

# Doubt

April 20, 2014

## I. Introduction

Show of Hands (and you can vote more than once):

- a. Agnostics?
- b. Free-Thinkers?
- c. Christians?
- d. Atheists?
- e. Humanists?
- f. Don't Know?

It's important to know your audience. I'll show you why.

When I was working for Frito-Lay in Dallas, we had a new marketing director. On this particular day, he met the Senior V.P. of Marketing in the hall who said to him, "My wife and I have some extra tickets to the Symphony on Saturday night, would you and your wife like to join us for dinner and the Symphony?..... It is important to know your audience!"

In case you wondered about how to vote as I conducted the straw poll a few minutes ago, you can complete the Scale of Doubt quiz after our talk today. It may help your self-knowledge. (The Scale of Doubt quiz is included as an appendix to the talk.)

A recent column in the Democrat Gazette noted that every baby where-ever they are born in the world is an atheist. They have no concept of any god, other than their parents. From their parents they learn a god-belief, whether Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or something else. And in most cases they are told that there will be people who will try to convince them that they are wrong! As they grow, questions questioning their indoctrination will typically be addressed with explanations that too often are based on an emotional belief rather than a rational explanation that addresses the question.

Today, I'd like to share with you some personal background doubt experiences as well as a bit of history about the great doubters in history. If you are like me, at times you have probably felt **alone** in your doubt. I hope you will realize from this morning's look at the history of doubt that we are just participants in a history of doubt that goes back at least as far as the days of Greece. For the historical notes, I will rely almost completely on a book titled, *Doubt: A History* by Jennifer Michael Hecht.

## II. Personal Background

I grew up in a rather conservative religious denomination, the United Presbyterian Church of North America. We didn't subscribe to a Sunday paper until I was ten or 12 years old although we took two daily papers during the week. The Presbyterians of North America merged with the more liberal Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. in the late 1950s. That was where Mary attended and that is where my first real doubt arose.

I grew up believing in Doubt. In our home we scarcely ever got through a meal without some member of the family getting the dictionary or the world almanac to check, verify, or refute some statement that another person had made. This checking was not vindictive nor considered a putdown; it was just the model that we used. I don't remember ever getting the Bible, however, to refute anyone's contention.

I attended both a youth group at the home United Presbyterian church and another at Mary's Presbyterian Church in town. At her church, I first learned about John Calvin's idea of Predestination. The Elect were predestined to go to heaven; if you weren't part of the Elect, you wouldn't be there. **What a cop-out!** Here was a prescription to live any way you wished. If you were among the elect, you would figure out just in time and if you weren't, it wouldn't make any difference anyway.

In college, I had a devout Catholic roommate. Even before I learned that little green men caused every physical phenomenon, my roommate and I discussed the premise that you could start out with one denomination and morph through successive denominations until you had a set of religious beliefs and practices that were

antithetical to those in the denomination that you started with. And both **could not be right!**

So, by the time that Mary and I got to California for graduate school in 1963, I had figured that I was probably going to Hell! Since I had begun to doubt both Heaven and Hell perhaps I was just accepting that other people thought that I was going to Hell. At registration time, the American Humanist Association had a table set up and I discovered my first group that seemed reputable enough **who as a group** had rejected most of what I had grown up with. I've been a member of the American Humanist Association even longer than I've been a UU.

A year later, we were visiting in Iowa at our parents' homes when my home church was hosting a ministerial candidate. At the Q & A following the potluck dinner, I asked the minister if there was a place for skeptics in the church. He responded, "Yes, I **dealt** with one just last week." That was enough for me to vote against calling him as a minister but I had to turn in a **blank** ballot because my mother wouldn't give me a pencil. BTW, I was right; he had an unsuccessful pastorate!

A couple of years later, we attended our first Unitarian service and discovered a whole group of **respectable** people who were living **ethical** lives who were perfectly accepting of our doubt and personal philosophies.

Here we are, nearly 50 years later, still doubting the **truths** of our upbringing and still associated with respectable Unitarian-Universalists.

One of my delightful discoveries a few years ago was Jennifer Michael Hecht's book *Doubt, A History*. She points out that there have been doubters throughout history. And that the path of accepted ideas has evolved as doubters have challenged the established beliefs. Even the reports of Jesus point out that he was a doubter as he challenged the established church organizations—throwing the money changers out of the temple....Other big doubters include Copernicus and Galileo.

- a. Doubt has inspired religion in every age: from Plato, to Augustine, to Descartes, to Pascal, religion has defined itself through doubt's questions. This continues today.

**b. Doubters among Greeks**

At the height of their cult, the Olympic gods of the Greeks were thought of as very real—not at all the equivalent of parables or half-believed fairy tales. The sun did rise every day....

Under the gaze of philosophy, the level of belief eroded rather dramatically along three major lines:

1. Some people began discussing how the universe actually worked,
2. Some people started questioning the reasonableness of the gods' biographies,
3. Some posited a whole other world of meaning that did not rely on the gods in any important way.

Birth of Philosophy (6th century BCE)—questioning how things really work, is the beginning of doubt.

Plato wanted truth, not just social happiness, and would sweep away everything about the Greek pantheon that he did not feel he could logically support. But that still left him with a complex sense of divinity in the universe and a certainty that human beings need and ought to have a tradition, local religion in which they can believe whole heartedly. **Plato was afraid the atheists would lose the old sacred commitment to living for the community.** *And this is a theme throughout history. Doubters typically limited sharing their beliefs to a few friends because they feared the masses could not live with the uncertainty that doubt provided but needed a simpler structure.*

Even today, we have some UUBC members who have elected to take family members to a traditional Presbyterian Easter service fearing that they would be uncomfortable discussing Doubt!

Plato's relative, the Athenian Critias, wrote a play in which religion is an explicitly invented lie, made up in order to keep otherwise brutish human beings honest and law-abiding—the gods had thus been a deliberate deception. Dostoevsky more than 2000 years later had similar ideas.

Aristotle noted “Our remote ancestors have handed down remnants to posterity in the form of myths, to the effect that the heavenly bodies are gods and that the divine encompasses the whole of nature. But the rest has been added by way of myth to persuade the vulgar and for the use of the laws and of expediency.

But Aristotle, like Plato, thought that the forms and rites of religion should continue. [This is another common theme through the early doubt.]

Carneades (ca. 200 B.C.) was arguably the best philosopher in the five hundred years after Aristotle. He added the idea of probability to philosophy as a way to develop a rational approach of the ideas being addressed. This was a significant improvement over the Skepticism which had tended to reject all.

**Carneades also attacked the “argument by design”.**

As the philosophers put the gods or God into doubt, according to rationalist narrative and natural science, they sought a philosophical replacement. They were not fighting against the religious impulse; they just reconceived the sacred so that it seemed true.

In the Hellenistic period a great many Jews became secular. Other groups believed when bad things happened that their gods were weak; **the Jews believed that they had failed God.**

The library in Alexandria was a place that Jews supported and their involvement showed their integration into the Greek culture.

Ancient Greece had harbored an extreme prejudice against women. This was breaking down in the Hellenistic period. One of the steps of Judas Macabee was to again restrict women's opportunities and to restrict the practice of broader cultural ideas which had grown during the Hellenistic period.

Hannukah celebrates the retaking of the temple but it should be noted that the revolt's first victim was a secular Jew at the hands of a zealot Jew.

**The earliest reference to doubt in the Bible** is in the Psalms 14 which refers to the ungodly. Job was a just man and the story of Job was a common fable of the times but **the God of the Job story was not a God of justice at all**. The God of the Job story is much like the Duke brothers in the 1983 movie *Trading Places* who arbitrarily ruin the lives of two young men to satisfy a bet about nature versus nurture.

“One of the fascinating things about the new Jesus religion is that its central figure was, several times in his short and deeply convicted life, quite wracked with doubt. These moments of doubt—and the weight of the new religious idea that had given rise to them—permanently changed the history of doubt. Forever after, we have had an image of agonizing doubt as part of our model of a religious life. This was not framed as doubt in the existence of God. It was doubt in the ability of the human being to inhabit his or her side of the new equation. It could be very hard to bear.” *Doubt*. p. 198.

### c. **Doubters in the Renaissance**

**One pleasure in rereading Doubt was discovering again Rabelais and Montaigne.** I had such a battle with French my freshman year in college that I had forgotten the

enjoyment that I had in both Rabelais for his baudiness and Montaigne for his philosophy. Montaigne may have been as much an influence as my later Philosophy course and Little Green Men in furthering my personal doubt.

The Jewish Bible had been translated into Greek even before Jesus' time. When the Muslim Turks sacked Constantinople in 1453, they sacked the libraries but many of the Greek books made their way to Europe and helped further the Renaissance. Also in 1453, Guttenberg's Bible was printed. The printing press clearly made it easier to spread treatises on doubt.

By the mid-thirteenth century, centers of Latin Averroism were developing in Paris and Padua. (Averroes was a Spanish-Arab philosopher.) They concluded that the soul is mortal. (This contrasted with a condemnation by Pope Leo X in 1513 of any such teaching.) **Pomponazzi**, trained at Padua, established in Florence, rejected the idea that people need threats of heaven and hell in order to be moral, reminding his readers of the heroic virtues of animals and even noting that self-interest could create such virtues as patriotism....Demons and angels were not real....whole world is deceived..Three major religions—Christ's, Moses', and Muhammad's—either all of them are false and the whole world is cheated or two are wrong and the greater part of the world is deceived. (My College roommate and I didn't realize that we were reconceiving Pomponazzi's thesis.)

**Luther's 95 theses posted on the Wittenberg in 1517 arose from his agonies of doubt. He could not convince himself that he had done enough to deserve salvation.** When he found Saint Paul and his conclusion that faith was enough, Luther found his answers. Paul had thrown out the laws of Moses. Fifteen hundred years later, the tense situation of belief being more important than acts was purposefully revived. The bible text was described as literally true and the community who joined Luther challenged itself simply to believe it....

**Calvin took the process a step further.** Whereas Luther believed that an individual could take some steps to further probability of salvation, Calvin said faith alone was the answer and **God knew** before one was born whether the individual would have a strong enough belief to be elected to salvation. And Calvin took it seriously, He had Jacques Gruet, a prominent member of the bourgeoisie burned as a “**speculative atheist**”, that is one who intellectually rejected the faith. He also had a man named Monet beheaded for being a “**practical atheist**”, that is one who behaved as if there were no God.

**Margaret of Navarre:** Watched carefully as one of her maids died. She had heard that the soul left the body precisely at death and wanted to see if it made any noise! She was noted for her writing and did as she pleased including Rabelais and Dolet, generally considered doubters. Dolet was eventually burned for his belief but Rabelais somehow survived.

**The Renaissance was a time when being a doubter became a serious issue.** Belief was a serious issue and the penalty for refusing to recant your unbelief was burning at the stake.

**Shortly after Rabelais' writings, the Inquisition really got going. And there were more doubters to burn with advent of the printing press and the availability of books. Bruno** was one of the notable victims. He was burned at the stake in 1600 for his complete conviction that **the universe was infinite and filled with many other suns like ours!**

Montaigne was asked by a later Margaret of Navarre, whose husband was a grandson of the consort of the earlier Margaret to help her with a defense of Religion because many members of her court were rejecting religion. Montaigne answer was a marvel in the history of doubt. He said, “Custom and law defined religion, not some inner knowledge of truth or any rational argument for truth.” But since you couldn't prove or disprove belief, he thought that you might as well just believe! Doubt, p. 326.

**d. Doubters in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America**

“The nineteenth century was easily the best-documented moment of widespread doubt in human history; there were more doubters writing and speaking where they could be heard than ever before, and many more had come to hear them....Throughout this century, people spoke about the old idea of replacing religion with science or philosophy but now they called for it out in the open and signed their names. Now some also spoke of replacing religion with politics or with art. And many of the best known were women. In this century, doubters of all stripes, from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to John Keats, to Karl Marx, were committed to their doubt and interested in figuring out what came next.” Doubt, p. 405.

“Also, even the best educated doubters felt that the time for doubting religion was over. It was time to start building something in which one could truly believe, a happy new world. They guessed that it would be a better world because the money and energy once given to religion would be devoted to generating food, clothing, medicine, and ideas. They also thought they might see farther than ever before, now that their vision was mended.” Doubt, p. 405.

**Robert Green "Bob" Ingersoll** (August 11, 1833 – July 21, 1899) was a [lawyer](#), a [Civil War](#) veteran, political leader, and [orator](#) of [United States](#) during the [Golden Age of Freethought](#), noted for his broad range of culture and his defense of [agnosticism](#). He was nicknamed "**The Great Agnostic**".

Many of Ingersoll's speeches advocated [free thought](#) and [humanism](#), and often poked fun at religious belief. For this the press often attacked him, but neither his views nor the negative press could stop his rising popularity. At the height of Ingersoll's fame, audiences would pay \$1 or more to hear him speak, a giant sum for his day.

In a lecture entitled "The Great Infidels," he attacked the Christian doctrine of Hell: "All the meanness, all the revenge, all the selfishness, all the cruelty, all the hatred, all the

infamy of which the heart of man is capable, grew blossomed, and bore fruit in this one word—Hell."<sup>[8]</sup>

**Jews were also experienced changes effected by Doubt in the 19th Century. Two examples:**

**Abraham Mendelssohn**, father of the composer Felix counseled his daughter:

“The outward form of religion...is historical, and changeable like all human ordinances, Some thousands of years ago the Jewish form was the reigning one, then the heathen form, and now it is the Christian. We, your mother and I, were born and brought up by our parents as Jews, and without being obliged to change the form of our religion have been able to follow the divine instinct in us and in our conscience. We have educated you and your brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, because it is the creed of most civilized people, and contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good, and much that guides you to love, obedience, tolerance, and resignation, even it if offered nothing but the example of its founder, understood by so few, and followed by still fewer. By pronouncing your confession of the faith, you have fulfilled the claims of society on you, and obtained the name of Christian. Now be what your duty as a human being demands of you, true, faithful and good....” Doubt, p. 409.

**Reform Judaism:** Other Jews did not convert but developed “a coherent, rationalized, even secularized, ‘official’ form of Judaism....called Reform Judaism.” Doubt, p.410.. In 1840, the Reform Jews held a conference and issued recommendations “for worship in the language people speak in their country; the reintroduction of organ music in worship; equal parts for men and women in everything; dropping general observance of the minor holidays; and rejection of the dietary laws—usually completely. The injunction to keep one’s head covered was generally let go as well. They spoke of circumcision as barbaric and useless, and many average Jews did not circumcise their sons in this period—

although, eventually, the rabbis decided to retain circumcision. Inter-marriage was acceptable.. Ibid., p. 411.

In 1885 a group of Reform Jews formally rejected Zionism noting that they were a religious community not a nation.

**Now I'd like to mention four women who today are not as familiar as Elizabeth  
Katy Stanton and Susan B. Anthony but were widely known in the 1800s.**

**Anne Newport Royall.** Done out of her husband's will by his children she took to writing and earned a substantial income campaigning against slavery, for public relief for widows, in defense of Native Americans and most of all, against the missionaries.

"Her biographer ...wrote in 1937: "She was nationally known, liked, feared, ignored, detested; but she would be heard whatever the reactions." He characterized her as a cross between Voltaire, Carry Nation, the fiery temperance leader, Joan of Arc, and H.L. Mencken!

**Harriet Taylor**, first a collaborator and then wife (after his wife died) of John Stuart Mill worked with him on the *Enfranchisement of Women* in 1851 and *On Liberty* (1859). *On Liberty* held that government should interfere with citizens only if they are hurting others: people should be able to smoke opium or walk across dangerous bridges, etc.

"It is a stunning contrast to the ancient doubters' bow to the state's religion. To speak your own truth was now a virtue." Ibid. p. 417.

Our third woman of note is a Unitarian **English woman Harriet Martineau**. She wrote books and at thirty-two published a study of American women that was as highly celebrated as Tocqueville's work on America. Financially independent she toured the Mideast in 1846 to study the great religions. Thereafter she wrote as an impassioned

doubter. Both William Lloyd Garrison and Florence Nightingale commended her as one of the strongest antislavery advocates in the country.

She had some remarkable observations as she thought she was close to death: “And not what I am awaiting it at any hour, the whole thing seems so easy, simple and natural... The case must be much otherwise with Christians....They can never be quite secure from the danger that their air-built castle shall dissolve at the last moment.... I used to think and feel all this before I became emancipated from the superstition.... But now the release is an inexpressible comfort; and the simplifying of the whole matter has a most tranquilizing effect. I see that the dying... desire and sink into death as into sleep.... Under the eternal laws of the universe, I came into being, and, under them, I have lived a life so full that its fullness is equivalent to length.

Our fourth woman is **Ernestine Rose**. Born in Poland, daughter of a Rabbi who taught her to read the bible in Hebrew, she came to the U.S. and became a crusader. Among other things she tried to establish national **non-religious holidays** including honoring the birthday of Thomas Paine. She wore her hair in easy to care for ringlets. Many free thinker women adopted her style so that at mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to say someone was “in ringlets” meant that she was a free thinker and a reformer.”

Rose became a famous abolitionist, women’s rights advocate, and atheist lecturer. In an 1861 lecture in Boston, “A Defense of Atheism,” she argued philosophically against God but also joked that instead of saving Noah and the rest, **God should have “let them slip also, and with his improved experience made a new world.”** Ibid., p. 423.

Not a woman but a doubter widely identified as anti-religion was **Karl Marx**. In fact, he did not spend much time *against Religion*; he thought that it would fall away naturally when the living conditions of the people improved!

In the early nineteenth century there were a lot of people around who believed that religion had misdirected human energies and thought that because we had finally realized this, it was time to find a better basis for morality and fix this misshapen world.

A key belief of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Doubters was that Atheists could run the world more humanely than the Leaders with Religious beliefs had been doing. They were proud to be labeled Atheists.

#### e. Doubters in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America

The totalitarian leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler really ruined the idea that Atheists would make better leaders as they showed themselves as evil as the Atheists had believed the earlier leaders with their alleged god given right to rule had been. And the cold war led to the term **atheistic-communism** as a single epithet.

Madelyn Murray O'Hair forced a break in the combined **Atheistic-communism** charge. She began by taking on compulsory prayer and Bible reading in Maryland schools and winning in court. Unfortunately she was so "wacky" that she intensified feelings against atheists.

The totalitarian despots have destroyed that concept that those who reject heaven and hell will govern better. "Human rights have to be anchored in something new. If it is to be more than just a slogan mocked by half the world, it cannot be expressed in the language of a departing era. But it can't be just science either.

Vaclav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia, has said that the Gaia Hypothesis which sees the whole earth as a single system, a mega-organism, might be the right kind of idea. Human rights won't be respected until there is respect for "the miracle of the universe."

#### f. Doubt today

- Possible  
Possible  
Skip
- i. "During the Cold War, the idea was that Americans believed more than our opponents did; on the confrontation with fundamentalist Islam, we are faced with an enemy that violently rejects public secularism. It demands a reappraisal of our attitude. In the most immediate terms, consider the response of a few doubting Muslims, Salman Rushdie published an article called "Yes, This Is About Islam" in the *New York Times* on November 2, 2001. There had been great effort to keep innocent Muslims from being harassed and to keep the peace with other Muslim countries. Rushdie explained that it was not so much about religion, as religion in politics. "The restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization, is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern".

Doubt has been a disproportionately industrious and dynamic stream of human culture and cosmology, espoused by such productive figures as Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein, Frederick Douglas and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Socrates and Sigmund Freud--it gets a lot done. The story of doubt has run alongside the religions all along, and probably will in the future. When Religion stay out of politics atheism quiets down to a calm chat; we hear about it from contemplative people, with little or no attack on the mythic aspects of religion, because in these circles, none is necessary.

### III. Conclusion

**Lowell Grisham** (Democrat-Gazette Feb 28, 2014):" The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. Certainty is the belief that we are smarter today than we will be tomorrow. The day we are certain about God is the day we have created an idol. Certainty leads so easily to arrogance. Openness and a willingness to doubt nurtures wonder and humility, essential qualities for people of science as well as people of religion."

<b>Appendix. The Scale of Doubt Quiz</b>			
Yes	No	Not Sure	Question
			1. Do you believe that a particular religious tradition holds accurate knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality and the purpose of human life?
			2. Do you believe that some thinking being consciously made the universe?
			3. Is there an identifiable force coursing through the universe, holding it together, or uniting all life-forms?
			4. Could prayer be in any way effective, that is, do you believe that such a being or force (as posited above) could ever be responsive to your thoughts or words?
			5. Do you believe this being or force can think or speak?
			6. Do you believe this being has a memory or can make plans?
			7. Does this force sometimes take a human form?
			8. Do you believe that the thinking part or animating force of a human being continues to exist after the body has died?
			9. Do you believe that any part of a human being survives death, elsewhere or here on earth?
			10. Do you believe that the feelings about things should be admitted as evidence in establishing reality?
			11. Do you believe that love and inner feelings of morality suggest that there is a world beyond that of biology, social patterns, and accident—i.e., a realm of higher meaning?
			12. Do you believe that the world is not completely knowable by science?
			13. If someone were to say, “The universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason, and all life on earth is but a tiny, utterly inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye never to be judged, noticed, or remembered,” would you say, “Now that’s going a bit far, that’s a bit wrongheaded”?

*Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Harper-Collins, 2010.

”If you answered NO to all these questions, you’re a hard-core atheist and of a certain variety: a rationalist materialist. If you said NO to the first seven, but then had a few YES answers, you’re still an atheist, but you may have what I will call a pious relationship to the universe. If your answers to the first seven questions contained at least two Not Sure answers, you’re an agnostic. If you answered Yes to some of the questions, you still might be an atheist or an agnostic, though not of the materialist variety. If you answered Yes to nine or more, you are a believer. But more than providing titles for various tates of mind, the questions may serve to demonstrate common clusters of opinion.”