

Doubting theology: A faith worthy of doubt

by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

How do Christians understand their faith in light of insights gained from history, social science, natural science and other modes of inquiry? How, for example, do Christians understand the book of Genesis in light of scientific investigations into the origin of the universe and of the species? How do they understand theological references to sin in light of scientific accounts of genetically determined behavior? Such questions have been at the heart of modern theology and especially that sprawling tradition known as “liberal theology.”

In *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt (Fortress)*, published this year, James M. Gustafson considers the ways that secular modes of inquiry—and their results—have been absorbed, accommodated or rejected by theologians. The book reflects Gustafson’s concern, evident through his career as a theologian and ethicist, to engage people in other professions and thinkers in other disciplines. It also reveals his dissatisfaction with recent “postmodern” or “postliberal” efforts that seek—in his view—to avoid scientific, social-scientific or other constructions of reality.

In these pages [William C. Placher](#), [P. Travis Kroeker](#) and S. Mark Heim comment on Gustafson’s account, and [Gustafson responds](#).

The great virtue of liberal Protestantism was that it submitted Christianity to tests it could fail. If Christianity cannot meet the norms of contemporary secular historical study, the rigor of current scientific explanations or neutral comparison with other religions, liberalism was willing to render an honest verdict: Christianity must be changed. However therapeutically transforming it may be for me or however comprehensively its narrative may order my world, if a version of Christianity is not true, I must exchange it for one that is or give it up altogether. One cannot draw interest on the bank account of some grand, meaningful narrative while remaining indifferent to whether each individual check that funds it is overdrawn against

shared standards of rationality and credibility.

There is an admirable intellectual asceticism in the best exemplars of this conviction, who embraced the self-doubt that modernity introduced to religion as a spiritual discipline as well as a rational obligation. It is in such a spirit that James Gustafson surveys the current religious scene. He is not pleased by what he sees. Across the spectrum from left to right, Christian thinkers and leaders finesse questions of consistency that are obvious even to a college sophomore. How does religious discourse, its claims and descriptions, relate to the many other concrete explanatory languages of biology, anthropology or history? Does Christian talk of sin and redemption have anything to do, for instance, with research on brain function and religious experience or sociobiological accounts of the development of our psychology and morality? Are they talking about the same thing in different ways, or are they not talking about the same thing at all?

Gustafson's question is a simple one: how do these ways of describing the world fit together? How does language of God's action work in relation to a scientific view of nature or to a social scientific view of humanity?

Gustafson's low-key jeremiad critiques contemporary religious thinkers (especially "postliberals") for their failure to accommodate Christian beliefs to the descriptive perspectives of the natural and social sciences. Theological extremes oddly converge in a flight from engagement with this challenge. With sophisticated jargon or pragmatic indifference, they avoid the task, while denigrating the liberal theology that once made it central.

In Gustafson's view, the post-Enlightenment perspective announced by some thinkers is neither possible nor desirable. In fact, some form of accommodation is always going on, or religious language would hardly be intelligible at all. As he puts it, "The trajectory and agenda of the classic forms of liberal Protestant theology are alive even in the Christian coroners who have certified its death."

But this accommodation is largely episodic, rationally ungrounded and culturally facile. The crisp rational confrontations that liberalism cultivated are few and the resulting self-criticism correspondingly rare.

The result, Gustafson says, is an excess of certainty in religious declamation, found for instance in contentions that terrorist attacks on New York reflected God's judgment on the U.S. for its moral failings. Whether this dogma comes from the right

(the moral failings are family dissolution and secularism) or the left (the moral failings are imperialism and greed) such categorical prophecy feels no need to tether its conclusions to sober empirical studies of history, economics or science.

Gustafson's liberalism is an honorable creed. It could hardly have a more admirable champion. But a creed that exalts doubt might entertain a few more doubts about its own universality and objectivity, particularly as it is a certain perceived absolutism in the older liberalism that led to the divergent movements that vex him.

Gustafson is well aware that claims of objective universality for scientific prescriptions and social scientific knowledge have been sharply contested in recent decades, though in these lectures he allows no good reasons why that might be so. He repeats the challenge to Christian thought to stand up to the bar of history, science and comparative religion, exhibiting a relatively untroubled certainty that each of these is an objective and unequivocal authority. But is not the questioning of such assumptions an example of the very doubt he commends? And are not the extremes this questioning has reached—extremes he so effectively critiques—in part a reflection of the absolutizing of his preferred principle of critical self-examination? We are on a well-beaten path when we ask if the liberalism of self-doubt can be sustained on a ground about which it requires agnosticism. Some nontenuous conviction is needed to convince us that the examined faith he commends is an unequivocal duty or path toward God.

Nor is the landscape quite as uniform as Gustafson argues. Much of modern conservative Protestantism continues to argue precisely for the conformity of religious convictions with a supposed scientific model. A strong stream in its literature is thick with empirical appeals for proof, with apologists as likely to use Bayesian logic as Derrida. The intelligent-design movement may be faulted on many scores, but surely in comparison with earlier contestations of evolution it is notable for making a step up in scientific rigor rather than a step down.

At the other end of the spectrum, postliberals are attacked by Gustafson because their approach is an expedient conformity to postmodern fads they have caught from other disciplines. This is a backhanded acknowledgment that these theologians are working at the very intersections with contemporary disciplines (literary, anthropological and historical) that Gustafson claims they have deserted. The currents of postmodern insularity and dogmatic parochialism are strong in regions of the humanities and social sciences, in secular and political forms. It is not so much

that those Gustafson critiques have turned their backs on accommodation. They are simply accommodating what he regards as the wrong kind of academic company: postmodern trends in literary and social studies.

“Scriptural reasoning” or “thinking through a tradition” may in his view be trendy excuses for insularity—telling our own story to ourselves and ignoring other voices. But practitioners in these areas have fostered some decidedly cross-disciplinary and cross-religious conversations. When Jews, Christians, Hindus and Muslims get together to talk about scriptural reasoning together, this is not exactly insularity. He may object that they are sheltering together from the blunt critical historical questions they should be confronting, but one could hardly argue that they are hiding from the interreligious ones. In fact, such dialogue seems an enhancement of an examined faith, not an abdication of it.

Behind the recent diminished confidence in atomistic rationality stands a sense that there is a holistic dimension to religious practice and belief that requires us to draw out connections and structures (narrative structure being one of these). This is not necessarily a flight from rational accountability: it is an observation that some tests (not to the exclusion of tests of individual components) can be carried out only on wholes as opposed to parts.

Can Christian perspectives produce distinctive insights into the understanding of complex issues? To answer that question requires one to construct and coordinate a variety of Christian sources into a meaningful whole that then proves to have value and intelligibility or does not. One does not wait until every individual link in the chain has been demonstrably verified before assessing if it can support something. In any event, the verdict on many links can never be more than a matter of probability. Even in the hard sciences, the idealized “decisive experiment” is rare, and one uses theories that are only possibly true in order to make predictions and test coherence and meaning. Success or failure of such efforts is one of the ways to test the level of acceptance such theories deserve.

Gustafson suggests that concern for the larger picture and grand narratives is simply flight from accountability and dialogue. At least part of the time he may be right. But why isn’t the development of such interpretive forms just an additional kind of test and dialogue alongside others? Religion could be deeply significant, in hypothetical terms, but actually prove false, failing to bear up under examination. This is the caution Gustafson rightly wants us to remember. But religion could also

be true in most of its component particulars and still prove essentially irrelevant or counterproductive as a source for ordering and transforming human life, likewise failing to bear up under examination of a slightly different sort.

Granting that in some form Christianity may be defensible, the questions arise: Does anything of significance flow from that? What difference might it make? As I understand it, postliberalism is asking those questions. If Christian faith cannot, even theoretically, offer distinctive levels of insight into the world we describe through the use of our other tools, cannot offer different ways of being in that world, then it is pointless to expend much energy testing its components.

Religions occasionally pass away because some central particular becomes incredible and untenable. Christianity with its footing in history holds itself out as especially vulnerable to this possibility. The sensitivity to this point in Gustafson and classical liberalism is a profoundly Christian instinct.

But religions as often pass away not because of a decisive shift in the ability to salvage any particular but because the whole seems insufficiently meaningful to support even modest exertion to accommodate its particulars with other perspectives. A strong, world-altering faith may be liable to error and exaggeration. It desperately needs the grace of self-doubt. A parsed, tentative, accommodating faith may be liable to triviality and indifference. It needs the grace to venture in uncertainty, to doubt its doubts, as Tillich put it.

The more that religion converges and identifies with what is known to be true in other disciplines, the less it can support a critical perspective on them. The more sharply it contrasts with them, the more doubt will be turned against religion. Accommodation has the virtue of diminishing cognitive dissonance and tension, but it is far from clear that this is an exclusive good. Rather it seems that there are competing virtues. Doubt about religious formulations is important. But relatively well-developed religious formulations are an important resource for maintaining an "examined life." Their very tension with established conventions provides a perspective for critique of the dominant views of the age.

A clear concrete gap between religious narrative and mundane descriptions is essential if faith is to support alternatives to the cultural norms. Such a gap is also necessary if religion is to provide a bridge for individuals and communities from one accommodation to another.

It is a cliché to note the rate of change in knowledge and assumed knowledge today. Accommodation is a task with a bewildering number of moving targets. An Augustine or an Aquinas might produce a synthesis that flourishes for centuries. But just as one job is unlikely to make a career today, so one adaptation of belief is unlikely to suffice for a lifetime. In such a situation, there is even more need for large and flexible constructs of faith that can make sense of the transitions themselves.

The ethical and spiritual imperative to be honest, to be specific and to be modest is as valuable as Gustafson says it is. Yet it will not suffice alone, nor is it immune to the diminishing returns of extremism. The tension, the gap we just discussed, requires that religion makes sense in and of the world we think we already know, but not too much sense. It must also make sense of a world we don't yet see, at the very least a dramatic transmutation of our historical one and at the most a reconstituted reality.

As we face new challenges, one difficulty is that our feet are often set too firmly in the concrete of earlier, detailed accommodations. Many Christians, for instance, resisted the Copernican revolution because they had come to identify the Ptolemaic cosmology with the Bible, forgetting that only with difficulty and continuing tension had earlier Christians managed to integrate Ptolemaic "knowledge"—that the center of the universe where earth was located was intrinsically the supreme point of corruption and imperfection, for instance—with basic convictions such as the goodness of creation or the incarnation of God. That is no argument against the need for accommodation. It is a caution that we can suffer from both too little and too much success in meeting it.

We live in a world where meanings are the things most worth passing on, not because they are an escape from the struggle for truth but because only such meanings face up to a central truth of our existence: it is a story in which we and all we know and make end. A faith that does not face this has not even begun to be examined, and such examination places a seed of doubt over all our discoveries and achievements.

On the other hand, we live in a world where we can never limit in advance the mystery of reality and the scope of novelty. Religious faith can be challenged as imagination running far beyond any empirical basis. But in our time it is as likely to be challenged because its range is too prosaic, its notions of mystery too small.

Accommodation is not only an apologetic, defensive necessity but an avenue toward renewed wonder. Modest and sober examination of our scientific frontiers is likely to expand and not diminish the dimensions of religious awe, even as it tests our ability to reconstruct our traditions.

The honest questioning Gustafson commends is valuable on both fronts. The parties to his quarrel really have a common venture. We search for a faith that is neither a flight from the world's questions into its own conventions nor an assent to the world's conventions that leaves them untroubled by faith's questions. Though the modes of their testing may vary, liberals, postliberals and evangelicals alike seek a faith that is worthy of doubt.