

INTRODUCTION

I find your lack of faith—disturbing.

—Darth Vader

The Enemies Are Both Right

There is a great gulf today between what is popularly known as liberalism and conservatism. Each side demands that you not only disagree with but disdain the other as (at best) crazy or (at worst) evil. This is particularly true when religion is the point at issue. Progressives cry out that fundamentalism is growing rapidly and nonbelief is stigmatized. They point out that politics has turned toward the right, supported by mega-churches and mobilized orthodox believers. Conservatives endlessly denounce what they see as an increasingly skeptical and relativistic society. Major universities, media companies, and elite institutions are heavily secular, they say, and they control the culture.

Which is it? Is skepticism or faith on the ascendancy in the world today? The answer is Yes. The enemies are both right. Skepticism, fear, and anger toward traditional religion are growing in

power and influence. But at the same time, robust, orthodox belief in the traditional faiths is growing as well.

The non-churchgoing population in the United States and Europe is steadily increasing.¹ The number of Americans answering “no religious preference” to poll questions has skyrocketed, having doubled or even tripled in the last decade.² A century ago most U.S. universities shifted from a formally Christian foundation to an overtly secular one.³ As a result, those with traditional religious beliefs have little foothold in any of the institutions of cultural power. But even as more and more people identify themselves as having “no religious preference,” certain churches with supposedly obsolete beliefs in an infallible Bible and miracles are growing in the United States and exploding in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Even in much of Europe, there is some growth in church attendance.⁴ And despite the secularism of most universities and colleges, religious faith is growing in some corners of academia. It is estimated that 10 to 25 percent of all the teachers and professors of philosophy in the country are orthodox Christians, up from less than 1 percent just thirty years ago.⁵ Prominent academic Stanley Fish may have had an eye on that trend when he reported, “When Jacques Derrida died [in November 2004] I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.”⁶

In short, the world is polarizing over religion. It is getting both more religious and less religious at the same time. There was once a confident belief that secular European countries were the harbingers for the rest of the world. Religion, it was thought, would thin out from its more robust, supernaturalist forms or die out altogether. But the theory that technological advance-

ment brings inevitable secularization is now being scrapped or radically rethought.⁷ Even Europe may not face a secular future, with Christianity growing modestly and Islam growing exponentially.

The Two Camps

I speak from an unusual vantage point on this two-edged phenomenon. I was raised in a mainline Lutheran church in eastern Pennsylvania. When I reached my teens in the early 1960s, the time came for me to attend confirmation class, a two-year course that covered Christian beliefs, practices, and history. Its aim was to bring young people into a fuller understanding of the faith, so they could publicly commit to it. My teacher for the first year was a retired minister. He was quite traditional and conservative, speaking often of the danger of hell and the need for great faith. In the second year of the course, however, the instructor was a new, young cleric just out of seminary. He was a social activist and was filled with deep doubts about traditional Christian doctrine. It was almost like being instructed in two different religions. In the first year, we stood before a holy, just God whose wrath could only be turned aside at great effort and cost. In the second year, we heard of a spirit of love in the universe, who mainly required that we work for human rights and the liberation of the oppressed. The main question I wanted to ask our instructors was, “Which one of you is lying?” But fourteen-year-olds are not so bold, and I just kept my mouth shut.

My family later found its way to a more conservative church in a small Methodist denomination. For several years this strengthened what could be called the “Hellfire Layer” of my religious formation, although the pastor and people there were personally

as gentle as could be. Then I went off to one of those fine, liberal, smaller universities in the Northeast, which quickly began to throw water on the hellfire in my imagination.

The history and philosophy departments were socially radicalized and were heavily influenced by the neo-Marxist critical theory of the Frankfurt School. In 1968, this was heady stuff. The social activism was particularly attractive, and the critique of American bourgeoisie society was compelling, but its philosophical underpinnings were confusing to me. I seemed to see two camps before me, and there was something radically wrong with both of them. The people most passionate about social justice were moral relativists, while the morally upright didn't seem to care about the oppression going on all over the world. I was emotionally drawn to the former path—what young person wouldn't be? Liberate the oppressed and sleep with who you wanted! But I kept asking the question, "If morality is relative, why isn't social justice as well?" This seemed to be a blatant inconsistency in my professors and their followers. Yet now I saw the stark contradiction in the traditional churches. How could I turn back to the kind of orthodox Christianity that supported segregation in the South and apartheid in South Africa? Christianity began to seem very unreal to me, though I was unable to discern a viable alternative way of life and thought.

I didn't know it at the time, but this spiritual "unreality" stemmed from three barriers that lay across my path. During my college years, these three barriers eroded and my faith became vital and life-affecting. The first barrier was an intellectual one. I was confronted with a host of tough questions about Christianity: "What about other religions? What about evil and suffering? How could a loving God judge and punish? Why believe any-

thing at all?” I began to read books and arguments on both sides of these issues and slowly but surely, Christianity began to make more and more sense. The rest of this book lays out why I still think so.

The second barrier was an interior, personal one. As a child, the plausibility of a faith can rest on the authority of others, but when we reach adulthood there is a need for personal, firsthand experience as well. While I had “said my prayers” for years, and while I sometimes had that inspirational, aesthetic sense of wonder at the sight of a sea or mountain, I had never experienced God’s presence personally. This required not so much knowledge of techniques for prayer, but a process in which I came to grips with my own needs, flaws, and problems. It was painful, and was, as is typical, triggered by disappointments and failures. It would take another, different kind of book to go into them. But it needs to be said that faith-journeys are never simply intellectual exercises.

The third barrier was a social one. I desperately needed to find a “third camp,” a group of Christians who had a concern for justice in the world but who grounded it in the nature of God rather than in their own subjective feelings. When I found that “band of brothers”—and sisters (just as important!)—things began to change for me. These three barriers did not come down quickly or in any set order. Rather they were intertwined and dependent on one another. I did not work through them in any methodical way. It’s only in hindsight that I see how the three factors worked together. Because I was always looking for that third camp, I became interested in shaping and initiating new Christian communities. That meant the ministry, so I entered it just a few years after college.

The View from Manhattan

In the late 1980s, my wife, Kathy, and I moved to Manhattan with our three young sons to begin a new church for a largely non-churchgoing population. During the research phase I was told by almost everyone that it was a fool's errand. Church meant moderate or conservative; the city was liberal and edgy. Church meant families; New York City was filled with young singles and "nontraditional" households. Church most of all meant belief, but Manhattan was the land of skeptics, critics, and cynics. The middle class, the conventional market for a church, was fleeing the city because of crime and rising costs. That left the sophisticated and hip, the wealthy and the poor. Most of these people just laugh at the idea of church, I was told. Congregations in the city were dwindling, most struggling to even maintain their buildings.

Many of my early contacts said that the few congregations that had maintained a following had done so by adapting traditional Christian teaching to the more pluralistic ethos of the city. "Don't tell people they *have* to believe in Jesus—that's considered narrow-minded here." They were incredulous when I explained that the beliefs of the new church would be the orthodox, historic tenets of Christianity—the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the necessity of spiritual regeneration (the new birth)—all doctrines considered hopelessly dated by the majority of New Yorkers. Nobody ever said "fuggedaboutit" out loud, but it always hung in the air.

Nevertheless, we launched Redeemer Presbyterian Church, and by the end of 2007 it had grown to more than 5,000 attendees and had spawned more than a dozen daughter congregations in the immediate metropolitan area. The church is quite multi-ethnic and young (average age about thirty) and is more than

two-thirds single. Meanwhile, dozens of other similarly orthodox-believing congregations have sprung up in Manhattan and hundreds of others throughout the four other boroughs. One survey showed that in the last several years more than a hundred churches had been started in New York City by Christians from Africa alone. We were as stunned by this as anyone.

New York isn't alone. In the fall of 2006 *The Economist* ran a story with the subtitle "Christianity is collapsing everywhere but London." The crux of the article was that despite the fact that church attendance and profession of the Christian faith was plummeting across Britain and Europe, many young professionals (and new immigrants) in London were flocking to evangelical churches.⁸ That is exactly what I've seen here.

This leads to a strange conclusion. We have come to a cultural moment in which both skeptics and believers feel their existence is threatened because both secular skepticism and religious faith are on the rise in significant, powerful ways. We have neither the Western Christendom of the past nor the secular, religionless society that was predicted for the future. We have something else entirely.

A Divided Culture

Three generations ago, most people inherited rather than chose their religious faith. The great majority of people belonged to one of the historic, mainline Protestant churches or the Roman Catholic Church. Today, however, the now-dubbed "old-line" Protestant churches of cultural, inherited faith are aging and losing members rapidly. People are opting instead for a nonreligious life, for a noninstitutional, personally constructed spirituality, or for orthodox, high-commitment religious groups that expect members to have a conversion experience. Therefore the popula-

tion is paradoxically growing both more religious and less religious at once.

Because doubt and belief are each on the rise, our political and public discourse on matters of faith and morality has become deadlocked and deeply divided. The culture wars are taking a toll. Emotions and rhetoric are intense, even hysterical. Those who believe in God and Christianity are out to “impose their beliefs on the rest of us” and “turn back the clock” to a less enlightened time. Those who don’t believe are “enemies of truth” and “purveyors of relativism and permissiveness.” We don’t reason with the other side; we only denounce.

We have an impasse between the strengthening forces of doubt and belief, and this won’t be solved simply by calling for more civility and dialogue. Arguments depend on having commonly held reference points that both sides can hold each other to. When fundamental understandings of reality conflict, it is hard to find anything to which to appeal. The title of Alasdair MacIntyre’s book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* says it all. Our problems are not going away soon.

How can we find a way forward?

First, each side should accept that *both* religious belief *and* skepticism are on the rise. Atheist author Sam Harris and Religious Right leader Pat Robertson should each admit the fact that his particular tribe is strong and increasing in influence. This would eliminate the self-talk that is rampant in each camp, namely that it will soon be extinct, overrun by the opposition. Nothing like that is imminently possible. If we stopped saying such things to ourselves it might make everyone more civil and generous toward opposing views.

Such an admission is not only reassuring, but also humbling. There are still many of a secular turn of mind who confidently

say orthodox faith is vainly trying to “resist the tide of history,” though there is no historical evidence that religion is dying out at all. Religious believers should also be much less dismissive of secular skepticism. Christians should reflect on the fact that such large sectors of our formerly largely Christian societies have turned their backs on faith. Surely that should lead to self-examination. The time for making elegant dismissive gestures toward the other side is past. Something more is now required. But what?

A Second Look at Doubt

I want to make a proposal that I have seen bear much fruit in the lives of young New Yorkers over the years. I recommend that each side look at *doubt* in a radically new way.

Let’s begin with believers. A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person’s faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.

Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts—not only their own but their friends’ and neighbors’. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And, just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, to respect and understand those who doubt.

But even as believers should learn to look for reasons behind their faith, skeptics must learn to look for a type of faith hidden within their reasoning. All doubts, however skeptical and cynical they may seem, are really a set of alternate beliefs.⁹ You cannot doubt Belief A except from a position of faith in Belief B. For example, if you doubt Christianity because “There can’t be just *one* true religion,” you must recognize that this statement is itself an act of faith. No one can prove it empirically, and it is not a universal truth that everyone accepts. If you went to the Middle East and said, “There can’t be just one true religion,” nearly everyone would say, “Why not?” The reason you doubt Christianity’s Belief A is because you hold unprovable Belief B. Every doubt, therefore, is based on a leap of faith.

Some people say, “I don’t believe in Christianity because I can’t accept the existence of moral absolutes. Everyone should determine moral truth for him- or herself.” Is that a statement they can prove to someone who doesn’t share it? No, it is a leap of faith, a deep belief that individual rights operate not only in the political sphere but also in the moral. There is no empirical proof for such a position. So the doubt (of moral absolutes) is a leap.

Some will respond to all this, “My doubts are not based on a leap of faith. I have no beliefs about God one way or another. I simply feel no need for God and I am not interested in thinking about it.” But hidden beneath this feeling is the very modern American belief that the existence of God is a matter of indifference unless it intersects with my emotional needs. The speaker is betting his or her life that no God exists who would hold you accountable for your beliefs and behavior if you didn’t feel the need for him. That may be true or it may not be true, but, again, it is quite a leap of faith.¹⁰

The only way to doubt Christianity rightly and fairly is to dis-

cern the alternate belief under each of your doubts and then to ask yourself what reasons you have for believing it. How do you know your belief is true? It would be inconsistent to require more justification for Christian belief than you do for your own, but that is frequently what happens. In fairness you must doubt your doubts. My thesis is that if you come to recognize the beliefs on which your doubts about Christianity are based, and if you seek as much proof for those beliefs as you seek from Christians for theirs—you will discover that your doubts are not as solid as they first appeared.

I commend two processes to my readers. I urge skeptics to wrestle with the unexamined “blind faith” on which skepticism is based, and to see how hard it is to justify those beliefs to those who do not share them. I also urge believers to wrestle with their personal and culture’s objections to the faith. At the end of each process, even if you remain the skeptic or believer you have been, you will hold your own position with both greater clarity and greater humility. Then there will be an understanding, sympathy, and respect for the other side that did not exist before. Believers and nonbelievers will rise to the level of disagreement rather than simply denouncing one another. This happens when each side has learned to represent the other’s argument in its strongest and most positive form. Only then is it safe and fair to disagree with it. That achieves civility in a pluralistic society, which is no small thing.

A Spiritual Third Way?

The rest of this book is a distillation of the many conversations I’ve had with doubters over the years. In both my preaching and personal interactions I’ve tried to respectfully help skeptics look at their own faith-foundations while at the same time laying bare

my own to their strongest criticisms. In the first half of this volume we will review the seven biggest objections and doubts about Christianity I've heard from people over the years. I will respectfully discern the alternate beliefs beneath each of them. Then in the second half of the book we will examine the reasons underlying Christian beliefs.

Respectful dialogue between entrenched traditional conservative and secular liberal people is a great good, and I hope this book will promote it. But my experience as a pastor in New York has given me another incentive to write this volume. As soon as I arrived in New York I realized that the faith and doubt situation was not what the experts thought it was. Older white people who ran the cultural business of the city definitely were quite secular. But among the increasingly multiethnic younger professionals and the working-class immigrants there was a lush, category-defying variety of strong religious beliefs. And Christianity, in particular, was growing rapidly among them.

I think these younger Christians are the vanguard of some major new religious, social, and political arrangements that could make the older form of culture wars obsolete. After they wrestle with doubts and objections to Christianity many come out on the other side with an orthodox faith that doesn't fit the current categories of liberal Democrat or conservative Republican. Many see both sides in the "culture war" making individual freedom and personal happiness the ultimate value rather than God and the common good. Liberals' individualism comes out in their views of abortion, sex, and marriage. Conservatives' individualism comes out in their deep distrust of the public sector and in their understanding of poverty as simply a failure of personal responsibility. The new, fast-spreading multiethnic orthodox Christianity in the cities is much more concerned about the poor

and social justice than Republicans have been, and at the same time much more concerned about upholding classic Christian moral and sexual ethics than Democrats have been.

While the first half of the book lays out a pathway that many of these Christians have taken through doubt, the second half of the book is a more positive exposition of the faith they are living out in the world. Here are three people at the church now.

June was a graduate of an Ivy League university, living and working in Manhattan. She became so obsessed with her physical image that she developed eating disorders and substance addictions. She came to see that she was heading for self-destruction, but she also realized that she had no particular reason to stop being reckless with her life. After all, what did her life mean? Why not be self-destructive? She turned to church and sought an understanding of God's mercy and an experience of his reality. She saw a counselor at the church who helped her draw a connection between the mercy of God and her seemingly inexhaustible need for acceptance. Finally she had the confidence to seek an encounter with God himself. Though she can't pinpoint one moment, she came to feel, for the first time, "unconditionally loved as a true daughter of God." Gradually she received freedom from her self-destructive behavior.

Jeffrey was a New York City musician, raised in a conservative Jewish home. Both his father and mother suffered terribly with cancer, his mother succumbing to it. Because of a variety of physical ailments from his

youth, he took up the practice of Chinese healing arts, along with Taoist and Buddhist meditation, and became extremely focused on physical wellness. He was in no state of “spiritual need” when a friend began taking him to Redeemer. He liked the sermons “until that Jesus business came around at the end” at which point he’d stop listening. Soon, however, he became somewhat jealous of his Christian friends’ joy and hope for the future that he had not encountered before. Then he began listening to the ends of the sermons and realizing they posed an intellectual challenge that he had not wanted to face. Finally, to his surprise, during his times of meditation he discovered his “moments of normally pure quiet and stillness were constantly interrupted by visions of Jesus on the cross.” He began to pray to the Christian God, and soon he realized that his dominant life narrative had been the escape and total avoidance of suffering. Now he saw how futile such a life goal was. When he understood that Jesus had surrendered his physical health and life to save the world—and him—it moved him deeply. He saw a way to get the courage to face the inevitable suffering of the future, and to know there would be a path through it. He embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Kelly was an Ivy League atheist. As a twelve-year-old, Kelly watched her grandfather die of cancer and her two-year-old sister undergo surgery, chemo, and radiation therapy for a brain tumor. By the time she was an

undergraduate at Columbia University, she had lost hope that life had any meaning to it. Several of her Christian friends at college spoke to her of their faith, but she was “rocky soil for the seeds” of their testimonies. However, when her sister had a stroke and was paralyzed at the age of fourteen, it moved her not to give up on God but to begin more deliberate searching. By then she was living and working in the city. She met her future husband, Kevin, also a Columbia grad and an atheist, who was working on Wall Street with J. P. Morgan. Their doubts about God were very stubborn, and yet they had doubts about their doubts, and so they began attending Redeemer. Their pilgrimage toward faith was slow and painstaking. One of the things that kept them on the trail, however, was the large number of believing Christians they met that were every bit as sophisticated and smart as anyone else they’d met in the city. Finally they were not only convinced of Christianity’s intellectual credibility, but were attracted by its vision for life. Kelly wrote, “As an atheist I thought I lived a moral, community-oriented, concerned-with-social-justice kind of life, but Christianity had an even higher standard—down to our thoughts and the state of our hearts. I accepted God’s forgiveness and invited him into my life.” Kevin wrote, “While sitting in a coffee shop reading C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, I put down the book and wrote in my notebook ‘the evidence surrounding the claims of Christianity is simply overwhelming.’ I realized that my achievements were ultimately unsatisfying, the

approval of man is fleeting, that a *carpe diem* life lived solely for adventure is just a form of narcissism and idolatry. And so I became a believer in Christ.”¹¹

Jesus and Our Doubts

Kelly’s account recalls how, as a struggler with doubt and faith, the passage about Thomas in the New Testament was a comfort to her. There Jesus modeled a view of doubt more nuanced than those of either modern skeptics or modern believers. When Jesus confronted “doubting Thomas” he challenged him not to acquiesce in doubt (“believe!”) and yet responded to his request for more evidence. In another incident, Jesus meets a man who confesses that he is filled with doubts (Mark 9:24), who says to Jesus, “Help thou my unbelief”—help me with my doubts! In response to this honest admission, Jesus blesses him and heals his son. Whether you consider yourself a believer or a skeptic, I invite you to seek the same kind of honesty and to grow in an understanding of the nature of your own doubts. The result will exceed anything you can imagine.