

Faith and doubt are not enemies – they are allies. Faith and *knowledge* are enemies – because what I know for sure, I don't have to believe. I don't have faith that water is wet – I *know* it is. I don't believe that 1 and 1 makes 2 – I know it does.

Doubt makes faith possible. Knowledge makes faith impossible.

In that branch of philosophy called logic, A cannot be both A and B at the same time. It is always a case of either/or. In psychology, religion, spirituality and mysticism, it is always a case of both/and. It's not a matter of faith or doubt, but faith *and* doubt.

Did Jesus have faith in God the Father? Absolutely. Did he ever doubt? Yes: on the cross he felt that God had forsaken him.

We must always leave room for doubt. This is something that Pope Francis instinctively understands. During one of his general audiences he once said:

“Everyone experiences doubts about the faith at times - I have, many times. But such doubts can be a sign that we want to know God better and more deeply. We do not need to be afraid of questions and doubts because they are the beginning of a path of (...) going deeper; one who does not question cannot progress in faith.”

The Anglican writer Harry Williams once said: ‘Absolute certainty belongs only to the insane.’ I would add: and the

religious extremist. Absolutely certainty is in itself a form of extremism.

‘Doubting Thomas’ was not doubting Thomas at all: he never said ‘I doubt that the Lord has risen,’ he said ‘I refuse to believe he has risen.’ That’s a different thing entirely. He was the original *refusenik*. When he said he wanted proof, he actually meant he wanted certainty – and certainly makes faith impossible. If the Lord appeared to everyone in the world at exactly the same time in all his power and glory, faith would disappear from the earth – because it would be obsolete. Everyone would *know* God – including R. Dawkins, though what he would make of a personal appearance from the Almighty is anybody’s guess. The absolute refusal to believe or to disbelieve is a pathological concrete hardness of mind and heart. During Vatican 1, the 19th century cardinal Henry Manning, referring to religious truth, spoke of ‘the beauty of inflexibility.’ But inflexibility is not beautiful – it is ugly; it is exclusive, elitist, discriminatory and dead within, because it cannot grow. Manning was wrong. Nothing in nature is inflexible – only the human mind is capable of that. Faith, belief, is both needed and being tested more than ever now. In this present time of pandemic – and in all the many forms of human suffering that humanity does not inflict upon itself – I wonder: Is God, however I imagine God might be – really in charge of it all? Do I know that divine providence is working out everything for the best?

No, I don't know it. Do I doubt it? Yes, I often doubt it. Do I believe it? Yes, against all my better instincts I do believe it. I have faith that there is a transcendent purpose to all things – a purpose I may never glimpse in this life; faith that in some ultimate way that seems to be contradicted by all the evidence around me, in some dimension of greater reality that my inadequate mind can never even partially grasp, that God is in charge. My doubt makes my belief possible.

I think of Julian of Norwich. She says in one of her revelations:

“And in this he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as little ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it was so little it might suddenly have fallen to nothingness. (...) In this thing I saw three properties: i) it exists because God made it. ii) it continues to exist because God keeps it. iii) God keeps it because he loves it and ever shall.”

I don't have to try very hard to believe *that*.