

## FAITH AND DOUBT

John 20: 19-29

Recently I read an article by a team of sociologists entitled: “How Religion Lost Devotion in Canada.” Its focus is on millennials – that group of adults aged mid-twenties to mid-forties. Whereas in 1961 less than 1% of Canadians in that age range claimed they had no religion, in 2021, 45% claimed they had none. The trend is obvious. The percentage of Canadians who identify their spirituality as connected to a particular religious tradition has declined and continues to decline. And this is especially true for millennials. Why?

The standard answer given is connected to three Bs – belief, behaviour and belonging. Traditional beliefs have been supplanted by secular beliefs and practices. Somehow belief in science has been pitted against belief in God and what is believed to be supernatural. Religious beliefs seem incredulous as measured by more scientific criteria for truth. Traditional practices of prayer and bible reading have also been supplanted by more eclectic practices like yoga, meditation, exercise, and book clubs. Traditional belonging within religious communities has been supplanted by more individual buffet style group belonging less bound to particular traditions. Religion and spirituality have become much more a make-it-your-own recipe rather than based on traditions and practices established over hundreds and thousands of years.

The sociologists writing this article, however, also believe these standard answers to explain secularization are incomplete. They believe there has also been a significant shift in what Philosopher Charles Taylor has coined: The religious imaginary. An imaginary is a world of impressions, experiences and perceptions of reality. How we imagine the world is based on impressions, experiences and perceptions, and when these are shared across society, a certain view becomes popularized. A world created and ruled by God was once the imaginary within which most people perceived the world. No longer. According to sociologists the religious imaginary in Canada has shifted away from any religious worldview, and especially among millennials. Sociologists identify at least four particular views that have accelerated such secularization.

1) Religion is antimodern. By antimodern is meant primitive, superstitious, anti-science, not open to criticism, and lacking in intellectual credibility. Whether it's God as creator, or Jesus being as divine as he is human, resurrecting from the dead, and many other ideas that have become doctrines, many millennials see religion as a holdover from a pre-modern past that is less and less compelling let alone believable anymore.

2) Religion is conservative. By this is meant that religion is seen as anti-progressive and antithetical to civilizational progress. Conservative also means: repressive, dogmatic and intolerant. Religion is also seen as a threat to individual freedom emphasizing greater conformity and obedience to a group rather than individual freedom in choosing personal beliefs for yourself and practices that work for you. By dogmatic is meant beliefs are not open to debate, discussion or disagreement. You follow what you're taught without question.

3) Religion is American, and by that is meant more specifically: right wing, politically charged and evangelical. This association also sees religion as intolerant, racist, sexist and willing to compromise integrity and truth to win on certain issues like abortion, inclusion, gender and family values by which is meant the authority of the man, husband and father in the household. Unfortunately, much of what makes it onto mainstream media when it comes to religion is this more authoritarian and extremist kind.

4) Finally, religion is seen as colonial. Not only has religion within the Christian west justified and supported colonization of land, enslavement and forced deportation of people for profit and control, but here in Canada, like elsewhere in the world, through residential schools and other policies, religious institutions have committed atrocities that have come to light and have caused great disillusionment, anger and shame.

5) But let me also add one more perception of religion that these sociologists have not mentioned, namely, ethical integrity. With sexual scandals and abuse within religious communities by leaders, as well as financial fraud and the abuse of power over more vulnerable congregants, traditional religions have been discredited as hypocritical when it comes to ethical and moral standards they hold versus what is actually practiced. Our news and social media highlight abuses by the church, for example, far more than anything positive churches are doing for people and the world. And all this has contributed to shaping popular opinion, and especially among millennials.

OK, so how may we respond to these findings and perspectives? One obvious way is to reject the criticism. Traditional religious institutions, practices and beliefs have been around for a long time, and they will be around well after secularization has come and gone. People who lack belief, behaviour and belonging are the ones missing out and any criticism of religion as antimodern, conservative, American, colonial or abusive and morally hypocritical, is just an excuse for rejecting what is of ultimate value for personal salvation. Many Christians follow this approach of rejection of any criticism, and they are more than eager to criticize the critics and dismiss claims that traditional religion, and in our case: Christianity, is fundamentally flawed as the institutional church manifests it.

An opposite response is to accept the criticisms and conclude that religion and Christianity in particular has had its day, and it is now passe. It is time to move on and progress is about developing new forms of spiritual expression not encumbered by old-time religion.

But there is yet a third option, and here, we must bring in our scripture reading. On the surface, the resurrection of Jesus and the claims of the gospel can appear to be mythical in the worst sense of that word. The idea of Jesus appearing to the disciples in the flesh after having been horribly crucified just days earlier and appearing to them by entering a room through locked doors, speaking to them, showing them his wounds, and breathing into them his Spirit which is Holy Spirit... all of it can seem fantastical. But then we have Thomas who brings it down to earth for us. Thomas is not there when Jesus first appears, and even though the whole group of disciples claim to have seen Jesus in the flesh and together sharing the very same experience, Thomas cannot believe it.

Well, I'm with Thomas. What about you? Even as I believe this story for some reason I cannot explain other than faith, if someone told me today they had had a similar experience, witnessing the physical resurrection of a dead and very dead man, I would respond exactly like Thomas. Unless I see for myself and conduct my own experiment with my senses – touch, sound, sight, taste and smell, and unless I ask questions with answers that will satisfy me, I cannot believe. What about you?

OK, but this is not the whole story as it's told us. Once Thomas conducts his experiment by not only seeing Jesus and hearing him speak but actually touching Jesus and especially touching the wounds on his hands and his side, wounds that may be healing but definitely look and feel very real... once Thomas does all this he says to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" Wow! Just, wow! What else can he say?

But if we're like Thomas, we would be in the same situation he was in when the other disciples told him a week earlier that they had seen Jesus and communed with him and that he was real. Thomas responded then: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." OK, great, so where does that leave us then? Thomas got what he needed to eliminate his doubts. What about us? We'll never get to see Jesus in the flesh and touch his wounds for ourselves. Does that mean we're left with perpetual doubt and a broken faith unless we're able to just believe blindly?

Here's where Jesus challenges Thomas and the other disciples then as he challenges us today when he replies to Thomas in this way: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." So, what is it that we're supposed to believe without seeing with our eyes? And does such belief, we're it possible, eliminate doubt?

First of all, belief is faith, faith is about trust and trust is relational. I don't just trust in the air, but I trust in something and in someone. Do I trust in Jesus? Do I trust what he told his followers, namely that if we embrace his way, his truth and his life we will experience abundance of life ourselves? Do we believe that even though he was crucified in the name of love for the downtrodden, crucified for truth against corrupt power, and crucified for a peace that can only come out of justice that is not fuelled by revenge, beyond such crucifixion, he rose from the dead because even as love is crushed in a world of power and violence, it keeps rising up again and reaching out into the world to heal and reconcile what is broken. Do we believe this? Do we believe that change and transformation are possible beginning with people's hearts and their relationships? Do we believe that people trampled underfoot can rise up and build up resilience without bitterness or hate, that people can forgive, that people can repent and seek to make amends, that we can expect better from our neighbour, from ourselves and in our world?... Do we believe any of this?

If we say yes to any of this then why is it so hard to believe in the resurrection of Jesus? Focussing on the physical resurrection as Thomas and anyone else does is highly inadequate. It doesn't change anything. What matters to Jesus and should matter to us is transformation of relationships and transformation of our own hearts. We need to rise up from the brokenness and the doubt that lead to cynicism, bitterness and despair in ourselves... Do we need a miracle for that to happen?

And this brings me to the second and last point. Faith is about trust, but trust also includes doubt. To be human is to be vulnerable and it is to be uncertain all too often about many things. Doubt is not an excuse to give up, but an invitation to persevere in our questioning so that new insight, growth and understanding happen. In this regard, doubt is not a problem, but a gift. Jesus often talks of faith as perseverance. We persevere through our doubt and such perseverance takes us deeper in our understanding and experience of resurrection.

While for many doubt leads to giving up on faith, for others, doubt takes them deeper still in search of the kind of understanding that transforms heart and life further. Faith is never blind. Faith that is genuine and authentic is always the fruit of a journey that has weathered many storms of doubt and questioning and has risen over and over again into deeper understanding, commitment, grace and compassion. Faith without love is no faith worth having. But to imagine love without faith can sustain itself is fantastical. I need to believe in you and believe change, growth, healing and transformation are possible. I need to believe that positive change can happen in me and in the patterns of my life that are not life-giving. I need to believe my relationships can grow deeper, stronger and that bitterness, hurt and disappointment can change either through forgiveness and renewal or the peace of acceptance of what cannot be as I would like...

Thomas, like the other disciples, and like us, needs to develop that kind of faith in the face of doubt. Sure. It's great to encounter the risen Christ in some kind of flesh-and-blood way. What an astonishing miracle! But the true miracle of the Spirit is the kind of transformation that brings life through and beyond death in spirit as much as body. And that requires a persistence and perseverance of faith that grows through every moment and season of doubt into deeper understanding and richer capacities to love and care. That's the kind of resurrection our world needs and that's the kind of resurrection Jesus came to activate in our world beginning with each and every one of us.

So, do you believe?... You do... That's why you're here, in person and online, taking in this service. The question is: Is your faith, as faltering as it may be, persistent and persevering?... Pray for it and seek it... Doubt is not the enemy of faith. Giving up is. Like a growing number in our society, have you given up or simply accepted that this is as good as it gets? Or are you one of those Jesus points to when he says: Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe?

Let us pray: Come to us, O risen Christ... reveal yourself to us... Plant in us fresh seeds of the kind of faith that becomes ever more persistent and persevering in the face of doubt... Amen.