

From Faith to Doubt is the memoir of how the author's attempt to face his doubts honestly while maintaining his youthful commitment to the family religion led him into the profession of philosophy and, eventually, a life of skepticism. He concludes that a life of honest doubt is morally superior to a contrived faith and that, contrary to what his religion taught, it would also be preferred by a good God--if one exists.

From Faith to Doubt...and Life as a Failed Believer

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From
Faith
to
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...and Life as
a Failed Believer

Wallace Murphree

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Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter 1: Childhood	5
Chapter 2: Youth	10
Chapter 3: Facing the Question	27
Chapter 4: Philosophical Arguments	34
The Teleological Argument	34
The Cosmological Argument	36
The Ontological Argument	38
The Moral Argument	41
The Problem of Evil	44
Criticism	48
Chapter 5: Looking Back	52
Chapter 6: Is Christianity Evil? A Question of Honesty	63
Belief-premium Christianity	68
(1) Self-interest	68
Self-interest and Dishonesty	74
(2) Duty	76
Duty and Dishonesty	78
Summary: Belief-premium Christianity	80
Love-premium Christianity	82
Chapter 7: Hurting Those Who Cared	86

Wallace Murphree

Chapter 8: Living in Doubt.....	94
Reality.....	95
Ethics.....	100
Faith	106
Death.....	109
Epilogue	117

Prologue

In introductory classes in philosophy it is not uncommon for instructors to assign short, argumentative papers in the attempt to lead students to do “original philosophy”—that is, to get them to philosophize themselves, rather than merely to read what other philosophers have written.

For such exercises a list of popular philosophical issues is usually provided, such as,

Do human beings have free will?
Are ethical laws absolute?
Does there exist a God?
Etc.,

from which students are to select a topic. The assignment then is (1) to adopt a position on the selected issue, and (2) to construct a rational defense for that position, i.e., to provide a rational justification—a logical argument—to show why that position is the one that ought to be believed.

Contrary to popular anecdotes about philosophy classes, *which* side is taken is of no concern to the instructor (at least, it should not be); rather the features assessed when the instructor reads the papers simply are:

Does this paper demonstrate an understanding of what the issue is?
and
Does the defense of the side taken show original thought on the part of the student?

Wallace Murphree

Indeed, it is not required that the defense be especially good; rather, it is only required that it be attempted, and that the student make as strong a case as he or she can for it.

However, providing a compelling defense for any philosophical position is an extremely difficult matter, and after doing their very best good students usually realize that their attempt was unsuccessful. So in addition to getting them personally involved in the subject matter, discovering the difficulty of creating successful defenses also helps them appreciate the classical arguments for and against the various positions when they are studied in the class later on.

But, of course, sometimes student responses miss the point altogether. I specifically remember one neat, carefully typed paper on good stationery (before word processors) that was entitled “Why I Believe God Exists.” It went something like this:

My grandfather was a preacher, my father is a deacon, and my mother teaches Sunday school, and at a very early age they taught me that God exists. Moreover, my aunts and uncles have prayed all my life that I would grow up to be a strong Christian, and all my close friends are regular churchgoers. In addition, the president of my country and the governor of my state believe in God, and the Pledge of Allegiance attests to His reality....

Etc. Etc.

And these are the reasons why I believe God exists.

But this paper was not acceptable. Of course, the claims it contained were no doubt true and they showed a degree of self-awareness on the part of the student. But the paper contained no attempt to *justify* the belief it reported; instead, it simply contained the student’s description of what *caused* her to start out with this belief rather than an alternative one.

From Faith to Doubt...and Life as a Failed Believer

I suppose I responded something like: “Fine, this reports how you were reared in this view; but other people are reared in other views. So, what reason do you have for supposing the view you were reared in is the correct one? What rational justification can you give for still believing it now that you are able to think about it?”

Of course, the question as to what, exactly, constitutes a rationally justified belief is itself a matter of live philosophical debate, and most, if not all, would agree that small children are not irrational for accepting what they are taught by nurturing adults. But on the other hand, most, if not all, would also agree that as children mature, it would not be rational for them to continue accepting beliefs on the *sole* basis that they were so taught by nurturing adults when they were children.

Chapter 1 Childhood

Like the student, I was taught to believe by my parents. My grandfather and father were Methodist ministers, as were two of my father's four brothers; and from the beginning my life was steeped in a religious outlook on things. Life on earth was depicted as a test to determine where one's eternal afterlife would be spent, and so it was the highest duty of parents to rear the children in the "straight and narrow way" to life everlasting.

My earliest memories are from our daily, family devotions in which we would sing, and read or quote scripture, and pray. Often my father would quote the first verse from a chapter in the Bible for a night or two and then he would move on to the second verse, and my mother would quote the first. And then, as they moved up another verse my sister, Sarah, would be assigned the first and then my older brother, (Jon) Tal; so, ordinarily I would already know each new verse by the time it became my responsibility to quote it. By this method I'm sure I had several full chapters of the Bible memorized before I started to school.

We lived on a small, wooded farm outside of Wedowee (we-DOW-ee), Alabama. My father had been appointed pastor of the northern Methodist church in Wedowee shortly after he and Mother married. Then, when the northern and southern churches unified, Daddy "localized" and the pastor of the southern church became pastor of the combined congregation. Dad, in turn, was appointed to smaller, rural churches in the county and began teaching English (and later Latin) in high school as our family's primary source of income.

There were five of us children. I was the middle, and my younger two brothers were born after Dad began teaching. When they got old enough to be left with a sitter, Mother started teaching, too.

Wallace Murphree

We children and Mother usually attended Sunday morning and evening worship services at our home church in Wedowee and often Wednesday night prayer meeting as well. In summers, we worked on the farm during the day but would attend the evening sessions during the church's revival meeting week, as well as those of the neighboring country churches where my father pastored.

Our big event each summer was Camp Meeting. After the crops were laid by we would pack our clothes for the ten-day stay in a cabin on Brasher's Springs camp ground some eighty miles away, where my grandfather (and later my father) was vice president. Here three main services and a special youth service were held daily, and prayer meetings and Bible study sessions often emerged between times. There would always be spirited and joyful music, and the evangelists would bring powerful messages that would conclude with moving invitations for sinners to repent and the saved to become sanctified.

During these early years I had no reason to doubt this religious interpretation of everything. Indeed, it didn't occur to me that it might be an "interpretation" at all (in the sense that alternative interpretations might be advanced); instead, the details of this world picture were simply taken as facts, and the existence of God was as unchallenged as the existence of gravity.

Furthermore, like gravity, the alleged religious facts seemed to be borne out in my experience. For example, from an early age I would feel Satan tempting me to disobey my parents, and I could sense the Holy Spirit urging me to do what was right. Also, I would feel God's presence in church, at Camp Meeting, in family devotions, and often alone on the farm; and these emotions were nearly as easily identifiable as anger, love, or fear.

Moreover, so far as I knew, every acquaintance of my youth held essentially this same view; at least they all believed that the God of Christianity exists. Of course, there were plenty of "sinners" around. But they all believed in God and intended to give up the life of sin

From Faith to Doubt...and Life as a Failed Believer

and get forgiveness before they died, for otherwise they believed they would be eternally “lost,” and go to hell. (The first professing atheist I remember meeting was when I was in the army.)

I’m not sure, but I think I may have had a passing doubt about the existence of God when I learned that Santa Claus was not real. It seems I remember wondering how old children would be when the adults confessed that the God-story is also a fairy tale. But it was a year or two later, when I was in the third grade, that I had my first really disturbing doubt. The class had read a piece in the *Weekly Reader* about Eskimos which included a vivid description of day-to-day life of a boy our own age. It provided accounts of dress, diet, chores, living conditions, family relationships, and a little about the religious beliefs and practices of his community. The teacher asked us to imagine ourselves being born and living there. I enjoyed the exercise, and could nearly pretend myself to be the Eskimo boy—except for the religion, because I “knew” it was wrong. However, I tried very hard, for two or three days at least, to see everything from his point of view. It was difficult for me to hold onto my ideas, and I would lose track and have to repeat my thoughts again and again. For starters each time, I would suppose the Eskimo boy received a *Weekly Reader* telling about a boy in Alabama (me), our ways, and our religion; then I took turns imaging myself to be that Eskimo boy, and then letting myself be me.

As myself, I *knew* the Eskimo boy accepted a false religion, but I realized that he accepted it because his parents taught him it was true and all his friends and acquaintances agreed with it. Then, as the Eskimo boy, I *thought I knew* the Alabama boy accepted a false religion, but that he likewise accepted it because that was what his parents taught him and it was what all his friends and acquaintances believed. But this was as close as I could bring the two positions to compare—: I *knew* his religion was wrong, but he just *thought he knew* that my religion was wrong.

Wallace Murphree

I realized that if I had been born to his parents, I would believe as he did, and that if he had been born to my parents, he would believe as I did. Still I just couldn't allow credence to the possibility that his view might actually be correct and mine false, although I came so close that it frightened me—which I thought must be a warning from the Holy Spirit.

The one point of difference I arrived at that finally allowed me some peace was that my parents were better educated than his; so, I concluded, if Christianity had been false, my school-teaching parents would surely have discovered it already. Deep down I may have known this answer would not do in the long run, but it did allow me to turn loose of the matter at the time.

Although our religion held that belief was a prerequisite for salvation, I was not concerned about losing mine once I had turned loose of the Eskimo boy exercise. Rather, I just assumed that the more I learned and understood, the more obvious the truth of the teachings would become.

However, I did worry about going to hell when I died; but I felt my greatest danger came from the possibility that I might be temporarily lured into sinful pleasure and then, like a "dope fiend," become spiritually blinded until I would have passed the point of no return. Of course, I promised myself again and again never to venture into such sin, but I knew that even the sincerest vows might yield to temptation if they were simply made and forgotten. So in an attempt to keep my vows from becoming casual and weak, I would often quote a haunting poem to myself about a boy whose promises failed, and whose life became "wrecked by the wine cup." The final lines were:

After the days of childhood
After a mother's prayer
After the years of manhood
Freighted with joys and care
After a thousand chances

From Faith to Doubt...and Life as a Failed Believer

After the final call
Bitter the wail of the spirit:
*Lost after all!*¹

¹ Charlie D. Tillman, *Select Revival Songs*, ed. Rev. E.B. Farrar (Dalton GA: The A.J. Showalter Co., Dalton GA, 1897), 101. [Instructions read: Can be sung to the tune "After the Ball."]

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