

## Doubt and Its Discontents

### Matthew Pullar

"A man can't always be defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it."  
C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

"...I am not sure, after all, whether one of the causes of our weak faith is not some secret wish that our faith should *not* be very strong. Is there some reservation in our minds? Some fear of what it might be like if our religion became *quite* real?"  
C.S. Lewis, "Religion: Reality or Substitute?"

"In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again."  
Hebrews 5:12

"I suppose the most important [defect]...was that nearly all of it was false."  
A.J. Ayer, on the defects of logical positivism

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Not long ago, I ended a short essay-of-sorts on doubt and intellectual method with these words:

[L]et's not quibble over what we can never know. Let's start with a valid, reasonable starting place. Otherwise, we'll never get anywhere.

Starting in the right place, of course, is a dangerous thing to do. You just may well find yourself going somewhere.

I'm not sure I quite knew what I was saying when I wrote that, though I did have in mind Lewis' warnings that doubt can often be a means of security. I have concluded since then that doubt most certainly *is* a comfortable place for "troubled intellectuals" to occupy. While in the guise of "working things out" it becomes quite unnecessary to progress in faith; it becomes unnecessary, for instance, to work on godliness, to apply all the disciplines of the faith, especially those that are most troublesome to us. (I have to note that, when doubting, the aspects of faith that I find most comfortable remain with me; I simply tell myself that they are not unique to the Christian faith, even when they quite obviously are – the loving of enemies, for instance, or the exchange of mutual grace.) And so I see that doubt comes in at times when I know that my faith is becoming dangerous; it is leading me out onto limbs that frighten me. It is much easier, of course, to pause before going out onto that limb, to keep checking your footing, to keep evaluating the stability of the limb, etc. etc. What nonsense. It's a limb. As if it would ever be stable. That's hardly the point. Yet I do all I can to put off going onto that limb, even though I also studiously avoid walking back down the trunk of the tree. I don't want to abandon faith, but I don't want to go out on that limb; so I delay. I think. I ponder.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis repeatedly has Screwtape advising Wormwood to "misdirect" his "patient's" thoughts, to keep them from what they should truly

be dwelling on. So, when praying, his patient may start to find his mind “drifting” to important matters. At such times, Wormwood is to ensure that the patient keeps “refocusing” his thinking, an act which the patient will equate with nobility but which actually keeps him from addressing the real issue. Intellectual inquiry can be like that for me. I occupy my mind with questions that are not terribly important; I pray agonising prayers that largely involve my own doubts and uncertainties, to the point that I begin to think that I must surely have very legitimate grounds for doubting and forget why I believe. My doubts are easier to summon than my reasons for faith. I have a long list of questions answered long ago which I can pretend are still up for debate. When all that fails, I can resort to, “I just don’t *feel* God right now”, or the downright puerile *fear* that I am falling away, inevitably. Nothing I can do. Success for the devil. If I really focused on what I *can* know, I might find myself dangerously following Jesus to the cross, truly living the life He has called me into, and truly being satisfied in Him. Instead, I settle for half-truths, clinging onto God in fright, paralysed by shame at my own weakness, not strong enough to believe or reckless enough to walk away.

The fact is that sometimes truths have to be assumed in order to make progress. You cannot always be going back to first principles. Sometimes you simply have to trust that those first principles were correct and that you can now move on. In Mathematics, for instance, there are times when you prove something *deductively* – you start with the “truth”, then you work backwards to show why it is correct. Other times, you work *inductively* – you start with certain pieces of information and from that draw conclusions. Then other times still you work with what is termed a “given” – there is even a Mathematical symbol for this concept which you use in probability equations. You take certain information as “given” and then build upon that information.

The writer to the Hebrews was speaking on something like this when he wrote his letter to the church – a church that was teetering on “falling away”. They were not running the kind of risk that we run today, of drifting into agnosticism or raging into atheism. They were likely to fall backwards, into the Judaism of their past. It seemed so much easier. It was stable. It had things they could hold onto and see, like animal sacrifices and temples. It also had visceral appeal – angels – where Christianity only had the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the ever-distant memory of God incarnate. It was a religion you could grab hold of, unlike this new faith, which was leading them further and further out onto a limb that was looking decreasingly secure.

It was completely secure, of course. The old way was dying; what they had now was far greater, though also more dangerous. Yes, it would lead to many risks, much persecution. It also did not fully belong in this age; much of it had yet to be realised. But, in the light of eternity, it was a much surer bet than anything from their past. And yet they kept looking back. Like Lot’s wife, they seemed unable to fix their eyes on their hopeful future.

I’m wary of over-identifying here. I am not facing the kind of persecution the early church suffered. I am not tempted to return to Judaism. Yet I am *tempted*:

tempted by stasis, tempted to remain in a place of uncertainty, of looking back at questions I have long answered, issues I have long put behind me. What faces me in my future is scary. Doubt is, somehow, secure.

It isn't really. This is where the metaphor of the tree and walking out on that limb comes up short. It only looks like a limb to us; in reality, the trunk of the tree is the dangerous place to be, and the limb by far the safest. But it is risky, and it is frightening. It requires leaving everything behind. Am I ready to do that? Are any of us who wallow in intellectual doubts ready to do that?