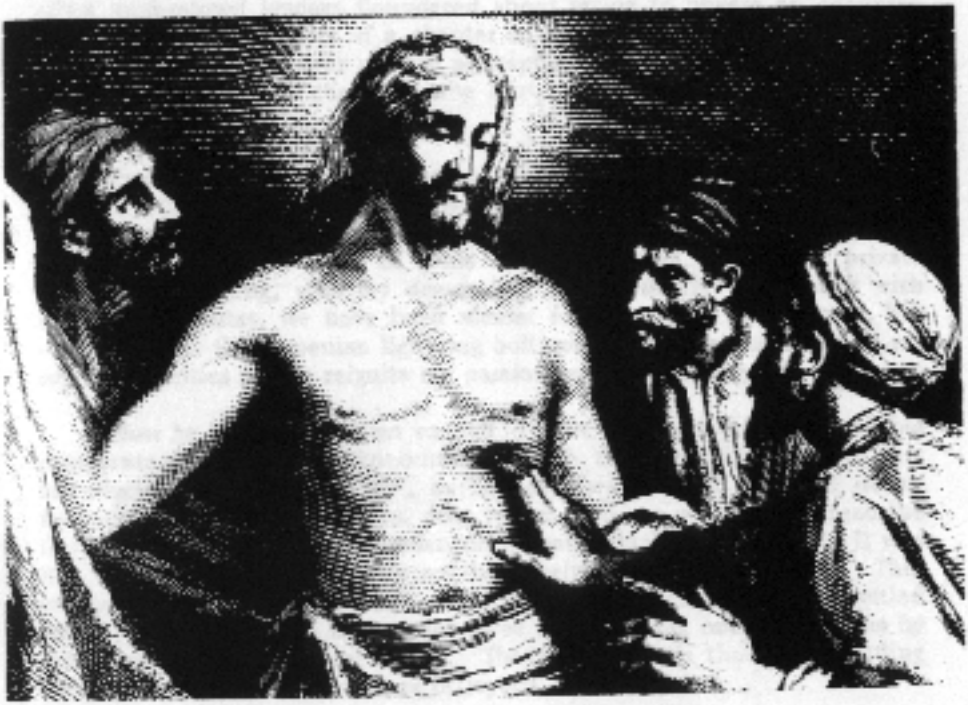
DOUBT AND SCEPTICISM

Could Become The Highway To Faith



Albert J. Noradunkian

Hai-Chrisdonia

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FOREWARD

It has been my pleasure and my privilege to know Albert Noradunkian for more than 30 years: I met him as the proud father of Isabelle, one of the brightest students in my first year of university teaching, and I also met his wife and constant support, "Angel". What an unforgettable meeting that was, and the ensuing years have deepened our friendship and our mutual respect.

It was in those early years that I first saw him in action as a lay religious educator of youth in a camp setting: a question had been asked by one of them as to the difference between a humanist and a Christian: the other professional leaders floundered about trying to phrase an adequate answer in anything short of a chapter in a book. Finally Albert stepped forward to offer his answer and the atmosphere was loaded: he said, simply, "A humanist parks his car where the Christian puts in the nickel." Finis! Next question!

From time to time in the ensuing years our busy paths have crossed, but not often enough. He in Toronto and I at Queen's University in Kingston, he with his private studies and writing, plus exquisite craftsmanship as a worker in gems and fine stones, I with my private studies and writing, plus my demanding though dearly loved work with teacher candidates, we have been almost fully occupied while apart, but every so often the Armenian lightning bolt comes down in our midst to re-set our priorities and to reignite my passion for true learning.

Now he has slowed down enough to write thousands of words of Bible commentary, and he has honoured me with the invitation to write this introduction (I am "Egyptian", as he has always called me!). I do so joyously, but cautiously for you, dear reader. You are not about to read the tired thoughts of a staid Armenian on a sentimental journey. No! It was Bob Dylan who said that s/he not busy being born is busy dying. This octogenarian who's busy being born, may be dangerous to your settled health. You, and I, may or may not agree with him, but once we are met by him, there is no quiet rest for us. The good news is that his unsettling always comes with an abundance of joyous love.

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PREFACE

It is a common human weakness to have doubts about spiritual realities because they are untouchable and unseen by physical means. All great human heroism, venture, achievement and invention are feats of belief and inspiration. Unbelief is essentially a *negative* faith.

In religion, atheism is not a mistrust of God, nor a limited belief in God, but it is a belief that *God does not exist*--a negative faith! Not being able to prove something is not a criterion that it does not exist or that it is wrong. However, to doubt is to limp along with faltering footsteps.

I am dedicating this modest booklet to my loving compatriots and to all dear doubters whose hereditary and unfading faith has had repercussions on their undignified and harsh fortune.

It is my prayer that this first English edition of my writings will reach the hands and hearts for all those who are in the vortex of doubt and darkness, and I hope to enlighten the lamp of their faith by looking at the doubts and skepticism of some of the early saints and martyrs. I want to point out to my compatriots that, whatever the reason he or she has stopped believing in God, a person cannot become an unbeliever, until he or she **disclaims** the Lord and God .

May God use this article to strengthen their faith.

I wish to say a special thank you to my good neighbours, Stan and Kathleen Jolly, for their help in editing this English translation.

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DOUBT AND SKEPTICISM

Why does man, in his heart, doubt and question some of life's important facts and realities? We should not search for the victims of skepticism among frightened and foolish persons, instead those victims and stranded souls of doubt can be counted among the courageous and the valiant.

The dominant power in the psychology of our world is the fear of the unknown. The fear of tomorrow wears out and enfeebles all who doubt. The greatest "unknown" is death. When anxiety and suspicion enters into the fortress of man's heart, it sows the seeds of doubt in a fertile field of innocence. The most dangerous symptom is fear, and fear leads its victims into a blind alley of mental darkness and confusion.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus approached the doubters and the anxious compassionately and tenderly. He tried to enlighten them and to dispel their doubts by saying to them:

"Look at the birds of the air...Consider the lilies of the field and learn thoroughly how they grow...If God so clothes the grass of the field, will He not much more surely clothe you... O you men with little faith"?
Math. 6: 26-30

Let us investigate some of the Biblical victims of doubt who, in the struggle of faith, were hurt and wounded, but never bowed to defeat under the powerful blows of doubt and skepticism.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

First, we can look at John the Baptist. The disciples of John, rivals to the disciples of Jesus, visited the wonderful Nazarene as messengers of their teacher. At the time of their visit, John the Baptist was the prisoner of King Herod. Poor John, deprived of the beautiful view of the divine solitude of the desert, was thrown into a dark depressing dungeon. The shadowy obscurity of darkness almost overcame the undaunted spirit of the last prophet of the Old Testament. The solitary hermit who had come to the river Jordan to open a new prophetic horizon and to proclaim the coming of the heavenly Saviour now had become a prisoner of confusion and doubt.

The daring and brave hermit, the fiery preacher of repentance and justice, had spoken against Herod and Herod's immorality. Now John was wavering in an agonising cloud of doubt and confusion even though he had been the **eye-witness** to the dove-like Holy Ghost and his ears had heard the Divine oracle saying:

"This is My beloved Son, in Whom I delight!"

Matt. 4:17

The gloomy darkness not only enclosed John's dungeon but it also enveloped his spiritual consciousness. Even his faith and trust in God was shaken. If Jesus was the long promised Saviour of his nation, religion and tradition, why, through a miracle, was He not liberating him--the forerunner of the Gospel. The misty logic of the hermit had thrown poor John into a whirlpool of doubt and skepticism.

John the Baptist, after long waiting, sent some of his very close disciples to question Jesus, in order to calm his tremendous concern and to discern the Divine will.

"Are You He Who was to come, or should we keep on expecting a different one?

Mat. 11:2.

It was a sincere and honest question. Are we surprised that a prophet should doubt, especially a person who had been an eye witness ambassador like John the Baptist? The compassionate and loving prophet from Nazareth immediately comprehended John's human weakness. Jesus Christ had come into the world to find the lost, to heal the sick and to restore the demoralised. The Saviour of the world did not come to judge but rather to save. Instead of attacking John because of his doubt, Jesus honoured His ambassador witness and said:

"What did you go out in the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?...A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one more superior to a prophet...Behold I send My messenger on ahead of You... Truly, I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist".

Mat. 11:7-11.

The Church still has much to learn from those luminous words of Jesus which give spiritual orientation to believers' thinking. What a pity and misfortune to see Christians thoughtlessly accuse, judge and condemn, not only skeptics, but also followers of Jesus Christ who love Jesus but who do not happen to think as themselves!

Look how Jesus tolerated and patiently suffered the Pharisees who were His money-worshipping rivals, and also His disciples who were slow to understand, ambitious and greedy for glory. How much do we, who are baptised in His holy Name, resemble Him? How much do we reflect His personal countenance during our daily business? How honest and upright are we in our personal, religious and political involvement? How patient and tolerant are we?

PETER

A second incident of skepticism is shown by Peter, one of the most ardent of Jesus' followers, when he tries to walk on water and starts to sink. Jesus, the Bread of eternal life, had just fed a crowd of 5000 who had come together to hear Him and to have their sick healed. Until sunset, the loving Jesus sympathised with the crowd, comforted them and taught all who simply did not want to part from the presence of the soul-stirring Galilean.

The day was getting late and the valleys were darkening, but the summits of mountains were still sunny. The Inseparable Son of the Father climbed toward the luminous top of the mountain to pray and to gather spiritual strength from the Immortal Presence. Until the early hours of morning, Jesus was in communion with the Father of humanity. Before dawn, Jesus parted from His Father and went down to the shore of Galilee. His eyes saw His faithful disciples struggling against nature--the wind and the waves. He did not pass them by but continued walking toward them on the water. Are we surprised? Is He not the Creator and Lord of the water? Does He not make tons and tons of water which wing over our heads as clouds? Jesus is not subject to matter or to the concrete. He is the Creator of substance.

The poor disciples were tired from struggling against wind and waves and had lost their bearing. Suddenly, under all this pressure and incertitude, the terrified disciples caught sight of the luminous apparition of a ghost, stealthily approaching them in the obscurity of the night. Then the disciples, who were in dreadful panic, terror and dismay, heard the calming voice of their Teacher saying:

"Take courage! I Am; stop being afraid!"
Matt. 14: 27.

The Incarnate Son of God gave humanity a new dimension to the true God and increased the lucidity of the Scriptures. Hereafter, the fear of God was converted to:

"Fear not. It is I", "I am with you until the end of the time".

The disciples were heartened by this encounter with their victorious Teacher and their self-confidence was restored. While they were swaying in fear and joy, Peter, the impulsive disciple, said to the luminous apparition:

"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water".
Matt. 14: 27.

Peter, encouraged by his Master's invitation, stepped out onto the waves of the lake and began walking toward his Master as if the water was dry land. It was typical of Peter that, at that very moment, he wanted to impress his comrades. To show his pride, he shifted his eyes from Jesus to his fellow disciples. When his eyes were turned away from Jesus, the source of life, Peter, the show off, began to drown. Instead of seeing the Divine Power in front of his eyes, he saw the huge waves which were trying to swallow him up and he heard the wind whistling like the laughter of the devil. In that solitary darkness and hopelessness, Peter cried out with a shattered voice of defeat:

"Lord, save me from death".

The Lord, the Saviour of humanity, instantly stretched out His tender hand, caught hold of the sinking Peter and compassionately asked:

"O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Peter and Jesus climbed aboard the boat and suddenly the wind and gale calmed down. Because of his lapse of faith, Peter was outwardly wet and inwardly filled with shame. He learned the hard way that he should never take his eyes away from his Lord Jesus Christ. The approach of Jesus to men and women was always firm, but affectionate. His harsh words and sever expressions were usually directed to the hypocrites and to those who tried to present themselves as pious and religious,

"O foolish one sluggish in mind,
and slow of heart to believe".
Luke 24:20.

During His heavenly mission on earth, Jesus used only a positive approach to advance His agenda of Truth, Righteousness and Justice. This did not mean that He never chided or reprimanded His disciples.

After Peter, the very dear disciple of Jesus, professed Him to be the Son of The Living God, Jesus called him Peter, the Rock, and declared him meritorious of the the keys of the Kingdom. A few moments later, when Peter balked at the idea of Jesus' death, Jesus scolded Peter and called him "Satan"

"Get behind me, Satan! You are in my way
***--an offence and a snare to Me"*--Mat. 16:23.**

Jesus loves all humanity irrespective of their colour and race. He was the defender of Truth, Righteousness and Justice. Even in His severity and strictness you can see the demonstration of His love and His compassion and mercy for those with faltering faith and confused and uncertain beliefs.

DISCIPLES

A **third** incident of doubt and skepticism occurred when Jesus reprimanded His twelve disciples for their anxiety on a boating trip. On this occasion, all the disciples show the same fear, doubt and insecurity.

Sunset was gilding the mountains when Jesus, after a long sermon and many miracles, began to dismiss the crowd. Jesus, the Living Word, together with the disciples, got on board and the Guiding Hand of destiny signalled for the boat to go to the other shore of the lake. The disciples opened the sail and the boat yielded to the western wind. The generous Son of God, exhausted after the day's heavy work, laid His head on a pillow of straw for a short nap.

Meanwhile, Satan was violently furious against Jesus after his disastrous defeat in the desert. He regarded the peaceful sleep of the Son of God as an opportune moment for conquest. The Evil One gathered together a stormy tempest of wind and rain. He tried to overturn the boat and sink it together with the sleeping Christ. Although they were trained fishermen, the poor disciples could not withstand these demonic machinations in the unspeakable darkness, wind and confusion. The Son of God, though worn

out, was sleeping peacefully. The adversary, who was unable to trap Jesus politically during the forty days of temptation in the desert, now tried to drown the one sent from God, together with all of His disciples in the Lake of Galilee. The tempter's violent anger was also directed against those simple fishermen who would become the heroic eye-witnesses of His glorious Resurrection. These disciples were destined to become the "fifth column" for justice and righteousness in a world of chaotic injustice and pervasive evil.

In this sea-voyage experience, there appeared two opposite facts and truths. One is the portrait of the disciples who illustrate confusion and hopelessness in their outcry of fear and doubt.

"Master, Master, we are perishing!"

Yonder, we see a portrait of Jesus, the eternal Hero of faith and hope, fast asleep in the bottom of the boat. This should not be regarded as carelessness or negligence on Jesus' part because He is Lord of all supernatural and omnipotent power.

The distinctive characteristic of the disciples, that of trust, should also be remembered.

"And the disciples came and awoke Him".

How many of us, in fear and panic, cry out to Jesus who is asleep within us? How many of us consult Jesus in an emergency and pray to Him when we think that we are alone, hopeless or lost? How many of us, after neglecting Him for so long, turn to Him, Who is asleep in our hearts? There are many churchgoers, many disciples of the magnificent Teacher, in whose hearts Jesus ***has fallen asleep.*** Faith and religion have become routine and without spiritual force in their daily living. They lack fervent devotion. The concept of eternal life and salvation no longer inspires them and they look at religious rites as annoying obligations.

Christian believers usually forget that affliction and pain, faith and temptation are the raw materials of creation--the "protoplasm" which gives birth. Men and women are subjected to the devil and tempted because of their weaknesses, lustfulness and covetousness, but their will can be controlled by logic, conscience and divine grace. God does not tempt men and women. Temptation comes from Satan. However, God can and will turn tempted men and women into converts and sanctify those who love Him.

When a man or woman awakens the Divine Force or Presence which is asleep within i. e., faith--then impossibilities become possibilities.

Jesus arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,
"Hush now!" Be still! And the wind ceased, (as if exhausted
by its beating) and there was a great calm--a perfect peacefulness.
Mark 4: 39.

When we awaken the Divine Presence within us, when we begin to trust Him as our Maker, when we surrender our will to His good will, peace and tranquillity will infuse our hearts and souls. Our lives will reflect God's

image.

The peremptory reproach of Jesus Christ to the wind and sea was a rebuke to Satan who was personified in the whirlwind and storm. Similarly, an idea can materialise in a human being and transform him or her into a saint or a demon.

Although Jesus spoke reassuringly to His disciples, His tone was sharp and exacting.

"Why are you so timid and fearful? How is it that you have no faith"?

Jesus did not want the aforesaid words to only be broadcast to the wind and waves. He wanted them to be engraved in the hearts and souls of men. As workers in the service of the Creator, we should accept praise and discipline in a spirit of humility and penitence, because *"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above; it comes down from the Father of all light, in Whom there can be no variation or shadow cast by His turning"*--James 1:17.

LAZARUS

A **fourth** incident of skepticism occurred when Lazarus died.

***"Did I not tell you and promise you that if you would believe and rely on Me, you should see the glory of God?*--John 11:40**

The incarnate personality of Jesus shared our human essence and our longing for intimate friendship and affectionate familiarity. He enjoyed this intimate companionship in the home of His friend Lazarus and the two sisters, Mary and Martha. Every time the charismatic Nazarene and His disciples passed by Bethany, He would visit Lazarus and spend the night. Their welcome was joyous and sincere.

One day this festive, jovial and conversational Lazarus, who was so hospitable to Jesus and His disciples, suddenly lay sick. Mary and Martha were powerless and confused. They sent word to Jesus, their friend and physician, to come and heal the one whom He loved so dearly. Instead of hastening His divine assistance to this troubled and confounded family as He had done with the immediate healing of the daughter of Jairus, Jesus, the Source of Light and Life, postponed His trip to Bethany.

"Therefore, when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, He still stayed two days longer in the same place where He was.
John 11:6

Why did those heavenly healing Hands which had cured hundreds of sick and blind people withhold His compassion and mercy from this hospitable and friendly home? This grief-stricken question has been asked innumerable times by unnumbered faithful Christians in the face of suffering and death. The answer to our question can be found in the same chapter, verse 4,

"This sickness is not to end in death; but it is

to honour God and to promote His glory, that the Son of God may be glorified through it".

John 11:4

We can visualise God easier than we can explain Him, and He exists more truly, than we can visualise Him! Without God, man can do nothing, but without man, God *does not want* to do anything! God searches for unselfish souls who devotedly want to become submissive servants of the compassionate God. Our prayers and supplications may be delayed, but they will never be unanswered. Sometimes the answer is "no" and sometimes we receive more than we hoped for. God will dispel our gloomy darkness and show us the sunny and hopeful dawn.

Mary and Martha, filled with grief and sorrow, buried Lazarus, their only brother. They began to question why their trusted Friend had not shown up to help their brother in his hour of need. Dark shadowy doubts and skepticism began to sneak into their hearts and they began to weep with floods of tears. While they were lamenting for their only brother, a messenger informed Martha that Jesus was coming. When Martha heard that their patron Friend was coming, she went ahead to meet Him, but Mary stayed at home.

Weeping and pushing through the crowd which was gathered around Jesus, Martha threw herself at the feet of Jesus and moaningly implored Him saying:

"Master, if You had been here, my brother would not have died".

Martha, while in the Presence of Him who bridges eternity and time, demonstrated her faith and said trustingly to Him who is the Life and the Truth,

"And even now I know that whatever You ask from God He will grant it to You".

The words above reflect Martha's personal faith and hope and crystallised her spiritual perception. Because of Martha's invincible confession, Jesus made a divine announcement saying,

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, although he may die, yet he shall live".

John 11: 25

Those immortal words of Jesus are the true expressions of the life state beyond. We, the believers of today, owe this revelation to the dynamic faith of Martha. After receiving the assurance of resurrection, Martha immediately ran to her sister Mary and whispered into her ear saying:

"The Master has come and is calling for you".

John 11: 28

Those words of Martha are so majestic and precious that only the invited will comprehend them. To be invited by Jesus is the sign of a festive and joyous celebration. Jesus never invites someone for judgment or punishment but only to receive joy, happiness and reward.

Jesus had not yet arrived in Bethany and He was still at the place

where Martha met Him. Close friends were trying to comfort Mary. When they saw her hurriedly leave the house, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to pour out her grief for her brother Lazarus. But Mary had run out to meet Jesus and to weep at His feet.

The majority of people in a crowd usually misunderstands and misjudges the reality. Often the crowd not only misunderstands but deliberately enjoys misrepresenting the truth...!

Instead of going to the dead, the weeping heart of Mary had turned to the One who is the undisputed Resurrection and the Life in Whose Presence haze and darkness take flight and even the dead arise to eternal life.

Mary, sorrowful and sobbing but not without hope, dropped down at Jesus' feet and sadly said: ***"Lord, if You had been here my brother would not have died".*** Jesus, who bears, suffers and endures all kinds of human pathos, looked around in silence for a moment. Instead of explaining His delay, Jesus, who cures all pain, said to the sobbing crowd:

"Where have you laid him?

Jesus, deeply moved, approached the tomb and came face to face with death. In that moment of grief, the Incarnate Son of God also wept. Why did Jesus weep? He wept because He had become like one of us. His cry was the physical evidence that God Himself participates in the pain of men and women. The True God, our Heavenly Father, is not like the gods on Mount Olympus who are indifferent to man's afflictions.

Jesus, deeply disquieted, together with all the crowd, approached the tomb. It was a cave--a hole in the rock--and a boulder lay against the entrance to close it. Jesus stood as a bridge between life and the insoluble mystery of death and gave orders for the boulder (the hindrance) to be removed. Martha, the sister of the dead Lazarus, protested: ***"No Lord. By this time he is decaying and throws off an offensive odour. He has been dead for four days!"*** Jesus said to her:

"Did I not tell you and promise you that if you would believe and rely on Me, you should see the glory of God?
John 11: 40.

The difference between human faith and the faith of Jesus Christ is that human understanding is limited but His is limitless. Jesus Christ does not demand **blind faith and blind obedience.** Man is not an animal. God does not put a bit into our mouths and use reins to force us to obey His whims. God wants faithfulness and trust in Him. He wants us to know Him as our Lord and Maker. He said to Martha, the wavering clay: ***"Did I not tell you and promise you that if you would believe and rely on Me, you should see the glory of God?***

In the company of Jesus, we shall see the glory of God and the substance of our faith will be converted to something tangible. But first ***you should believe!*** First, you should roll away the boulder from the tomb of your heart and soul. Your doubt and skepticism are the boulders which you have to throw away so that the light of truth can penetrate

within your heart. Jesus is the bridge, made not of metal and stone, but made of hope, communion and love. He was the Bridge of Life between death and hope, between tragedy and the glory of God at the tomb of Lazarus. For two thousand years He, who lived and shared the human tragedy, repeats His challenge to us, saying:

***"Did I not tell you and promise you that if you would believe and rely on Me, you should see the glory of God?*--John 11:40**

To believe and love God is the "magic cane" which is granted to humanity. To believe, is to have fervent and enthusiastic faith towards the unbelievable. Faith cannot be analysed by logic or reason. The greatest reality for men and women is to believe in the existence of God and in His Fatherhood. Our role in this world is to believe in God, to suffer for Him and to wait patiently.

THOMAS

The disciple, Thomas, provides a **fifth** example of doubt and skepticism and earned him the name of Doubting Thomas.

"Do not be faithless and incredulous, but believe!"

The above words are heavily laden with significance. Jesus did not intend to chide or to reproach. Instead His words were spoken in the spirit of gentle encouragement, reminding the believer of Golgotha and the sanctity of grief. In this unspeakably beautiful portrait, we see the Master and the disciple face to face--one, in an attitude of shame and, the Master, with tearful eyes. For three long years Jesus, the Nazarene, the Hope of the nation, the touchable Incarnation, had educated and trained hundreds of youth from which He had chosen twelve superbly faithful followers. These disciples, including Thomas, had travelled with the Master visiting villages all over Judea. Thomas was an eye-witness to all the miracles of his Master and he had heard the gospel message of the heavenly Prophet. He had witnessed the feeding of the five thousand and he, too, had served the multitude with those blessed fish and loaves of bread. Thomas was among those sent to preach the Gospel as a missionary to his fellow Israelites. He had heard from Peter and John about the transfiguration of the Master. The Revealed Truth of God had bowed down and had washed the feet of Thomas along with the other disciples. Finally, Thomas had also been with the Master in that upper room at the Last Supper and had partaken of the sanctified body and blood of his Lord.

Although the dividing curtain of the Holy of Hollies was rent asunder at the crucifixion to open the way to the True God, another curtain of doubt and skepticism descended upon the hearts and minds of those elected ones. Their crucified Master's predictions and His warnings about the end of times had not altered the thinking of the disciples. To them, their teacher, Jesus, should have been an invincible hero who would liberate the Jewish

nation from Roman subjugation...!

The cruel crucifixion on Golgotha had crushed and demoralised the disciples. They not only lost their hope, but also their eternal vision. Now it appeared to their kin and friends that they had followed a hoax. They were devastated!

But that unique Easter sunrise announced the victorious resurrection of the crucified Jesus. Its melodious echoing reverberate eternally. The angelic choir sang the Halleluia of the Victor who had given the decisive blow to the pangs of death and the tomb. Jesus Christ had become the new perspective of God and the horizon to which humanity was to aspire in various languages and diverse countenances. Usually, a novel's theme is based upon unlucky tragedy, but the theme of the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, paradoxically, became the theme of Christian faith.

Our Lord Jesus did not **end** His mission but, instead, **began...**the sacred crusade! God, who had raised the Nazarene Teacher, now the immortal Son, in turn, will raise the deadened hearts and souls of His disciples. His glorious resurrection is the first step toward the defeat and the overthrow of the Evil One.

The privileged eyes which will be first to see the enthroned Resurrected Lord, will be the eyes which come early and search for their loving Lord. On the first Easter morning, that blessed person was none other than Mary of Magdala. The eyes which first beheld the Resurrected One were the eyes of a heroic woman. The cover of skepticism still hung over the eyes of the disciples. Blessed are the women who became the pioneers and the torch-bearers of the Gospel of salvation.

After defeating death and defying the grave through His triumphant resurrection, Jesus went to seek His lost sheep. He knew their earthly feebleness as He knows us today. Jesus Christ conquered concrete matter. The only door still closed to Him is the door of a person's **will.** He can open and enter anywhere freely, except into a person's heart and soul. He does not present Himself by force. First, He knocks and then He waits patiently until you open the door of your heart and invite Him in. The frightened, confused and hopelessly embarrassed disciples were gathered together facing an uncertain future and looking toward a dark horizon. Suddenly there was a light and through it appeared the Master who greeted them saying:

"Peace be unto you".

The bewildered disciples were petrified and did not know what to say. Some began to look at their unexpected and resurrected Lord in shame and others in confusion. Following his customary routine, Jesus, with His commanding personality, approached and hugged each one of them tenderly and lovingly. He put forward His Hands and showed them His side and the nail marks on His feet. Those Hands which had healed the lepers and the blind, the Hands which had blessed the people and the Hands which had prayed over the children, had been rewarded by being nailed to a rough wooden cross.

However, the Resurrected Christ triumphantly proclaimed peace to

His disciples, because peacemakers were the co-workers of God. Those who desire to follow Christ should first become peacemakers to win the war before the battle begins. With peaceful motivation, self denial and subservience to the Lord, Christians would soon transform the world. For example, the results which the apostles Bartholomew and Thadius achieved through their self denial and martyrdom, will always remain fresh in the mind of the Armenian nation.

Thomas, one of the twelve, missed out on this soul-stirring and affectionate reinforcement of the Resurrected Christ, perhaps because he preferred to stay away from the company of his fellow disciples. He may have thought himself superior to them because they were ignorant Galilean fishermen.

In the next few days, the enthusiastic disciples heralded the news of the glorious resurrection to all their community. Those who loved their Master were delighted and believed. Thomas, the educated and presumptuous disciple, considered his friends to be visionaries, and opportunists. A week later, the disciples were gathered together once more and this time Thomas was with them. While the eleven were in hot dispute about the Resurrection of their Master, Thomas insisted that they must have been hallucinating and that, until he saw Jesus with his eyes and touched the Master physically, he would not believe in Jesus' resurrection. Almost while Thomas was uttering his last word, they saw a shining light through which appeared their glorious and victorious Master. Jesus gave the usual greeting:

"Peace be unto you".

Poor Thomas, humbled, ashamed and defeated, could not even stutter. Although Thomas was worldly and pretentious, he did have a golden lining. He had a worshipful love and sincere faithfulness toward his Lord and Master. Jesus had known Thomas's merits and virtues from the first day and, therefore, He loved him. Jesus knew each disciple's imperfections and was tolerant towards them. He knows man's fragility and is patient with us. He knows that man sins because of his compulsion. Man, without the Supernatural, is equal to the animals. Therefore, the smiling Resurrected One did not demand an apology from Thomas but, rather, He took the first step and turning to the silent Thomas He said gently:

"Reach out your finger here and see My hands;
and put out your hand and place it in My side.
Do not be faithless and incredulous, but believe!"
John 20: 27.

The demoralised Thomas looked to his Master and then looked at his fellow friends and in a stuttering manner said,

"My Lord and my God!"

Thomas had not been smug or arrogant about his disbelief. He was not a skeptic on whim. He did not insist on intellectual arguments before

he would believe. He did not stand alone as a sophisticated cynic in time and space. Thomas represents the spirit of those who are doubters and skeptics through-out history. Let us be cautious before we judge Thomas. Even Jesus did not judge His disciples or scold them. Jesus Christ, through his love, sanctified Thomas's skepticism.

The doubt of Thomas resulted in the addition of an extra "Blessedness" to the list which was given in the Sermon on the Mount:

***"Because you have seen Me, Thomas, do you now believe? Blessed and happy and to be envied are those who have never seen Me, and yet have believed and adhered to and trusted in and relied on Me"*--John 20:29.**

It was neither an accident nor a mischance that Thomas showed skepticism and doubt. Thomas was, by no means, the only follower of Jesus who had difficulty believing in the resurrection. The wavering of Thomas's faith happened to strengthen our faith and the faith of the generations to come. After two thousand years, the encouraging words of the loving Christ still echo in our ears, saying:

"Don't be a doubter, but believe"!

Now it is up to us to either accept the invitation of faith or to disregard Thomas's confession,

"My Lord and my God!"

Cleopas

A **sixth** example of doubt and skepticism occurred on the road to Emmaus.

The same day that the triumphant Conqueror of Death appeared to Mary of Magdala at the empty tomb and sent her to announce the good tidings to His disciples, two of His disciples, (who were not part of the twelve), were walking to Emmaus which was about seven miles away from Jerusalem.

Instead of manifesting His glorious resurrection to Pontius Pilate and His crushing victory over death to the high priests, Jesus walked toward Emmaus to reveal Himself to His humble and simple disciples and to encourage and comfort them. Jesus Himself approached the disciples. It was common in the East for discussions to be loud and for passers-by to hear and even participate in the arguments. Jesus took the first step and asked them why they were arguing so loudly and gesturing with their fists.

Then one of them, Cleopas, turned to this stranger and angrily exclaimed: *"Are you alone as a stranger in Jerusalem and not know the things that have occurred there in these days?* Jesus, who knew the disposition of each disciple, joined the hot discussion. Jesus was pleased that the disciples were interested in what had happened to their Teacher and that He was not a forgotten Prophet under a tombstone. Although they repeatedly misunderstood Him and had abandoned Him in the Garden of Gethsemane,

He had the power to convert these faltering followers into unselfish, and obedient apostles.

The conversation of Cleopas reached the point where his skepticism was revealed:

"And moreover, some women of our company astounded us and drove us out of our senses. They were at the tomb early in the morning, but they did not find His body. They returned saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive! So some of us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said...But we were hoping that He would be the One Who would redeem and set Israel free"--Luke 24: 21-23.

Until this point, Jesus humbly listened to Cleopas's misguided expectations. He was familiar with His disciples' uneducated way of speaking, but He also knew their spiritual sincerity and devotion.

Jesus stopped for a moment, turned towards the two disciples, looked into their eyes as deeply as possible, and longed to hug them and to reveal Himself to them. But, first, He decided to arouse them from their ignorance and prejudices. After having listened to them, He began to speak:

"O foolish ones dull of perception and slow of heart to believe everything that the prophets have spoken!" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He went on explaining and interpreting to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning and referring to Himself"--Luke 24: 25, 27.

Jesus did not argue with them, but instead He explained. He did not want to confuse them any further. His conversation was not only interesting, but it also widened the listeners' horizons and opened their minds and enlightened their souls. He reproached these skeptics who had fallen into the pit of doubt, by saying, "O foolish ones, dull of perception and slow of heart to believe". His first words were firm, but they were not scornful or malicious.

At the beginning, Cleopas and his friend assumed that Jesus was either a stranger or an ignorant person. But His personality was charismatic and His soul was captivating. In His fellowship, they felt alive, and, in His Presence, they sensed contentment. Jesus' conversation was so interesting that the two travellers lost track of time and forgot about their weariness. Suddenly, they found themselves close to their house, where smoke from the chimney was rising towards the sundown. The voice of the stranger and His style and movement seemed very familiar to them, but, still, they did not recognise who He was. They did not want Him to part from them but He acted as if He was going further on His journey. They offered Him their hospitality and begged Him to stay with them overnight and to continue on His way the next morning.

"Remain with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent". So He went in to stay with them.

Jesus never refuses a loving invitation. He went in with the disciples. When the women had prepared the food, they sat down around the table

and the senior member asked this astonishing stranger to say the grace. The Son of God, who distributes the Bread of Life, picked up their bread, cut it and gave it to all after saying the blessing.

When the pieces of the bread touched the hands of those who were around the table, their eyes were opened, and they recognised the Stranger. He was none other than their Lord and Master--the resurrected Jesus Christ. As they jumped up to worship Him and to demonstrate their love and faithfulness, Jesus became invisible to their eyes.

Jesus does not show contempt for skeptics and He does not belittle the ignorant. Instead, He will reveal Himself to all who are drawn to Him as He did in the past. Though we may be unlearned, faint-hearted and weak, He still will manifest Himself to those who love Him. Jesus Christ did not disclose Himself to the Pharisees or to the educated scribes, but only to those who loved Him, even though they belonged to the working class. He, through His spiritual power, can transform each skeptic and doubter, each illiterate and timid soul, into an undaunted apostle, preacher and courageous martyr.

You who are reading this message, whatever your status, Jesus is able to transform and mold you into His likeness and to grant you life eternal.

"Even though He had done so many miracles before them--right before their eyes--yet they still did not trust in Him and failed to believe in Him."
John 12: 37.

Man needs not only intellect but also spiritual perception in order to crystallise the believers' knowledge. The supreme merit is to have neither talent nor heroism but rather **to believe.** Faith should not be a terminus but the **way** to reach the goal. To believe involves an act of both the soul and the will and it is the means by which man's reasoning reaches a supreme joyfulness and exultation which is beyond human understanding. Man's scientific knowledge pertains only to the things which can be seen, touched and measured. Why not also believe in realities which are higher than our present knowledge and beyond our limited perception. To believe is a divine sensation in man's diversified nature and essence.

Paul

A final example of an early skeptic was the apostle Paul. Although the Pharisees and the scribes saw and marvelled at His miracles, they hated Jesus in their hearts and, eventually, their jealousy and hatred drove them to kill Him.

Yet, among those haughty, proud, law-abiding and orthodox Pharisees, God saw a misled and misguided Israelite in whose heart there was no guile. This early antichrist met the glorious Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. This lost Israelite encountered Jesus, not as a stranger like the travellers who met Him on the road to Emmaus, but rather as the fiery and thundering Resurrected Jesus. After this lightning-like encounter, Paul reflected on his past wrong. The radiant appearance of Jesus physically

blinded Paul who could not even speak or utter a word except to ask this brilliant apparition who He was. Jesus, true to His merciful nature, approached Paul and, with a firm but gentle voice, confronted him:

"Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting Me...I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. Arise and go into the city and you will be told what you must do".
Acts 9: 4-6.

Paul immediately repented, expressing sorrow and lament and weeping for his misguided attitude. He was in tears and fasted for three days. It is very significant that although he had so cruelly persecuted those who believed in Jesus, he was not punished for his actions but was chosen, instead, to become an impassionate apostle of the Gospel. The transformation and conversion of Paul is the expression of supreme love which emanates from God towards a suffering humanity in need of mercy and guidance. God does not choose sluggish persons. He is searching for people who have the willingness to act, cleanliness of heart, a desire for justice and a vision to follow.

As you can see, those pioneer apostles who appear to us as Titans also had their shortcomings. The real and true God, which our Lord Jesus Christ revealed by His holy incarnation, transforms the human into the divine, darkness into light and weakness into strength. Paul, the apostle who preached and glorified his Lord Jesus Christ and His resurrection in the presence of kings and state governors, said:

"For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot perform it.--I have the intention and urge to do what is right, but no power to carry it out; for I fail to practise the good deeds I desire to do, but the evil deeds that I do not desire to do are what I am doing"-- Romans 7: 18-19.

Paul, that great apostle to the heathen, healed thousands who were sick in spirit and turned them from the authority and slavery of the devil into the liberty and freedom of Jesus Christ. This daring and gallant apostle confessed his weaknesses, not to weaken the faith of his fellow believers, but, rather to guide and to encourage them to turn to the heavenly Jesus, whose inexhaustible mercy and grace has been sung throughout the world for the last twenty centuries.

The apostles and saints of Jesus Christ carried out their duties faithfully and some of them with the sacrifice of their own blood. They were not perfect saints, but they overcame evil because their strength came to them from above, from God Whom they loved and in Whom they put their trust.

Conclusion

In the Persian dungeon, the Armenian hero, Vartan Mamigonian, also denied the only true and real God who was revealed by Jesus Christ. This denial was only the reflection of weakness of man's flesh and humanity. When the trumpet sounded ***"for the faith and the fatherland",*** however, the fearless Vartan repented, not with tearful eyes,

but by shedding his blood on the battlefield. Whatever is written with blood is for eternity. Therefore, the unsilenced wisdom of the modern age says to the present generation:

"It is better to try to attain perfection and miss it,
rather than to try to reach evil and accomplish it".

Doubt and skepticism will pursue and chase us until death, but do not despair. Although our horizon of thought will darken, the Sun of Righteousness and Grace will appear above the darkened clouds. Our soul's flight ought to be aimed toward the heights above doubt and skepticism, because evil will try to chain us to a materialistic philosophy.

The Armenian State embraced the faith of Jesus Christ in 301 A.D. The holy Echmiadzin Church, with unwavering faith in spite of the martyrdom of her people, clung to its calling, confirmed its vow of obedience and kept the Armenian nation in the Christian faith to this present day. Neither the Islamic expeditionary forces nor the Ottoman sword could dislodge the faith of the Armenian nation. The martyred saints of the Holy Echmiadzin church had transformed the Christian faith into flesh and blood and strength and life and had given it the inspiration and the reason to exist. Communism, with its steely mechanisation, apostate scholars, and unbelieving professions and arts, could not subdue the unarmed population's deeply-rooted faith. Those who are dedicated believers, whatever name they carry and whatever language they speak, belong to the same church and race.

Jesus pointed out the dynamic power of faith, even if it is as small as a mustard seed. Why does God search for faith in men and women? Why does He give the highest value to faith? Why were the miracles rooted in faith? God can give knowledge, authority, beauty, and riches to any one, but art and science are not sufficient and cannot compensate for a person's faith. Faith is that supernatural essence of an individual, that untouchable and unseen force that must sprout from within ourselves before we can offer it to God. If God bestowed faith on us, that gift would not be a free-will offering to God. Faith is our true and real personality, our essence which springs from within free will and sacrificial love, which only we ourselves can give, produce or create. God's role in our ability to believe consists only in bestowing on us the possibility of willingness. We ourselves must consent to it, will it and decide it.

A tiny speck of faith was born in the heart of the thief on the cross and he offered it to the Crucified Lord even at that late moment. That tiny sprouted faith of the dying thief was appreciated by the Son of God. In spite of His own pain and suffering, Jesus promised him:

"Thou shalt be with me in Paradise".

For us, faith can seem unimportant or even imaginary, but to God, faith is more forceful than an atomic bomb. The Incarnate Son of God said:

"Truly, I say to you, if you have faith (that is living) like a grain of mus-

tard seed, you can say to this mountain, Move from here to yonder place, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible to you"
Mat. 17:20.

Faith and dedication to whatever you believe is neither circumstantial nor accidental, but self-produced. It is the product of men and women and it comes from their deepest being. Faith is not only a powerful force, but also a turning point. We see an example of this rebirth and salvation in the life of Zacchaeus the tax collector when he promises to give back what he has taken dishonestly.

The most characteristic events after the resurrection of Jesus were His visits to doubting, frightened and skulking disciples. Jesus imparted spiritual resurrection to their dying souls and grieving hearts because He saw the tiny candle-like light in each disciple's heart. We should not assume that the disciples, while in the company of their Master, were men of great faith and vision. Jesus addressed the disciples who were walking to Emmaus by saying:

"O foolish ones (sluggish in mind, dull of perception).

To Thomas, the disciple, He said:

"Do not be faithless and incredulous, but believe".

This was the raw material which Jesus used to build His Church. Although they loved Him, they were ordinary men. In return for their faith and trust, He gave them power and authority. If they had faith and trust in Him, He could provide the remainder. The most important criterion for Jesus was to have faithful followers on earth which is the enemy state.

Jesus transformed a small flock of flawed characters, a company of weak uneducated fishermen, and gave them authority to upset the devil's strategy. Because they believed and trusted in Him, they not only preached His Gospel but were ready and willing to die for Him. This was possible because the resurrected Jesus breathed His breath upon them and promised:

"Peace be upon you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you".

Those of us who are living in the twentieth century have lost much of our heritage in the spiritual dimension. Our holy Armenian churches are in ruin. Our sanctuaries are turned into market places and our holy altars are desecrated. Atheistic and worldly customs have penetrated into our psyche and lead us away from the true path. Nevertheless, there remains a little bit of faith. This mustard size faith, which has come down through centuries, is our greatest heritage. It may not brightly light the road but it is sufficient to show the way. God, the Creator of the cosmos, is waiting for that faith of ours to grow. Let us show Him our lamp. Let us put our candle on a candlestick. Let us invite Jesus into our hearts so that, when He

breathes upon us, our lamp may energise and grow in brightness. With a transformed life and a deepened faith, we too will become His disciples and His co-workers. We will live not only to **exist,** but we will live for a purpose and for an ideal. That purposeful life will continue eternally. Only by purposefully living will we know why we were created and not evolved. Life on earth is not accidental, but by design.

Skepticism deprives life of its meaning. Only belief in God reveals the meaning of life to man. Even with its tremendous progress, science cannot be equated to religion because natural science is only the superficial knowledge of the unseen reality. Doubt and skepticism invaded our realm because the Church leaders did not and could not reveal God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their everyday lives and action!

In Christianity, there is life-generating inspiration which nourishes the soul and leads the person to meet God, the Ultimate Reality. In the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there is life-giving communion with God and a knowledge of the Divine Essence which can be attained through intuition and insight independent of the senses or processes of reason, and hence, the ecstasy of those who claim they have had insight or visions which brought them into spiritual union with the eternal, the Absolute. In the West, Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure and William Blake are some of the best known of male Mystics, while St. Theresa is an outstanding figure among women Mystics. Among Armenians there stands high S. Gregory of Nareg. Even in the Communistic era they published 100,000 copies of his books in Russian and Armenian. His "Madian Voghperkoutian" begins with God and directs us toward perfection.

It is possible to meditate about Epiphany (Divine Revelation) which has something which surpasses the historic and the hypothetic and makes a person feel the touch of the Absolute in his or her soul. This touch of the Absolute is not only rare in materialistic thought, but it simply does not exist in atheistic materialism. Christ is looking for that missing primary element, the untouchable and unweighable which He calls FAITH, in each one of us.

A doubter eventually will say, "If only I could prove that immortality exists through mathematics, then I will believe". However, the forces of mathematical proofs are ***subordinate*** to moral arguments!

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