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The Anatomy of Doubt

We were already living in an age of doubt even before we suffered these blows to our faith. The test of faith is to overcome our doubts in time of great trial.

" November 25, 2018 # Dale Ahlquist \$ Features, Opinion % 6 ! Print (**Image: Tim Marshall | Unsplash.com**)

“There is the prevalence of a sort of casual and even conversational skepticism, making even the idle thoughts of an idle fellow busy in the interests of doubt and despair. I mean that a man, without thinking at all, will throw off some flippant phrase which is always (by a strange fatality) a sort of feeble revolt against all traditional truth.”

Thus wrote **G.K. Chesterton in 1932**. (Though technically, he spelled skepticism “scepticism,” as the English tend to do.) It is a passage speaks for itself. And yet I’m going to speak about it! I’m going to expand it and expound on it and explain it so that I can make it say even more emphatically what it already says.

1. “a sort of casual and even conversational skepticism.”

It is hard to have a deep conversation these days. What we lack in depth, we make up for in shallowness. But it is getting increasingly difficult to talk about anything. There is the fear that it might lead to an argument. Even a discussion about sports might spark violence. And who would have thought that talking about the weather would become political? And politics? Who wants to get into that? The topic is so utterly divisive that it is avoided in polite company—or in company that wishes to remain polite. If someone wants to talk about politics, they do it while they’re alone—to a computer screen—like so many activities that once used to involve personal human contact.

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And yet when it comes to religion, it seems that people have no reluctance to toss off critical comments in passing conversation without fear of being challenged, hurling verbal mud-balls and rocks with confident ease. How often is a believer expected to sit silently and listen to someone say something that implies there is no God, that all religion is a sham, that faith is a delusion, that every church is a monument to meaninglessness? There is no opportunity to refute an actual claim; we have simply had the smoke of skepticism blown in our face. When it comes to Catholicism, the doubts may be more explicit. How often does a Catholic have to hear that the Church is irrelevant and corrupt and doomed because it hates women and gays, and every priest is probably a pervert?

The comments are made casually. Casual means not formal, or, in other words:

2. “idle thoughts”

There is nothing systematic about the skepticism tossed off by the casual doubter. He has concluded that the faith is wrong, however, he cannot base his ideas on any formal and active thought process, but rather “idle thoughts.” And to what end?

3. “busy in the interests of doubt and despair.”

Doubt does not promote truth. It only attacks the truth. It is a negation. There is nothing edifying about it. It is energy expended toward nothing. It is hopeless. Doubt and despair go together. Despair is not a good thing, so why should doubt, its companion, be considered a good thing? Why promote doubt?

4. “without thinking”

Idle thoughts are different from actual thinking because, as Chesterton says, “Thinking means connecting things.” Idle thoughts are disconnected. Doubts are random. There is no thinking when there is no philosophical foundation producing the ideas. It is not thinking when it is not thought-out. Most doubts are not only not thought out, they have not even been thought *on*. They are uttered “without thinking.”

5. “flippant”

To be flippant is to be unreflective, trite. It means not assigning the proper gravity to a heavy subject, to make a joke that is not funny. A joke is not funny when it misses the mark. It does not connect. It buzzes but it does not bite. And when we have to deal with many flippant comments, we are dealing with a swarm. Chesterton says, “One of the chief nuisances of our time is a swarm of little things, in the form of little thoughts... the buzz of dull flippancy... the omnipresence of the insignificant.”

6. “always”

“Always” is used here as a general term, not as an absolute. It means in most cases, most of the time, with most people. The fact is, we live in a secular society that is generally anti-Catholic. We know where these thoughtless flippant remarks are going. They are going to go against the Church. We can count on it.

7. “a feeble revolt against all traditional truth.”

And this sums it up. The comments against Catholic doctrine, Catholic practices, Catholic priests are revolts against things that have been in place for over two thousand years. Chesterton says we always hear the arguments for change, but we never hear an argument for tradition. The casual critic and his

friends who go against tradition regard their revolt as something brave and bold.

But it is feeble.

Doubt is feeble. Doubt does not build anything. It only destroys. The Agnostic pretends to be impartial, but no one is impartial. Everyone takes a part, one way or the other. The agnostic's impartiality keeps him outside the Church, but he is not indifferent to the Church. He is against the Church.

He might argue that a judge must be impartial. But even a judge ends up taking sides. That's what making a judgment is. A judge cannot remain an agnostic. As Chesterton says wryly, "Even men who know nothing cannot settle everything."

And what of the doubters who leave the Church? In the wake of new revelations of the extent of the sexual abuse scandal plaguing our Church, we have all heard stories of people who have walked away. I do not doubt their pain and disappointment. But I wonder about their doubt. That is, if a scandal causes them to doubt their faith, what *was* their faith? How does a hypocrite prove that something is false? Counterfeit money does not mean there is no real money. Fake ghosts do not prove there are no real ghosts. Doubt does not prove anything. We were already living in an age of doubt even before we suffered these blows to our faith. The test of faith is to overcome our doubts in time of great trial.

Most people who leave the Church, leave in a bad mood.

Chesterton points out that faith is something that survives a mood. He says the same thing, by the way, about marriage.

It is easy to fall. It is hard to stand. It does not take any courage to leave the Catholic Church. It takes courage to join it. It does not take any courage to attack the Catholic Church. It takes courage to defend it when it is attacked. It does take any courage to doubt. It takes courage to believe.

About Dale Ahlquist ∟ 32 Articles

Dale Ahlquist is president of the American Chesterton Society, creator and host of the EWTN series "G.K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense," and publisher of *Gilbert Magazine*. He is the author and editor of several books on Chesterton, including *The Complete Thinker: The Marvelous Mind of G.K. Chesterton*.

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