

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

In Praise of Doubt

How to Have Convictions Without
Becoming a Fanatic

by

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CHAPTER 1:

THE MANY GODS OF MODERNITY

1. The authors point out how philosophers predicted that there would be a steady decline of religion as the twentieth century progressed, a theory known as “secularization.” This decline has been evident in western and central Europe, but not in the United States, where there has been an explosion of Evangelical Protestantism. Why

do you think Europe and the United States have taken different paths with respect to secularization? What is there about modern life in the United States that allowed Evangelical Protestantism to take root and flourish? Think about your own family history. Since World War II has there been a movement towards secularization along your own family tree?

2. The authors claim, “modernity pluralizes.” Is there evidence for this claim in your own life? Has your own community become more plural over the past fifty years? Have the institutions to which you belong—church, school, service organization, social club—become more plural over the past fifty years? How much social interaction do you have with people who are ethnically, religiously, or otherwise different from you?
3. Do you accept the idea that in modern communities individuals choose their identity? How much of an individual’s identity is comprised of things he or she chooses and how much results from factors over which one has no control? What is the identity that you have chosen for yourself?
4. The term “religious preference,” common in American English, highlights the fact that today an individual’s religious affiliation is a matter of choice. Have you ever changed religions? If so, how was this change greeted by your family, colleagues, and friends? Does your “religious preference” contribute to your identity in a significant way?

CHAPTER 2: THE DYNAMICS OF RELATIVIZATION

1. The authors describe the work of Robert and Helen Lynd, sociologists who surveyed people to determine which statements about beliefs and values would elicit the response, “Of course.” Can you name some “of course” statements that you and your immediate social group would accept? Do you think your children or grandchildren will respond the same way in twenty years? What does this say about relativization?
2. The authors distinguish between “positive tolerance,” which is characterized by “genuine respect and openness” and “negative tolerance” which is characterized by indifference. What is an example of individuals or groups for whom you have positive tolerance? Negative tolerance? What determines whether we exhibit positive or negative tolerance for an individual or group? How would it be possible for negative tolerance to evolve into positive tolerance?
3. Psychologist Leon Festinger points out the unsurprising fact that people try to avoid “cognitive dissonance.” In other words, people avoid reading newspaper articles, watching news programs, or conversing with individuals who hold political positions that are different from their own. What media outlets do you employ to learn about current events? What media outlets do you avoid? Do your choices reflect an effort to avoid “cognitive dissonance”? Can you think of an example in your life of a

time when “cognitive dissonance” caused you to change a previously held, significant view?

- There are three typical positions that one can take with respect to religion: exclusivist, pluralist, and inclusivist. If one accepts the inclusivist position, which “affirm[s] strongly the truth-claims of one tradition [while] accepting possibilities of truth in other traditions,” then one must be able to distinguish what is central to one’s faith and what is marginal. Speaking for yourself, what is central to your personal faith and what does not matter? Can you name elements in your own personal faith that are not consistent with the dominant religious tradition with which you are aligned? In other words, how would you fill in the blank: “I’m a Catholic [or Methodist, or Episcopalian, or what have you] but _____.”

CHAPTER 3: RELATIVISM

- “Postmodernism” is a term attached to everything from architecture to sociology. With respect to philosophy, the authors maintain that postmodernist theory is the idea that there is no objective truth. Every “truth” is a product of the power and politics of its proponent. Conversely, when one attempts to analyze “truth,” it is necessary to “deconstruct” the narrative and determine the power and politics that underlie the “truth.”
- Think of a family story that gets repeated around the Thanksgiving table after a big meal and a couple glasses of wine. How does one member of the family tell the

story? Conversely, how would another member of the family tell the story? Why is the story different depending on who tells it? What power and politics determine the narrative? For example, does the youngest sister tell the story in a way that highlights her victimhood as the scapegoat of all family adventures? Does grandfather emphasize the humiliation he felt as head of the household when the neighbor had to be compensated for the teenager's vandalism? Congratulations, you have just "deconstructed" a family myth! "Deconstruction" is a defining characteristic of postmodernism.

3. What would a world be like in which there are no facts? Would this be a frightening or disturbing place to live? Why or why not?
4. Return to the family story. Does the fact that two members of the family tell the story differently make it impossible to arrive at an objective account of the facts? Can you retell the story yourself, keeping in mind your own interests and prejudices, in such a way that it is as close to objective (or "true") as possible?
5. With respect to the family story, the issue of which narrative is "true" may not be significant. But history is filled with examples of conflicting narratives, such as the depiction of Japanese imperialism chronicled in Japanese history textbooks and the one put forth in the history textbooks of China. Can you think of current political realities that are certain to result in multiple narratives? What could be the negative result of refusing to seek an objective account of truth in cases such as the ones you cite? Why not just accept that "Truth is what serves the

German [substitute whatever political or cultural group you like] people?”

6. The authors do not accept “relativism” or “postmodernism” as an intellectually coherent way of understanding the world. They maintain, along with Emile Durkheim, that “a society cannot hold together without some common values.” Do you agree? If so, what do you consider to be some of the “common values” of your society today?

CHAPTER 4: FUNDAMENTALISM

1. The authors use a vignette about Empress Eugenie and Queen Victoria to illustrate the difference between traditionalism and fundamentalism. What institutions, if any, in your life do you regard as a traditionalist? Conversely, are there institutions in your life that you view through the lens of fundamentalism?
2. One version of fundamentalism that appears in the world is when fundamentalists attempt to take over an entire society. In order for this approach to succeed, there must be total isolation. The authors cite Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as historical examples and North Korea as a contemporary example of this type of totalitarianism. Can you name any other contemporary examples of this type of fundamentalist take-over? What do you expect to happen to the individuals living in such a society?

3. Another version of fundamentalism that appears in the world is when fundamentalists are content to impose their creed within a much smaller community. Most religious sects are an example of this type of fundamentalism. Name some examples of small-scale fundamentalism in our society today. What happens to individuals who are members of this type of community?
4. The authors point out that “converts” to a sect are usually more fervent than those who are born into the sect (“natives”). Is this “convert” vs. “native” issue one that you observe in less radical arenas in your life, such as politics or sports team affiliations? What are some reasons for this phenomena?

CHAPTER 5: CERTAINTY AND DOUBT

1. The authors claim that there are “true believers” who have no religious affiliations. List the nonreligious “true believers” you encounter in your everyday life. What characteristics do these “true believers” have in common?
2. One consequence of modernity is the fact that individuals migrate from one community to another much more frequently and in greater numbers. These migrants often find themselves straddling two or more cultures. Can you think of individuals you know who are in this position? Do some accomplish the task of straddling two cultures more gracefully than others? What makes the

difference between an individual who thrives with one foot in each culture and an individual who struggles with this divide? Have you ever found yourself in this position? How did you respond?

3. “True believers” cannot listen to opposing opinions and ideas, claim to possess an irrefutable truth, and claim that they have a monopoly on truth. What kind of harm have you observed resulting from such a position in the political, social, or religious arenas?
4. The term “cynic” is often used pejoratively in our culture. The authors differentiate between cynical doubt and sincere doubt, a constructive position in their view. What are some institutions in your life that you regard with cynicism? What are some institutions that you encounter through the lens of sincere doubt? What differentiates these institutions?

CHAPTER 6: THE LIMITS OF DOUBT

1. According to the authors, “Doubt without limits leads to both individual and collective paralysis.” Can you think of examples of paralysis resulting from limitless doubt?
2. The authors use the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to illustrate how perception shaped morality in nineteenth-century America with respect to slavery. Can you think of recent examples where media shaped morality? If “the jury is still out” on a moral issue (as it is in the case of capital punishment in

America) how do you expect the moral issue will be decided?

3. The authors allude to the “big fiction” that results when a leader adopts the position of “limited liability.” Have you ever experienced the “limited liability” excuse in your own life? Which side were you on? How did it feel?
4. The authors assume the position that, “If one aims for the right consequences, one then acts out of responsibility even if one gets one’s hands dirty.” When have you been forced to decide whether or not to “get your hands dirty” in order to act morally? What did you decide to do? How do you feel about your decision now?

CHAPTER 7: THE POLITICS OF MODERATION

1. The authors appear to have a very negative opinion of “true believers.” They argue, “True believers not only work devotedly for whatever their cause is, they have nothing else to do. Doubters typically have many other things to occupy them—family, job, hobbies, vices.” Do you agree with this characterization? Can you think of “true believers” who do not fit the authors’ mold?
2. The authors maintain that all three political ideologies—liberalism, socialism, and conservatism—can be radicalized. Describe two individuals you know who fall at extreme ends of the ideological spectrum. (For example, a radical conservative and a liberal conservative.) What characterizes these individuals? Can you think of a third

- individual who falls between the two extremes (a moderate conservative, for example)? Of the three, whom would you rather have dinner with? Why? Whom would you want to represent your interests in Congress? Why?
3. The authors conclude, “The politics of moderation steers clear of both relativism and fundamentalism.” What steps might an individual take to ensure that he or she practices the “politics of moderation” as advocated in this text?