

Faith as Doubting Belief: A personal reflection

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Abstract: This paper is a personal reflection revealing the author's ideas of faith and belief to have previously been inadequate as they have focussed on believing in particular certainties, even when this way of thinking about faith proved self-destructive. The context for this way of approaching faith is the first few years of ministry in an Anglican/ Episcopalian church, which led to the author abandoning ministry for a number of years. The ideas of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and others are used to demonstrate that faith is more about a direction and less about certainties. The essay also proposes that the fundamental content of faith is action, often taken because of the ability to doubt accepted norms. On this basis, doubt is a useful element of true faith and good ministry. Faith is not something fixed but something that moves and develops. This is found to be of more practical use than lists of items to be believed as 'true.'

Introduction

This essay is a personal reflection on ideas of doubt and certainty in my own faith, both from a religious, spiritual point of view and from a personal, psychological point of view. My personal situation largely prevented the proper exploration of my religious doubt when it would have been most useful and yet this essay is an attempt to carry out that reflection now, some years later, in the hope that it may be useful to myself and to others. In order to set the scene, this personal reflection occupies the first (and shortest) section of this essay, although it continues at pertinent moments throughout the rest of the essay and is only completed in the conclusion. After the personal reflection has begun, I build on the ideas brought to light by examining what others have said, more eloquently than I, on these issues.

Most of this is guided by Wilfred Cantwell Smith's work on faith and belief, but other theologians, including those who disagree with Smith, are also examined. There is a sense in which this is an essay written to myself, in order to bear witness to myself and to work out my own thoughts. Others are welcome to read, on the understanding that any conclusions I reach are probably somewhat provisional. Indeed, it may be that in this life this topic can only ever be provisional. However, in the conclusion I do reach some suggestions about the way in which faith and doubt can be viewed that I hope will be of use to others as well as to myself.

A personal experience of doubt

As a curate in the Church of England in a collection of twelve rural parishes, the aspect of my life I struggled with most of all was what I thought was the weight of the expectation to have faith. I did not have sufficient faith. Reflecting on this time now, some years later, it seems that it was not faith that was the real issue, but rather a lack of certainty. That is borne out by the fact that just two weeks before I ceased to work for the church or to celebrate its rites for some years, I was deeply involved in bringing someone to the Christian faith. I myself had no idea what faith I had left at this point nor what any of it meant, but could still see that faith was a good, even enviable, way of life. Maybe I was living vicariously through this new convert, hoping they could live a life I could not live. Maybe my involvement was from selfish motivations. Maybe, but I think not. I think I still had faith and hoped that others could have it too. Only a few close friends in the congregations knew that I was not going on to another Church job; I wanted everyone's faith to be kept intact and had no wish to damage it. But I had had too much experience of two aspects of

the Church, one of which had (wrongly) demonstrated to me that certainty was necessary for faith and the other of which had (again wrongly) demonstrated that self-loathing, or at least extreme self-doubt, was also a requirement. I will unpack this in a brief way below.

It is striking to look at the sermons I preached whilst in my curacy. They morph over time from probing investigations that invite the congregation to do most of the work themselves into messages preached with certainty. Why I made this transition is not all that clear. It seems likely that this was because I felt, wrongly or rightly, that this is how I was expected to preach by my superiors, maybe also by some in the congregation. However it happened, I was aware that I became increasingly detached from what I preached, increasingly less convinced by what I was saying. But I also felt unable to voice my doubts, my uncertainties, partly because I never felt confident to do so for fear of being removed from post as unfaithful (either through official channels or through more subtle pressure) and partly because I had no wish to damage the faith of those I perceived to be the more faithful. Thus I was stuck in a loop of increasing difficulty, having to preach with certainty and to be certain in other, non-preaching situations, whilst also becoming more and more aware of my dishonesty in so doing.

The second issue I struggled with is also about faith and doubt, but rather than being about religious faith and doubt *per se*, it is about personal faith and doubt, faith and doubt in myself. This is a little harder to pin down than the issues relating to my preaching and other certain interactions. This is less about what I was feeling in an immediate sense and more about the secondary reflections I made about not wanting to be cast into a particular mould. Three instances with superiors in the

diocese are emblematic of this. There was a situation where one of my superiors in the diocese had a complete breakdown in a meeting. He was chairing the meeting and the entire meeting came to revolve around him breaking down in tears. There is not really a problem with this. People have bad days. But this happened repeatedly and the message, confirmed by him outside of the meetings, was that vulnerability like this was of vital importance in the work of a priest. I did not see it as vulnerability but as self-indulgent and 'Pollyanna-ish.' It was, and here I *was* certain, not a way of life I wanted to live. At least, my superior was not demonstrative of the sort of person I wanted to be. Second, and briefly because the points arising from it are echoed in the third instance, there was the occasion of a layman setting up a home group. This was met with horror by one of my superiors. He called me to his study where he asked me what I thought of it. I was positive. I was kept for some while being asked different things about the home group. It was only when I lied through my teeth and said it was a bad idea, would go wrong and we, the clergy, would have to pick up the pieces that the interview was at a close and I could continue my day. Third, the same individual accused me of sending pornography to his computer, via an email. The implication was that I was a sinful user of pornography and had also been stupid in sending an email containing these images. What had actually happened was that I had sent an image of one of our church events. When my superior had downloaded it, he had seen the image, then clicked 'next' and it had taken him to pictures already on his hard drive. I had no difficulty in imagining where the images had come from. It was a shared computer and he had a teenage son. As it was, although I denied sending pornography, he was only grudgingly convinced. I never received one word of apology and I always felt under suspicion. Although always

sure of my own positive nature and, although a sinner, sure of my innocence with respect to the pornography charges, these and other similar instances were very wearing. None of this was what I had signed up for and I doubted I could continue to serve the Church.

In all of my personal difficulties ostensibly with faith and doubt, it seems that my difficulties were never with faith and doubt as such. On the one hand, my difficulty was with trying to have the type of faith I thought I was expected to have and, on the other hand, with fighting against the person that, rightly or wrongly, I felt others were trying to mould me into. My mistake all along was to try to live a falsely certain faith rather living the faith I had. But this mistake was, I think, made more possible by feeling the pressure of expectation to be a particular sort of person. As deviation from this mode of being was not acceptable, I never felt able to deviate from my trajectory of increasingly certain, yet false, faith. And what is more, I had nowhere to take my doubts.

Applying Smith's ideas of faith and belief

According to Smith, one of the problems that modern day religion faces, even if it is unaware that it faces it, is that there is a lack of awareness about what the word 'belief' means. This is particularly true for the Christian world, especially with the prevalence of English translations of the Bible. The word 'belief' in the English Bible is no longer an adequate translation of the concept of those who wrote the text.

Smith suggests that there are three modern usages of 'belief.' First, it may be used in the sense of a person reporting that another recognises a particular fact. Second, it may imply that one is of the opinion that a particular fact is the case. Third, it may

mean that one imagines a particular fact to be true. The differences are subtle but important. In the first instance, recognition of a fact, both those reporting and those believing are certain that the fact in question is correct. By contrast, the second possibility, opinion about the veracity of a fact, implies that there is a large measure of doubt on the part of the person reporting the fact and possibly also on the part of the person said to hold that opinion (although this is not necessarily the case). The third possibility, of imagining a fact, implies that the person reporting the belief is sure that it is incorrect, fanciful even. Smith contends that belief used to imply recognition but has come to imply opinion or even an imagining.¹ To suggest that the Bible's authors hoped people would come to hold a certain opinion about God makes a mockery of them.² No. They hoped people would recognise the truth they had also seen, that this would have an existential impact upon people's lives. The modern meaning of 'belief' as opinion, Smith contends, has no place in an honest translation of the Bible, possibly with the single exception of the 'belief' of demons in God found in the letter of James.³ In the Bible it is only here, with the demons, that head and heart are not linked, that belief is opinion only.

Applying Smith to my own situation is instructive. It appears that if 'belief' is a word that could be applied to me, it was more in the sense of the demonic experience of head and heart not being linked. There was a time when they were, but head and heart certainly became decoupled. I did indeed begin to talk about beliefs in an abstracted sense and failed to live what I talked about. A brief note is

¹ These three meanings of 'belief' outlined and explained in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 116-121 and his, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, Washington: OneWorld, 1998, 76ff (First published as *Belief and History* by Virginia University Press in 1977).

² Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 77f.

needed about my greatest joy in ministry, which is to stand at the altar with a congregation gathered in the church and to say the mass. It is difficult to pin down exactly why this is such a joy, but I think it is to do with it being a form of ecstatic experience. Ecstatic in the rather precise Study of Religions sense in that it is a form of worship which I find moves me beyond myself. Amongst other things, there is a distinct sense of presence at the Eucharist, the presence experienced by the faithful in the bread in the wine and the presence of the priest at the altar in some way representing Christ in the form of an icon. It is a unique privilege to be able to stand as an icon of the divine, and, in part, that is why it is ecstatic. The priest is fully engaged in conducting the service and yet is also a worshipper, attending at the table of the divine priest. My difficulties with faith and doubt, religious and personal, made me lose the sense of being a worshipper. As such I was just a person standing in funny clothes and acting a part. I did not feel I was representing Christ and believed myself to be fraud. In truth, I think I was right. Hopefully not for all time, but certainly then, at that time, heart and head were very clearly not connecting. Demonic belief was the best that was on offer.

Smith points out that in the Bible πιστις (faith) and its derivatives are usually used without an explicit object. People are said simply to have (or not to have) faith. This is not usually 'faith in God' or 'faith in Christ' but 'faith' as a category sufficient in itself. This suggests that even the life-changing (at least life-informing) belief (at least in so far as it is usually used in the modern world) is different from πιστις in and of itself.⁴ To the nature of πιστις itself, we shall return presently.

⁴ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 127.

Although not identical, faith and belief are inextricably linked. Smith suggests that corporately held beliefs and systems of belief are the place in which an individual's faith develops, whether in support of the general scheme of belief or in opposition to it. However, Smith is at great pains to point out that faith is not belief. Moreover, apart from a brief period in recent Western history, Smith holds that 'no serious and careful religious thinker has ever held that it was.'⁵ For most of history, the words 'I believe' have been essentially a declaration of faith, but of belief only in very general, overarching terms. 'I believe' once spoke more of the commitment and engagement of the individual who uttered the phrase than of the specifics of what was or was not believed. In general, today, phrases such as 'he believes' or 'they believe' are more common than the phrase 'I believe' and indicate a particular set of specific facts believed in (or perceived to be believed in) by the individuals who are the subject of the comment. 'I believe' still usually indicates that what follows is not so much a list of specific facts, but a declaration of commitment to and engagement with a particular tradition (or, conceivably, an amalgamation of several traditions).⁶ In my case, I had come to assume very much (although more in practice than in principle) that the list of precise beliefs constituted that to which assent was to be given. But this was my demonic application of 'believe' and 'belief.' Another way of saying this is that as I acted the part, the consciousness of my so acting made it clear that the beliefs were abstracted rather than being lived.

As indicated a moment ago, the NT lists relatively few specifics after the verb πιστεωω, πιστις appearing more often as a concept in and of itself. Smith examines a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, chap. 6 and Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, Chap. 2.

number of Christian theologians from history and time after time finds that faith and belief are not thought of as being identical. Even where the individual in question was aware (vividly at least) only of the Christian instance of faith and belief, the two are not equated. Aquinas, for example, saw the specifics of Christian belief (as he knew them) to be a factual expression of universal truths about how the world was. However, for Aquinas, faith was commitment to those facts of belief at a level beyond the intellectual agreement with their veracity. The type of knowledge available to the highly trained intellectual (theological exposition of the specifics of belief) was, for Aquinas, a lesser form of knowledge than that of faith. Furthermore, he had no difficulty in thinking of another's beliefs as wrong whilst simultaneously admitting to their faithfulness as a Christian.⁷ Very much in agreement with Smith, though almost two thousand years before him, Clement of Alexandria commented that 'Sensation is the ladder to Knowledge; while Faith, advancing over the pathway of the objects of sense, leaves Opinion behind, and speeds to things free of deception, and reposes in the truth.'⁸ Christian tradition seems to be asserting that faith and belief have always been linked, but they are not the same. Faith is related to the testimonies of the Christian faith, but moves above and beyond these. Clement's comments in particular bring home the idea that to grasp too much to the idea of knowledge or opinion (both being types of belief) is to miss the path of faith.

Knitter finds ideas such as Smith's about faith and belief attractive but also somewhat flawed. When considering (from a Christian point of view) the theological

⁷ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 78-91. See also Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002, chap. 11.

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, II.4. Quoted as the 'Patristic Reading' in the *American Theological Inquiry*, 5 (1), 2012, 1f.

question of the scope of salvation it is attractive to suppose that the same measure of faith can exist in very different places leading to very different expressions of that faith. Maybe this can be stretched to include Buddhists, Muslims, atheists and all humanity. It is not necessary for a person with one expression to diminish the faith of another, even if they do not understand their expression. Knitter cautions that from this line of reasoning arises the danger, at least in popular thought, of assuming all religions to be the same. 'External forms of religion *do* affect the way the universe is experienced' and 'certain beliefs and norms may provide a more adequate image of deity or a more relevant morality than other beliefs or norms.'⁹ Knitter encourages Christianity to be open to extensive dialogue with other traditions, but never to close off the possibility that Christianity is indeed the best way of understanding the transcendent.¹⁰ Indeed, in a globalised world, such dialogue is crucial for Christianity's development. Nevertheless, Christ can still be viewed as unique and Christianity can still be pluralistic in terms of salvation whilst affirming its self-belief as a better way of understanding God than other religious traditions.¹¹ Knitter does not therefore go as far as Smith in suggesting the fundamental equality of faith across the world, but nor does he insist, as Rahner does, that all those who are saved are saved by Christ and as Christians, albeit anonymous ones.¹²

⁹ Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards World Religions*, London: SCM Press, 1985, 50-4, quotation from 52. Italics in original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Chs. 9 and 10.

¹¹ Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1996, 98-101.

¹² Rahner says that 'to be a Christian is simply to be a human being, and one who also knows that this life which he is living, and which he is consciously living, can also be lived even by a person who is not a Christian explicitly and does not know in a reflexive way that he is a Christian.' See Karl Rahner, (translated by William V. Dych), *Foundations of the Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, NY: Crossroad, 1989, 430.

Knitter certainly makes a valid comment about the way in which Smith's ideas could descend into pure relativism where everything is the same and nothing is preferred. Whether or not Smith himself saw this danger, he was not one such relativist, continuing to identify himself as a Christian. However, there are points at which Smith comes very close to this. He began his academic work with the study of Islam, which he admitted he used to consider as a defined 'religion.' However, in the process of living amongst Muslims and of considering their participation in their faith, he came to realise that it was almost impossible to specify exactly what any individual believed. Whilst it was easy enough to answer the question of 'what Islam had been' what 'Islam is' (now) is far harder to ascertain.¹³ Even if it were possible to give a complete definition of all that Islam has been, this is still not enough to tell us what it is today. The claim by the religious person is that:

religion is a response to a divine initiative. Islam has been a human activity, and even the Muslim's ideal of Islam has been an evolving human vision. Islam has not been a purely human activity, since it would not have been what it has been at any given moment if those involved in it had not at that moment seen more in it than that; and yet, for all that, it has been human, and an activity. Islam has been something that people do. And since those people have all been different, and living in varying places and times, it has been variegated and dynamic, a living tradition. [It is] fluid, imperfect, creative, dynamic.¹⁴

In other words, the fact of the human element in all religion and the fact that humans perceive their participation within religious traditions as being a response to some Transcendent Other means that religion always evades precise definition in its

¹³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'Participation: The Changing Christian Role' in Willard G. Oxtoby (Ed.), *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, NY: Harper Forum, 1976, 117-37, 118f.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 120

most current form. It is an ever-evolving response, reactive both to the Transcendent Other (whether or not conceptualised as 'Divinity') and to the mundane facts of human life and experience. As indicated above, in the modern world, one of those mundane facts is the interaction by a believer with people of many different faiths and with those of none at all. This has always been the case for some believers in some parts of the world, but it is far more universally the case now than ever before. In this, people who designate themselves as Christians will not stop being Christians, nor will those calling themselves Hindus become Jewish or Muslim (although a few from each religion may indeed change their self-perceived religious affiliation). However, in the modern world, the interaction of people from different traditions means that those traditions have far more mutual effect upon one another's present and future content than has been the case in the past. For good or ill, there is a sense in which humanity is now one religious community, or is at least on its way to becoming so. Traditions of belief will not stop existing and will not fuse as such, but cannot help but be influenced by one another.¹⁵ Thus Smith himself avoids the relativism that Knitter worried about. Religious traditions are dynamic and 'Islam' or 'Sikhism' should be thought of only as shorthand for the dynamic process of continually becoming as authentically Muslim or Sikh as a believer (or maybe a 'faither'?) can contrive to be, right now, and then tomorrow, and then the next day.

All of this puts some of my own issues of faith and doubt experienced during my curacy into some sort of perspective. However real my feelings were around the need to only interiorise my doubts and the perceived need to avoid voicing these,

¹⁵ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, chaps. 6 and 7 and Smith, 'Participation,' 136f.

there was a category error at the heart of all this, in that I had made a false assumption that belief was essentially a quasi-factual proposition to which the church required assent. What is required instead is a commitment to a path, something dynamic and changing rather than a fixed point. In this model, faith itself is a type pilgrimage. But this pilgrimage cannot reach the final destination in this life, apart maybe from brief mystical experiences in which the ultimate goal is glimpsed. In the waking and non-mystical life, to reach 'the goal' is to stultify, becoming faithless through the ascription of the title 'the Ultimate' to that which is not ultimate, but a mere point on the path rather than its end.

The content of faith

Let us focus a little more on some arguments around the theory of faith and its content. As he has provided much guidance up to this point, we will begin with an attempt to distil Smith's ideas. 'All religions are new religions, every morning. For religions do not exist up in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished, and static; they exist in men's hearts.'¹⁶ This is rather the point of the belief-faith distinction. Faith is of the heart and of its very nature always eludes precise definition. For Smith, the highest and most accurate definition of the concept 'religion' is indeed 'the faith in men's hearts.'¹⁷ Two quotations from Smith's *Believing: An Historical Perspective* are in order here, although we will come to the second a few paragraphs hence. The first quotation demonstrates the point that Smith makes about the priority of faith over

¹⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?' in Willard G. Oxtoby (Ed.), *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, NY: Harper Forum, 1976, 138-157, 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 146f.

belief. It hints at faith as being akin to insight and more like Kuhn's paradigms¹⁸ than the particulars (beliefs) which may exist within them:

The Christian movement arose not as a body of persons who believed that Jesus was the Christ, but as an upsurge of a new recognition in human history: a sudden new awareness of what humanity can be, is, all about; the dawning of a new insight into what had previously been called divine could, and should, be understood as meaning (God is not simply high and lifted up, in the sanctuary; He is a carpenter in a small town...); a new recognition of human potentialities, one's own, one's neighbours, the proletariat's, the drunkard's. Participants in this movement did not think that they believed anything. And while their new vision of the world and of themselves was articulated in quite an array of new conceptual symbols, I am not sure that an historian wishing to apprehend what was going on should concentrate on those symbols, except as clues to something much deeper and more personal. It is not what they believed that is significant, but the new faith that the belief-system gave a pattern to, and was generated by.¹⁹

Without the radical re-visioning of the faith of those who became the early Christians, no structure of beliefs would ever have arisen that could be called 'Christianity.' The faith of these early Christians was prior to the beliefs they held; the movement of the heart preceded that of the head. One point that Smith does not seem to consider explicitly at this juncture is that these early Christians were in an extremely privileged position *vis-à-vis* faith and belief. The generations of Christians who followed after the earliest days of the Christian movement were brought up

¹⁸ Kuhn's work on this subject describes a paradigm as a set of assumptions about the world around which everything else is built. In science, the results of experiments are all understood in terms of the assumptions made within the paradigm in operation. Paradigms themselves need to be destroyed and new ones built for science to move forward. This only happens occasionally, only when the existing paradigm is under great pressure from having to accommodate many difficult results. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 (third edition.).

¹⁹ Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, 87f.

within the head-structure (beliefs) which first arose from their forebears' heart-response (faith). Later generations have to come to the logically and meaningfully prior element of faith *via* the beliefs of others.

Hick, who is generally approving of Smith's thought, also had minor reservations about his tidy account of faith and belief. Hick places a slightly different nuance on the distinction between the two, finding Smith's account of faith too empty of content. Some 'positive judgement' must be made by the faithful individual of what it is they have faith in. For Hick, Smith's analysis is broadly correct, but he cannot draw quite such a tight distinction as Smith does between faith and belief.²⁰ Nonetheless, the distinction remains important for Hick. He makes use of a variant of this distinction when he notes that although theologies from different religious traditions can be contradictory, this is because 'these theologies describe different manifestations to humanity of the ultimate divine reality.'²¹ Smart's criticisms of Hick's ideas as being too theistic-centric brings him rather close to Smith. Smart simply points out the fact that theists and non-theists experience the 'ultimate' in different ways (he uses the terms 'dualist' and 'non-dualist'). These cannot necessarily be brought into complete harmony but may productively be held in tension. In this, Smart, like Smith, is putting the actual experiences of humans at the centre of his thought.²²

A second quotation from *Believing: An Historical Perspective* brings us full circle in that it expresses Smith's recognition of the validity of another's faith where

²⁰ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, esp. 158-162.

²¹ John Hick, 'Is Christianity the Only True Religion?' in *Theology*, CI: 803 (1998), 322-30, 327. Also see Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1973 (1993 reissue).

²² Ninian Smart, 'Our Experience of the Ultimate,' in *Religious Studies*, 20: 1 (1984), 19-26.

the specifics of belief (howsoever formulated as recognition, opinion or imagination) are very different from his own. This quotation eloquently expresses Smith's view of faith as a human activity which itself transcends any particular religious expression (Christian, Hindu, Muslim...):

If, as increasingly is becoming apparent, faith be a more or less universal quality – indeed, in some ways *the* final human quality –, then it is possible to re-read the New Testament in a new light. Christ came in order that men might have faith... The early Christians were unaware that other men and women in places of which they had never heard were finding faith through the Buddha, or in later centuries would find it in the Qur'an. All that they knew, and this they proclaimed, and in this they were right, was that they found it in Christ. And this news was so good that, in exultation and strength, with it they turned the world upside-down.²³

There is a sense in which this quotation answers Hick's criticism of Smith's thought. Hick wanted to be assured of some content to faith and here Smith allows for faith to be shaped and nurtured by context. For Christians, faith is very much found in their experience of Christ, so there is some content to specific faith. But, crucially, faith cannot be confined to any one religious tradition, far less to any particular set of beliefs within such a tradition. Faith may be nurtured by context, but, for Smith, faith is still a shared human experience across religious divides.²⁴

²³ Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, 93.

²⁴ This does not make 'all religions the same' but just recognises a shared human experience. If some authors make this sort of claim, it is not fair to suggest that Smith makes it. He allows Islam to be Islam and Hinduism to be Hinduism whilst recognising the fact that both (and all) traditions are composed of human beings in all their similarities and differences. Peter Donovan rehearses arguments against all religions being considered 'the same' in 'The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism,' in *Religious Studies*, 29: 2 (1993), 217-29 where Smith is mentioned in passing. Robert E. Florida makes this criticism specifically of Smith when he criticises him for apparently making Buddhists into theists in his 'Theism and Atheism in the Work of W. C. Smith: A Buddhist Case Study,' in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 10 (1990), 255-62. Smith protested that this was not what was intended but rather that he intended his work to encourage a move away from focusing on the question of theism or atheism and to move the focus of the study of religion to the question of faith. See Smith's 'Response to Robert E. Florida,' in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 10 (1990), 263-73.

Wainwright offers a critique of Smith's thought that is somewhat similar to our critique above, about the relationship of faith and belief in the early church *vis-à-vis* the later church. He comments that 'Faith is a human experience and no genuinely human experience is completely unarticulated. In particular, religious experience is not some kind of raw data or impression which is logically prior to any sort of conceptual articulation.'²⁵ In other words, Wainwright is arguing that Smith cannot truly separate out faith from belief because the only sort of faith available to a human is an articulated faith. Faith necessarily finds out what it believes and cannot, in fact, exist without finding this out. It is possible to offer a challenge to Wainwright not from philosophy, but rather from temperament. It is likely to be the case that there are people, maybe Wainwright is one of them, who find their faith most fully and most beautifully worked out through a precise analysis of what one does and does not believe. But there are others, and I include myself in this category, for whom this is not the case. Holloway talks about the idea of the 'maybe.'²⁶ This 'maybe' appears to become a sacred thing for Holloway. Although he seems very unsure of what he believes, no reader of his most recent book, *Leaving Alexandria*, can be left in doubt that here is a man of faith. It is painful and broken faith, but faith it is. The ability to stand on the edge of uncertainty and to resist the urge to claim certainty one way or the other, to paraphrase Holloway, seems to me a more eloquent expression of faith than the need to articulate what one believes or does not believe.

²⁵ William J. Wainwright, 'Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Faith and Belief,' in *Religious Studies*, 20 (3), 353-66, 357.

²⁶ Richard Holloway, *Leaving Alexandria*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012.

To return to Smith's words, already quoted above, 'All religions are new religions, every morning. For religions do not exist up in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished, and static; they exist in men's hearts.'²⁷ Faith is a movement of the heart. But a movement to what? From what? In the NT, *πιστις* exists often, as noted above, without an object. No object is necessary, no movement necessarily clearly defined. For faith is about transcendence. In faith, with faith, humans reach beyond that which they know in any objective sense towards that which they know they cannot fully know in any sense at all. Yet rather like love, although never fully known, faith can be seen in its effects.²⁸ For those who have faith, it is this reaching beyond that which is readily seen in the mundane that gives transcendent meaning to all things: 'a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.'²⁹ Although this may be a somewhat idealised vision of faith, if we cannot ever fully express it, this at least shows faith's essence. It also shows how different it is from belief. In making faith explicable, neat, delineated, belief necessarily makes it also mundane. But the mundane can neither capture nor contain the transcendent and thus belief never fully articulates faith, but only interprets, at best symbolically. That these symbols sometimes come to be thought of as ultimate truth in themselves and come to be equated with faith is to the detriment of religion in general and the detriment of erstwhile faithful humans in particular. Alas, notes Smith, since the rise of science and the objectification of truth, this has all too often been the case. It has led, amongst other things, to the modern, delineated idea of 'religions' based on

²⁷ Smith, 'Comparative Religion,' 142.

²⁸ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, NY: Mentor Books, 1964, 168f.

²⁹ Smith, *Believing: An Historical Perspective*, 93.

particular sets of codified beliefs. Religions themselves, even in the sense of cumulative tradition mentioned above, are a modern conceptual aberration from the historic norm. Once-upon-a-time such codifications were the exception rather than the rule.³⁰

It is for me very personally true that the experience of my curacy made faith mundane in that I felt expected to objectify ultimate truth in a clearly defined and delineated manner. I felt expected to give a good deal of content to a faith that ultimately seemed false. And this was not a truth affirming experience. Although I indicated above that I never felt I had a theologically 'safe space' to explore these issues, I must surely take the responsibility for not seeking out more of a safe space in which to do this. I should have tried harder on this point. Maybe I could have tried harder too, for in my heart of hearts, I knew that faith was about transcendence and that transcendence was far beyond the prescriptions and proscriptions of what I felt I was trapped in. This was clearly the case in the last few months of being a curate. Above, I alluded to the fact that was involved in a conversion in the last few weeks of being employed by the Church. The powerful moment of this was technically a breach of the Church's rules, when I gave communion to an individual who was not confirmed. Yet it was the transcendent nature of this small service, conducted just between the two of us in my living room that was a moment of turning around in her life and of reaching out to the divine, the Transcendent Other. One other occasion from these last few months was the private blessing of their relationship carried out for a homosexual couple. This was also a breach of the church's rules. But it was also a moment when it was possible to reach out and touch

³⁰ Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 44-7.

the Transcendent through a very simple and common human situation, given extra beauty and joy by the addition of a heartfelt religious, spiritual dimension. This more major departure from the church's rules on my part, just like my minor transgression over communion, felt truer than so many other things that I did, and certainly truer than the things I said. The reason for this seems obvious now. Both the communion service (which was a spontaneous suggestion from me) and the blessing (which was planned and was a request from them) were acts of the heart. They were faith in action. Action is the trust content of faith.

Conclusions: In praise of doubt

Throughout this essay, we have noted a number of agreements between Smith and other thinkers. About Smith's conceptualisation of faith and belief there is the ring of truth; it seems to be the way in which those of faith experience the world to be. It is certainly close to my experience, broken and inadequate though that may be. As we draw this essay to a close, it is worth quoting from Duffy who describes his experience of losing his faith and then finding it again in terms of realising the difference between faith and belief, and of realising the place that transcendence plays in faith.

...now I know that faith is a direction, not a state of mind; states of mind change and veer about, but we can hold a direction. It is not in its essence a set of beliefs *about* anything, although it involves such beliefs. It is a loving and grateful openness to the gift of being. The difference between a believer and a non-believer is not that the believer has one more item in his mind, in his universe. It is that the believer is convinced that reality is to be trusted, that in spite of appearances the world is very good. When we respond to that good, we are not responding to something we have invented, or projected.

Meaning is not at our beck and call, and neither is reality.
When we try to talk *about* that reality we find ourselves
talking *to* it, not in philosophy, but in adoration...³¹

Too often it is assumed that religion is to be equated with the codified list of beliefs that can be found in so many introductory textbooks. This is not to underestimate the value of such codifications for scholars in their studies or for the believer seeking guidance. Nevertheless, such lists are secondary. The guidance sought by a believer in consulting any codified list of beliefs will aim, I will be so bold as to say *should* aim, at something beyond the list. The aim will be to develop faith. Faith is, or at least should be, more important than belief both to scholar and to believer, for it is faith, not belief, which is the true heart of what it is to be 'religious.' It is with faith that believers ('fathers'?) really come to an understanding of the universe and their place within it. Thus, it is by studying faith that scholars will come to the deepest understanding of how believers see themselves and the world and of what any particular religion actually is. Humanity, the experience of being human in the face of reality, of trying to discern and to live with and by ultimate truth, is at the centre of understanding religion. Individuals can and do aim at ultimate truth, and religion is best understood by the study of those who so aim. Humanity and the human experience is at the centre of any understanding of religion precisely because faith is more important than belief.

Faith and doubt are often seen as two polar opposites. People of a very certain faith in, say, Christianity, can be dismissive of doubters, especially if the doubter is doubting whilst claiming allegiance to the faith of the person sure in their own faith. Equal though different frustration is also shown by those on the other end of sure

³¹ Eamon Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers*, London: Continuum, 2004, 8f.

faith, by those who are certain that all (religious) faith is tomfoolery and, at best, delusion. That people of such opposite faiths, the one faithfully proclaiming their Christianity and the other proclaiming their atheism, can both feel similar things about the same doubter suggests that doubt is, or can be, an opposite to faith and yet also that it is not the opposite as usually understood. It is the opposite in the sense that it does not proclaim the certainties of the extremes of faith, either for or against religion. In fact, doubt is only the opposite of faith in the very specific instance of the person who is certain in their faith, whose faith brooks no doubt. This suggests that doubt is actually the opposite of certainty rather than being the opposite of faith. Doubt is never, in a formal sense, the opposite of faith. It coincidentally appears this way when faith and certainty coincide. But the doubt that the person of certain faith (whether religious or atheistic) despises is never the opposite of his faith, but rather of his certainty.

Action, not thought, is the key to faith and in this, doubt plays a vital role. It doubt about the previously imposed words and thought systems (whether self-imposed or imposed by external authority) that enables the human to rise above these systems to behold the truth of the Transcendent Other and to be bold enough to act on this perception, oblique and inchoate though it may be.

Lord, grant me a doubting heart that I may have faith!

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