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Discerning Doubt: A Review of After Doubt

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Discerning Doubt: A Review of After Doubt

Abstract

"Doubters must reframe the way they think of the church, and churches must reframe the way they make space for doubt."

Posting about the book *After Doubt* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/discerning-doubt-a-review-of-after-doubt/>

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Comments

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April 29, 2021

Discerning Doubt: A Review of *After Doubt*

Justin Bailey

Title: *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith Without Losing It*

Author: A.J. Swoboda

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We live in an age of deconstruction, where doubt is *valorized*, and deconversion is celebrated across social media. Some Christians respond to these crises of faith by doubling down on Christian truth, creating spaces where doubt is *demonized*. As a professor and a pastor, I have regularly had students in my office, wondering if their doubts are acts of betrayal against those that nurtured them in faith. I have learned that navigating doubt is always a matter of discernment. We must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to shut down the conversation with premature pronouncements. We must learn to walk together with patience, love, and hope, trusting that there is something deeper than doubt.

A.J. Swoboda has written an excellent guide to this process of discernment. In *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith Without Losing It*, he seeks to assist doubters and those who walk alongside them. Rather than demonizing or valorizing doubt, Swoboda seeks to reframe doubt in terms of spiritual formation, calling us all deeper into Christ himself.

Swoboda makes his argument in two parts. Part one is descriptive, defining important terms (e.g. doubt, deconstruction, differentiation) and demonstrating how Western culture shapes the experience of faith and doubt. Part two is prescriptive, offering practices and pathways forward to sustain the journey of faith amidst doubt.

The strength of Swoboda's writing is its pastoral and personal tone. Dedicated to his students, his reflections emerge from real conversations. Early in the book, he describes the way that struggles with doubt are often nested within the natural process of growing up and our desire for differentiation. Many young people deconstruct their faith after leaving home, Swoboda argues, because they have never had the opportunity to differentiate while they were still there. This requires parents and teachers to handle doubts (and faith) differently. As Swoboda writes with respect to his own son: "I have to hand faith on to my son as a very act of faith, not an act of control.... My new goal is handing my son a story of Jesus so beautiful and compelling that no philosophy teacher during his first year of college could rip it out of his heart" (12).

As we feel the tension between "becoming our own person and honoring our past" (9), we must learn how to honor the communities that nurtured us while also seeing beyond them. The gospel, after all, is always bigger and more beautiful than any local expression. And we have all ingested additives to the gospel that have given us spiritual indigestion, so to speak. No matter how vital a community, we invariably experience malformation alongside positive spiritual care. The goal is not to blame these formative influences, but to distinguish between the things we learned that are resonant with the gospel, and things that we learned that are less so.

Making these distinctions usually requires us to go through a journey, which Swoboda narrates in three stages: construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. It is this second stage that holds so many pitfalls. Swoboda wants to show that deconstruction—in which we actively seek to take our beliefs apart and examine them—can have a dark side. We may become addicted to the iconoclasm of questioning authority while forgetting to question ourselves. Or we may be tempted to deconstruct our faith simply so that it conforms to our cultural or personal preferences. But as Swoboda reminds us (channeling Augustine), "if we believe what we like in the Gospels, and reject what we don't like, it is not the gospel we believe in, but ourselves" (52). The way forward as we doubt is to remember to doubt ourselves, even as we trust in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, here Swoboda makes it clear that he is not advocating for a watered-down faith. The preposition "after" in the title is essential. Swoboda wants his readers to get through the desert of deconstruction and to begin the craft of reconstruction, which requires courage and intentionality. Anyone can be a coroner, he writes, someone who

dissects the body of desiccated faith. But he is looking for surgeons, those who can put things back together in healthier configurations.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this important work. In eight concrete practices that he offers for reconstructing faith, his love for the local congregation shines brightly. He laments the tendency of emerging generations to seek answers from podcasts and disembodied voices rather than in the accumulated wisdom of a church community. Addressing them directly, he writes: “Order your pizzas and books online, but don’t take your deepest doubts and questions there. Bring them to us, God’s people on the ground. Please don’t replace us. Question the assumption that a PhD is the same as being wise, or the assumption that “most viewed” or “viral” has anything to do with veracity” (120).

To take this challenge seriously doubters must reframe the way they think of the church, and churches must reframe the way they make space for doubt. For those who doubt, to abandon the church altogether is to cut themselves off from a vital means of grace. As Swoboda writes: “Sometimes the best I can do when I struggle with my faith—is surround myself with the faithful the way the blind would for those who see. We all need a group around us who believe for us when we struggle to believe on our own” (89).

But for a local congregation consistently to be such a place requires a renewed commitment as well. It requires the church to become more hospitable, more honest, and more hopeful when encountering doubt. It requires us to see faith as a community project, rather than an individual achievement. It requires us, in an age of incredulity, to follow Jude 22: “have mercy on those who doubt.”