

Rational doubt preferable to blind faith

By Goldwin Emerson

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Each year a number of conscientious believers are prepared and instructed for the Protestant Christian ministry. They are usually thoughtful, caring, intelligent young students who will have special training in theology, counselling, and group leadership.

Frequently, they are filled with enthusiasm and love of God, and are motivated towards the betterment of human-kind. But it is a fact that some, after a few years, begin to doubt whether or not they have chosen the correct career path. They will doubt their own ability to bring about positive changes in church membership, or in the growth of Christian devotion, and in the strong beliefs they originally possessed earlier in their training and careers. Those clergy who are reflective and self-analytical may begin to wonder about their own effectiveness in bringing the Christian gospel to their congregants with sufficient clarity and enthusiasm. Others, perhaps not so self-critical, may begin to question the effectiveness of the Christian message in changing the minds and actions of their parishioners. They may not feel that what they are preaching has made a sufficient difference in the everyday lives of those to whom they preach. Still others, may begin to have their own doubts about theological concepts that they previously felt enthusiastic and clear about in their earlier training. While many who leave the clergy carry some of the same doubts and problems as those who actually lose their faith in Christianity it is this latter group about whom I am writing today. That is, it is those who no longer hold to their original Christian views.

In my own religious journey of some association with Protestant faith, I have come to believe that doubt is not such a bad approach in clarifying Christian thought. At least, when compared to blind faith or thoughtless acceptance of

whatever one is told to believe without serious questioning, having some measured doubts may be a significant improvement.

Many highly respected Christians were filled with doubts from time to time. Even in the life of Jesus, his words taken from the scriptures express his inner doubts at the time of his crucifixion. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mother Teresa, in her book of letters, expressed serious doubts, at times even wondering whether or not God exists. Saint Thomas, the Apostle, and John the Baptist, similarly wrestled with doubts. These are not signs of weakness, but signs of using their reflective and rational mental faculties. They were intelligent people trying their best to comprehend reality.

In the smaller Protestant religious sects, statistics on clergy leaving their professions in United States and in Canada, are surprising. Approximately 1500 to 1700 clergy leave the ministry each month. Many conscientious clergy work from 55 to 70 hours per week and many are discouraged by persistent disagreements among their parishioners. Some who remain within their ministry do so because they openly recognize that it would be difficult to turn to new occupations.

I personally know three former Protestant ministers whom I count as my friends who have left the ministry. Each of them is intelligent, caring and thoughtful. They are all excellent communicators and they are ethical people who care about making the world a better place. After leaving the ministry, each has been successful in the work he has taken on.

Since one of these former ministers will be coming to visit London in June, 2014, I will mention his name here. He is Dan Barker. He will be speaking at Wolf Performance Hall on the evening of June 11th 7:00 p.m. about why and how he left his work as a clergyman and why he changed his thinking from Christianity to a more atheistic approach. Everyone, either of religious faith, or non-religious persuasions, is invited to hear his interesting story. This is a free event sponsored jointly by the London Public Library and the Humanist Association of London and Area. You will not be asked to change your own beliefs, but you will leave more informed. Those who attend will come to better understand the current challenges faced by today's Christian clergy in modern times.