

The Value of Doubt in Religious Life

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I recently heard a discourse on this general subject of the relation of faith to doubt. It was so erroneously presented that I resolved to try to give it a more adequate presentation. We read that there is nothing in all this world that ever leads men on to real victory but faith; that we are justified by faith; that salvation is through faith; that faith is the gateway to the kingdom of God. We are saturated with the idea that faith and faith alone is good. All this is true. Paul's old doctrine of justification by faith is fundamental. I pointed out last Sunday the fact that every man must have some kind of a faith in life in order to continue to exist. The great question is as to the quality of that faith and the kind of a life that it will produce.

But the attitude of mind that contrasts faith with doubt, and relegates doubt to the world of sin and evil is quite as disastrous in its results as it is narrow and ignorant in its methods. To try to confine faith to that mental debasement which shall assent to a few theological dogmas, and accept them on the authority of another, and under the fear of condemnation, is the most immoral and disastrous influence of our time as it has been of all times. To characterize as sin all inquiry and all honest doubt as to the nature of these dogmas bespeaks a mind too narrow to be measured.

To one who at all feels the pulse of the mind of men today, the most apparent fact to be relied upon is the fact of religious doubt. Everywhere people of all ages and conditions are either doubting, or have rejected those dogmas which it is considered the essence of faith to accept and believe. Some years ago appeared the novel, *Robert Elsmere*,² which portrayed in

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

² *Robert Elsmere* is a novel by Humphry Ward (1851-1920) published to great success in 1888.

a very able manner this fact of doubt in modern life concerning the traditional dogmas of religion. That book is very well worth reading now. The criticisms against the book pointed out the fact that the book is fundamentally at fault in that it does not explain how these doubts happen to arise in the mind of Robert Elsmere. Those who condemned the book said that the book was valueless unless the author could point to the source of the influences that had caused these doubts to make their appearance in the life of this young man. But this seeming weakness in the book is indeed one of its strong points. The author does not explain the origin of these doubts because she knows, as does everyone else, that they are the predominant force in the atmosphere of our time. If faith is to be regarded as that attitude of mind which accepts these dogmas, then one may say that this is indeed a generation of doubt and skepticism. Nor from this point of view is there any hope for a revival of faith. Wherever you may cut a cross-section from the life of modern society, you will find that the rising generations are either courageously questioning, or already have rejected those forms which the kind of faith to which I have referred, demands that they shall accept. When these people who doubt and question the objects of faith are tearfully urged to return to the faith of the olden time, to the faith of their fathers, they can point as the ancient authority for their skepticism to the old preacher whose words of skepticism are preserved for us in the Old Testament in the book of Ecclesiastes. They can cite in defense of their doubts these words, "Say not thou, What is *the* cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this."³ It is true that this is an age of doubt, so are all ages. Jesus may well be described as the prince of doubters as well as the prince of peace. Show me that body of men in which there is no doubt, no free, bold questions asked concerning the nature of life and the opinions that are held concerning it, and you will show me only shoes who are morally and intellectually dead.

As a good illustration of the nature and the moral quality of religious doubt, let me refer to the experiences of Frederick W. Robertson, the great English preacher.⁴ Robertson left Oxford in an unhappy and unsettled frame of mind. As a pupil, he had been taught the old dogmas of the English Church, but in the free

³ Ecclesiastes 7:10.

⁴ Frederick William Robertson (1816-1853) English preacher.

life he had also drunk heavily of the modern spirit which was awakening in the English churches of his time. The old forms and the new faith could not live together, as many to their sorrow have learned. So, Robertson entered upon his work as a minister, torn by these doubts. Listen, he had been taught that his religious life, that his moral life, rested upon truth of certain alleged facts. He had been told that all those things which make life significant depend entirely and absolutely upon whether or not we can prove that certain alleged events and certain doctrines could be maintained. His formal teaching had been the old bottles of the ancient systematic theology. His real life had been the subtle influence of the modern life that was at work. This was the new wine. His conditions in life had made the attempt to put the new wine into old bottles. This could not, and never can, be done. A few years of active turbulent work as minister in Winchester and Cheltenham finds him leaving the world to go away into the mountains of Switzerland to fight out the great problem which was before him. The passage which I read for a scripture lesson gives his own description of his feelings at this time.⁵ You have already noticed that the passage read covers the three phases through which the doubting person must pass.

Let me point them out. He had been taught, as all to many are taught today, that his religious faith depended upon those forms which are only the passing forms of expressing that essential faith in life which belongs to the human soul. He had never been taught to walk alone in the religious life. He had constantly depended upon props. Without any question he had accepted the statements that had been given to him and had been taught to believe that upon them he must depend. Then comes the time as it must come to everyone who has been taught to believe that the leaves that cover the trees in summer are the permanent and the abiding thing in life of nature. The leaves begin to fall and with them falls the faith that rested upon the passing and the transient. With the departure of the passing comes the days of despondency, which Robertson so well depicts in these words,

It is an awful moment when the soul begins to find that the props on which it has blindly rested so long, are, many of them, rotten, and begins to suspect them all; when it begins to feel the nothingness of many of

⁵ Unfortunately the manuscript for this sermon does not identify the scripture reading the Davis refers to here.

the opinions which have been received with implicit confidence, and in that horrible insecurity begins also to doubt whether there be anything to believe at all.⁶

Notice that he has been taught to depend upon props which his maturing years can see are rotten. These rotten props give away under him, and he begins to doubt and suspect all the foundations, even that which may be sound. This is the essential occasion of the kind of doubt of which we are speaking. Some passing opinion, some local form of ritualism, some meaningless sacrament, has been held up as the essential object of faith and indeed the foundation of faith. The time comes when the true character of this passing form appears. As a support to faith it is not more. In its crumbling fall it carries with it the faith that rested upon it. This is the occasion of that doubt which causes so much consternation, and indeed which leads at times to discouraging results. We are living in a world ordered in truth. We have certain capacities which enable us to find out something of the truth of the world in which we live. Our life, and indeed all human life, is engaged in the discovery of the truth of the relation of the individual life to the unseen world in which he lives as well as to the seen world. It happens that a certain man in working upon this question, offers to the world what seems to him to be certain truths connected with life. He has tested these truths in his own experience and he has confirmed...⁷

⁶ This passage is quoted in Anonymous, *Life, Letters Lectures and Addresses of Frederick W. Robertson*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1870, p. 86. According to the text prior to the quoted passage, it is taken from a lecture that Robertson gave to workmen in Brighton in 1850. The passage describes his period of doubt from the early 1840s.

⁷ Here the manuscript ends with a handwritten, "Incomplete."