

Robert L. Millet: Feed faith, starve doubt

By Robert L. Millet

For the Deseret News

Published: April 6, 2017 10:00 a.m.

Updated: April 6, 2017 10:02 a.m.

Questions are good, but a truly Christian culture should prioritize faith over doubt.

Questions arise for a number of reasons: We are thinking. Our intellect is expanding. We are striving to love God with all our mind. Not everything has been revealed or discovered. We have not paid a sufficient price to resolve the particular issue. We could be looking in all the wrong places. Other things need to be learned first. We are human and thus limited in our perspective. Questions are a natural byproduct of being human.

They are not, in other words, strange, inappropriate or a sign of weakness.

So what's the difference between having a question and doubting something? The verb form of doubt has changed very little in the last two centuries. For example, definitions in the 1828 Webster's Dictionary for doubt include: to waver or fluctuate in opinion, to hesitate, hold questionable, to withhold assent from, to fear, to be apprehensive of, to suspect, to distrust, and to withhold confidence.

It appears that doubt is a more serious form of questioning and perhaps a potentially more harmful form. A careful look at how the word doubt is used in scripture is very revealing: It is never used in a positive way, never something the Lord or the prophets recommend or praise. LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson taught: "Remember that faith and doubt cannot exist in the same mind at the same time, for one will dispel the other. Cast out doubt. Cultivate faith. Strive always to retain that childlike faith which can move mountains and bring heaven closer to heart and home."

In recent years, doubt seems almost to be celebrated and in some quarters is considered to be a prerequisite to faith, a kind of stepping stone to strong belief. One of the problems with believing and teaching such a thing is that some persons who have never had noticeable periods or seasons of doubt just might suppose that (1) his or her faith must not be as strong and stable as a person who labored painfully with doubt; or (2) they ought to seek out or welcome doubts into their lives to complete the supposed faith formula. Both ideas would be false and potentially hazardous. Neither encouraging doubt nor glorying in it is spiritually healthy or wise. The late LDS apostle Elder John A. Widtsoe explained that doubt "can be and should be only a temporary condition. ...

"The strong man is not afraid to say, 'I do not know'; the weak man simpers and answers, 'I doubt.' Doubt, unless transmuted into inquiry, has no value or worth in the world. Of itself it has never lifted a brick, driven a nail or turned a furrow. To take pride in being a doubter, without earnestly seeking to remove the doubt, is to reveal shallowness of thought and purpose."

Now the fact is, doubts exist. Among devout Christians. Among practicing Latter-day Saints who have testimonies. No one should feel either ashamed or less worthy when doubts arise. Like questions, doubts seem to come with the turf of mortality. “Stigmatizing doubt to the point that people feel guilty for even having questions is not conducive to spiritual growth,” scholar Patrick Mason observed. “Neither is it helpful to ignore questions as if they are invalid, unimportant and wrongheaded. After having spent time in the scholarly trenches with many if not all of the issues that typically trouble people, and as one who has had countless conversations with those who feel their faith is teetering on the edge, I can strongly assert that the challenges are real and that most of the people who face them are earnest.”

There are remarkable lessons to be learned from the saintly woman who came to be known to the world simply as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. As we have in recent years come to know that in spite of her “dark night of the soul” — an almost half century of spiritual alienation, a heart that yearned for but did not feel the love of God — she remained at her duty station and continued to serve those she called the “poorest of the poor.” Mother Teresa may not have lived in the light and peace and fulfillment that one would expect to be enjoyed by such a Christ-like human being, but she was possessed of an undying faith in Jesus Christ that transcended her bitter cup and enabled her to carry on until her death in 1997. Christian historian David Steinmetz has written: “From time to time everyone endures a barren period in the life of faith. Prayers bounce off the ceiling unanswered. Hymns stick in one’s throat, and whatever delight one once felt in the contemplation or worship of God withers away.

“In such circumstances Christians should ‘do what is in them’ — that is, they should keep on keeping on. They should keep on with their prayers, their hymns of praise and their daily round of duties. Even though it seems like they are walking through an immense and limitless desert with oases few and far between, they plod on, knowing that obedience is more important than emotional satisfaction and a right spirit than a merry heart.”

Steinmetz added that Mother Teresa did not “abandon the God who seemed to have abandoned her, as she very well might have done. By doubting vigorously but not surrendering to her doubts, she became a witness to a faith that did not fail and a hidden God who did not let her go. That is what sanctity is all about.”

Her life is a lasting lesson for Latter-day Saint Christians, Nicene Christians, Jews, Muslims and persons of any and every faith community. Faith is the impetus to keep on keeping on, even (and especially) when we do not have the answers to perplexing issues or troublesome circumstances. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland counseled not to “hyperventilate if from time to time issues arise that need to be examined, understood, and resolved. They do and they will. In this Church, what we know will always trump what we do not know. And remember, in this world, everyone is to walk by faith.”

At the April 2007 LDS general conference, Elder Neil L. Andersen made a comment that, spiritually speaking, stopped me in my tracks: “Faith is not only a feeling; it is a decision. With prayer, study, obedience, and covenants, we build and fortify our faith. Our conviction of the Savior and His latter-day work becomes the powerful lens through which we judge all else. Then, as we find ourselves in the crucible of life ... we have the strength to take the right

course.” In a subsequent general conference, Elder Andersen said: “The future of your faith is not by chance, but by choice. Faith never demands an answer to every question but seeks the assurance and courage to move forward, sometimes acknowledging, ‘I don’t know everything, but I do know enough to continue on the path of discipleship.’”

We must “doubt our doubts.” From my perspective, to doubt our doubts is to be courageous rather than cavalier when it comes to eternal things. **No one of us should ever allow a doubt to reign when in fact it has not won that lofty perch through proving itself beyond all doubt. Just as for me it takes far too much faith to be an atheist, so we should not be so kindly, such a pushover, as to allow our faith system to go by the way without intellectual and spiritual kicking and screaming on our part. Our faith is worth fighting for.**

Cyprian, a great defender of the faith following the apostolic period, remarked: “Into my heart, purified of all sin, there entered a light which came from on high, and then suddenly, and in a marvelous manner, I saw certainty succeed doubt.” Those who pursue the path of faith thereby position themselves to eventually hear the voice of the Lord whisper reassuringly, “This is the way, walk ye in it” (Isaiah 30:21).

Robert L. Millet is a professor of ancient scripture and emeritus dean of religious education at Brigham Young University.