person asked

¹ *Zeitgeist* is taken from the German literally meaning "spirit of the time". The *zeitgeist* is the "defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time".

themselves questions like why did God create the dinosaurs and why did He take so long to get to us? In a sense science knocked humankind off of its pedestal. By the end of the 19th century people were filled less with optimism and more with a sense of feeling adrift.²

The scientific process cannot really be blamed for causing this cultural shift; rather, it was the *perceived implications* of scientific findings causing people to question the existence of a divine order or purpose to things. Many of the major cultural figures of the 19th century, like Emily Dickinson and Fyodor Dostoevsky, wrote their most important works during this period. Both writers felt they were living during a time of challenge and bracing change; and although doubt had always co-existed alongside faith, it was during the 1800s open unbelief first became an intellectually viable and, perhaps most importantly, a socially acceptable option. In the 21st century, we have learned to live with unbelief. Yet, when modern unbelief first broke upon the scene in the mid-nineteenth century, the sense of disruption and disorientation it caused, was palpable, even overwhelming for some; and by the end of the 19th century doubt went from being an isolated experience on the cultural margins to becoming a central component of modern life.

Changing *Zeitgeist*: Changing Expectations

Up until the middle of the 19th century young people were expected to adopt the same values and worldview as their parents. No questions asked. Today the situation is changed: young people are expected to make their own way through the world; they cannot rely entirely upon traditions, society or their family to guide them. Young people are expected to examine things objectively and not just accept things at face value. People living in the 21st century possess a degree of freedom and individual responsibility inconceivable to our ancestors.

Lundin is a child of the 20th century. He grew up living with significant doubt. At times he entertained the idea some force governed the course of life; however, he had no idea what it was like or whether it even had a name. He clearly did not believe it was a loving, forgiving, or personal power directing history or events from behind the scenes. As a child of the 20th century, Lundin believed the laws of life took no notice of his personal longings or the prayers and destiny of people. Instead, it appeared to him people were simply wandering around life from nowhere to nowhere. The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz aptly describes the situation in his poem “Road to Nowhere”:

If what is proclaimed by Christianity is a fiction,
And what we are taught in schools,
In newspapers and TV is true:
That the evolution of life is an accident,
As is an accident the existence of man,

² In the 1930s, sociologist Émile Durkheim described this popular sense of feeling adrift through the concept of *anomie*. Anomie, in societies or individuals, is a condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals. Scientific advances successfully challenging religious claims contributed to a collective sense of rootlessness and despair. Science, or knowledge itself, was not to blame *per se*; rather, the problem was with how intractable and unbending people were in their thinking: instead of adapting to the new information by adjusting old beliefs to reflect new scientific information, many abandoned religion altogether.

And that his history goes from nowhere to nowhere,
Our duty is to draw conclusions
From our thinking about the innumerable generations
Who lived and died deluding themselves,
Ready to renounce their natural needs for no reason,
To wait for a posthumous verdict, every day afraid
That for licking clean a pot of jam they go to eternal torment.

Milosz's reference to the "evolution of life" is an allusion to the work of Charles Darwin. When Darwin developed the theory of evolution he made no use of a God. Instead he explained humankind's origins solely through material and observable forces. Life took the shape it did, not because of the activity of a loving all-powerful God, but through interspecies struggle and survival of the fittest. Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. His "dangerous idea" caused controversy for at least two reasons: firstly, it provided an alternative explanation to the biblical account of humankind's origins; and secondly, the theory contributed to the emerging 19th century notion that all previous generations of the faithful had merely been, to quote Milosz, "deluding themselves".

For his part Darwin was *never* an atheist. Scientists study nature for its own sake (not to disprove religion).³ Darwin developed the theory of evolution through his work studying barnacles. He wanted to explain why there was such a variety of them. Why caused them to differ so much from one another? He concluded that barnacles took the forms they did due to adapting to new environments through a process he called natural selection, i.e. organisms better adapted to their environment tend to survive and produce more offspring. In other words, dead barnacles don't have babies. Competition between the different varieties of barnacles shaped what they looked like. The most important conclusion Darwin reaches was *all of varieties of barnacles shared one ancestor population in common*. The implications of shared ancestry weren't lost on him: he looked at the United States with horror because white people justified the continued practice of slavery by an appeal to racial superiority. Darwin concluded correctly that if humankind was evolving, then just like with the barnacles, every human being could trace their ancestry to a single shared ancestral population in the distant past. Later developments in biology confirmed what Darwin suspected: there is no white person or yellow person or black person or red person genome (DNA molecule). There is a single *universal human genome*.⁴

People living in the 21st century are shaped by both faith-based and scientific perspectives. Consequently, today even "firm" believers appreciate that while religion provides a meaning, science likewise has something to teach us. Therefore, to be a believer today is to recognize that in the deepest personal sense, belief appears to be more or less optional; that is, whatever a person is able to accept

³ Darwin actually completed significant education and training towards becoming an Anglican priest.

⁴ By the end of his life Darwin was an agnostic: he accepted the fact some questions were simply unanswerable by their nature. He never said at any point evolution disproved God's existence. Darwin observed scientific theories merely describe *how* a process unfolds; scientific theories, however, do not answer the question *why* the observed process existed in the first place (or if *someone* as opposed to *something* was responsible); thus, unlike some opponents of religion claim, evolution never unseated or "killed" God; it is possible God used evolution as a means of creating and shaping life. Nonetheless, it is accurate to say evolution certainly challenged certain assumptions people had about God.

and affirm he or she is also free to reject or deny. Faith, therefore, is a choice. By the same line of reasoning unbelief is a choice, as well.

The Adulthood of the World

There is no point in regretting our freedom to choose. The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said as much in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Bonhoeffer argued it made no sense for Christians to try and fight the “adulthood of the world”.⁵ Specifically, he observed that it was “in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place un-Christian” to jettison scientific findings if and when they conflicted with established belief”.⁶ Admittedly, some ideas and certain perspectives make many believers uncomfortable. But being made uncomfortable by a particular idea or line of reasoning isn't evidence that the idea is false. Such discomfort is more or less an indicator of the individual's ability or inability (unwillingness) to change their thinking to reflect new and better information.

Bonhoeffer asserted if gainsay was our only defense against challenges to belief little was accomplished. Facts are, as President John Adams once observed, stubborn things. So, when an *assumption* about God is successfully challenged, like the Earth is 4.5 billion years old and not 6000 years like some creationists claim, this does not mean that because we got the Earth's age wrong we must also be wrong about God even existing. Darwin argued science told us *how* processes unfold, not *why*⁷ or for what greater purpose they unfold. Look at it this way: people make assumptions about others all the time. Are the assumptions themselves the *person* whom they're being made about? Or are they an imperfect reflection of a *version* of them? God and the assumptions people have about It.⁸ are not the same *thing*. Not even close.⁹

Shortly after Lundin's conversion to Christianity, he dreamt about how much better his life might have been if he were born during the middle ages. Life was simpler then and the authority of the Church and the Bible were not questioned (actually this authority was challenged but the Church's ability to kill or imprison opponents is what kept such questioning to a minimum). Yet, Lundin's view of the medieval period was correct in at least one respect: the Christian narrative then was firmly accepted “as is” without any real challenge from science. Lundin, though, freely admits wishing to be alive at this time is an example of foolish idealism. When he was a child his life was saved twice by modern medicine. If he

⁵ Bonhoeffer used “adulthood” as a metaphor referring to the advances made in science and the subsequent leaving behind of certain beliefs.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, D. (2017). *Letters and papers from prison*. London: SCM Press, p.327.

⁷ The words *how* and *why* are actually quite similar in their meaning, e.g. they both ask the question *in what way or manner did something come to be*. However, I am using the adverb *why* to refer to something related to Providence or the work of an unseen God. So *why* is being used here as a synonym for “underlying reason” or “overarching purpose”, e.g. Why was X made? So that Y would happen.

⁸ It is not even clear that God is a *He* or a *Him* in the strictest *human* sense of the word. Some theologians and anthropologists argue that if we live in a patriarchal society it's more likely we'll explain God in masculine as opposed to feminine terms.

⁹ Every ancient society believed gods directly influenced human history. Judaism was unique, in that, it was the first religion to posit the idea there was only one God, not many gods, at work in the world. Christians believe God worked through Israel to prepare a foundation for the birth of Jesus; and God used Jesus to show us His parental heart: God is a parent—in every sense of the word—who looks after us. He is not necessarily an indifferent cosmic power as some critics claim.

lived during the middle ages, he would have died twice by the age of ten. Lundin does not cry over our loss of innocence and medieval certainty. Instead, he accepts reality for what it is: something is true not because it is believed in; rather, nothing *depends upon a believer at all*, e.g. God might exist despite the atheist's lack of belief and God might not exist despite the theist's belief. Again, Lundin asserts there is no point in wishing this were not the case. Faith is a choice.¹⁰

To writers like Emily Dickinson and Czeslaw Milosz, belief and unbelief were real tensions, and like Jacob did with the angel, these authors wrestled with God—and in some cases also with the shadow cast by His apparent absence. To her credit Dickinson perceived the promise and peril of the modern world earlier than most. In the case of Dostoevsky, he knew that the theological ground had shifted dramatically over the course of a *single* generation from confidence to doubt in God. They found the new dynamics of belief challenging and grew weary pursuing God; though they had strong convictions their self-dividing doubts always remained. Near the end of her life Dickinson observed to a friend that on “subjects of which we know nothing...we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps [belief] nimble”.¹¹ Her observation captures the essence of what it means to believe or not believe in the 21st century—we are as justified in practicing one position as the other.

Conclusion

Poet W. H. Auden looked at the influence of science as both admirable and harmful. According to Auden, science liberated men from misplaced humility before a false god. Interestingly, Auden observed the god whose death Friedrich Nietzsche declared in the late 19th century was not the Christian God but a cultural creation or a “Zeus without Zeus’ vices”. To Auden, the singular achievement of science in the modern world was to demythologize the universe; and since God created the universe He could not be directly encountered within it.¹² So we are left partially blind and to our assumptions. In his book *The Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explains the situation this way:

Now this change, which has taken place over the last [thousand years] in our civilization, has been immense. We move from an enchanted world, inhabited by spirits and forces, to a disenchanted one; but perhaps more important, we have moved from a world which is encompassed within certain bounds and static to one which is vast, feels infinite, and is in the midst of an evolution spread over [ages].¹³

¹⁰ When it comes right down to it faith is a choice. Faith is not a collection of ideas. Faith is a state of being, not a series of "correct" propositions the believer is obligated to memorize and apply to their life formulaically. Appealing directly to St. Paul, faith has less to do with *fide* (literally "belief" from the Latin) in series of ideas or doctrines and more to do with a persistent state of *pistus* (literally "trusting" from the Greek) in God, anyways. Faith, therefore, is a choice between *trust* and *doubt*.

¹¹ (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2020, from <http://archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/lord/l750.html>.

¹² Auden elaborated on this position through the following analogy, e.g. Just as when I read a poem, I do not encounter the author himself, only the words he has written which it is my job to understand". Kirsch, A. C. (2005). *Auden and Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p.162.

¹³ Taylor, C. (2018). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p.323.

In 1849 Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky was arrested by the czar's secret police in Russia for criticizing the government's policies. He and several others were condemned to death; at the last moment, a note from Czar Nicholas I was delivered to the firing squad. The czar spared the writer commuting his sentence to four years' hard labor in Siberia. A woman named Natalya Fonvizina gave Dostoevsky a copy of the *New Testament* just before his four-year exile began. Dostoevsky wrote Natalya a letter while in prison. The contents of the letter place the Russian author squarely at the center of the 19th century discovery of unbelief and the subsequent efforts to believe again:

I will tell you that I am a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt, I am that today and (I know it) will remain so until the grave. How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me and costs me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it. And yet, God sends me sometimes instants when I am completely calm; at those instants I love and I feel loved by others, and it is at these instants that I have shaped for myself a *Credo* where everything is clear and sacred for me. This *Credo* is very simple, here it is: to believe that nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly, and more perfect than Christ; and I tell myself with a jealous love not only that there is nothing but that there cannot be anything. Even more, if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.¹⁴

There exists no more passionate statement of faith than what is found in Dostoevsky's letter. Human beings are as much a product of reason as they are of passion. If people are genuinely thoughtful, and value intellectual humility and honesty, they cannot ever entirely escape some degree of doubt. But then I remember one simple thing I learned as a young boy reading scripture for myself: Jesus never told me I had to have the right *ideas* (assumptions) in my head. He didn't tell me faith consisted in having the right understanding; he told me I was literally born to do good. Maybe the question of God's existence is not so important after all (since it cannot really be answered scientifically). Perhaps faith then is best understood not as a series of logical propositions or doctrines, but more of a conscious decision to persist and *choose* to love the good and live in hope and trust.

Questions for Discussion

- 1). According to Dickinson "we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour." What precisely does she mean by this statement?
- 2). W. H. Auden observed that the effects of modern science were both admirable and harmful. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

¹⁴ Frank, J. (2002) *Dostoevsky: Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p.160.

3). According to W. H. Auden, science's greatest achievement was to de-mythologize the Universe. What does he mean by this statement?

4). What does Dostoevsky mean exactly when he says "I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth"?

5). In what sense has belief in God *always been optional*?

6). Do you have doubts about God and, if so, what are they? Take this opportunity to develop thoughtful answers.