

ZONDERVAN

The Sacredness of Questioning Everything
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Never What You Have in Mind

Questioning God

What do I love when I love my God?

Augustine of Hippo

Remember to love your neighbor as you love yourself.
And if you hate yourself, then please—
just leave your neighbor alone.

Jon Stewart

Dig, if you're willing, this picture: a tiny town with a tight-knit community. The people share joys and concerns, woes and gossip. They keep a close and often affectionate watch on one another's business. They talk and talk and talk.

What an outsider would notice within minutes of listening in on conversations are constant and slightly self-conscious references to "Uncle Ben." A beautiful sunset prompts a towns person to say, "Isn't Uncle Ben awesome?" Good news brings out how thankful and overjoyed they feel toward Uncle Ben. Even in tragedy, a local might say, in a slightly nervous fashion, "You know, it just goes to show how much we all need Uncle Ben. I know—we all know—that Uncle Ben is good."

Uncle Ben is always on their minds.

Even when the magnificence of Uncle Ben isn't spoken of aloud, he's somehow present in facial expressions and actions. It's

the look of stopping a train of thought before it goes too far, of letting an uncompleted sentence trail off into awkward silence, of swiftly changing the subject. It's as if a conversation can go only so far. People hardly ever look one another in the eye for long.

At the beginning of each week there's a meeting in the largest house in town. Upon arriving, people get caught up in good fellowship and animated discussion of the week's events, with conversations straining in the direction of Uncle Ben. When a bell sounds, talk ceases. Everyone moves to the staircase and descends into the basement. Each person sits facing an enormous, rumbling furnace. Seated close to the furnace door, as if he were a part of the furnace itself, is a giant man in black overalls. His back is turned to them.

They wait in silence. In time the man turns around. His face is angry, contorted. He fixes a threatening stare of barely contained rage on each person, then roars, "Am I good?"

To which they respond in unison, "Yes, Uncle Ben, you are good."

"Am I worthy of praise?"

"You alone are worthy of our praise."

"Do you love me more than anything? More than anyone?"

"We love you and you alone, Uncle Ben."

"You better love me, or I'm going to put you . . . in here" —he opens the furnace door to reveal a gaping darkness—"forever."

Out of the darkness can be heard sounds of anguish and lament. Then he closes the furnace door and turns his back to them. They sit in silence.

Finally, feeling reasonably assured that Uncle Ben has finished saying what he has to say, they leave. They live their lives as best they can. They try to think and speak truthfully and do well by one another. They resume their talk of the wonders of Uncle Ben's love in anticipation of the next week's meeting.

But they're limited, in myriad ways, by fear. Fear causes them to censor their own thoughts and words. Fear prevents them from telling anyone of their inner anguish and fright. Fear keeps them from recognizing in one another's eyes their common desperation. This fear is interwoven, subtly and sometimes not so subtly, in all of their relationships.

End of story.

I find this story both jarring and entirely familiar. It captures some of my worst fears concerning the character of God. And I suspect a good number of people live their lives haunted by a nightmare similar to this one. Perhaps you entertain fears like these. Perhaps Uncle Ben forms your image of the divine even now.

Something akin to the Uncle Ben image might be what a lot of people refer to when they speak of religion as the worst thing that ever happened to them, a nightmare that damages everything it touches. We might protest that there's much more to religion than such tales of terror. But I find it hard to deny that the image of Uncle Ben lurks within an awful lot of what is called popular religious belief.

Uncle Ben might be the best-selling version of an all-powerful deity, a great and powerful Wizard of Oz-type who refuses to be questioned and threatens anyone who dares to doubt or protest. Fear constrains many to call this God good and loving, ignoring what they feel inwardly. The less reverent candidly observe that this God is the perfect model for a brutal dictator, the cosmic crime boss who runs everything and expects us to be grateful. Trying to satisfy such a God while also getting through a work-day, trying to balance a checkbook, and being moderately attentive to the needs of others can take a certain emotional toll.

Loving God

For a long time, I was in the habit of praying a prayer (“I love you, Lord”) that was something of a gamble, like Pascal’s wager.¹ I wasn’t sure I loved this God at all. In fact, I believed this Uncle Ben-like God was unlovable, determined to consign most of humanity to eternal torment for believing the wrong things. But, given the terrifying outcome of not loving him, I sensibly said I loved and believed in him anyway. If, somehow, I succeeded in loving this God, lucky me. And if I didn’t love him, I’d be more or less damned anyway.

Having faith in this brand of God is akin to Orwell’s “double-think”—a disturbing mind trick by which we don’t let ourselves know what’s really going on in our minds for fear of what might follow. We learn to deny what we think and feel. The resulting mind-set is one of all fear all the time, a fear that can render us incapable of putting two and two together. Never quite free to *say* what we *see*.

When we think of belief intertwined with such fear, we might begin to wonder if self-professed believers caught in the grip of unseemly ideologies, religious or otherwise, are as fully convinced of what they claim to believe as they appear to be. Many are trying to prove their ultimate commitment by eliminating doubt—and fear—ridding themselves of the last vestiges of independent thought through force of will. Responding to the push that demands as much can become a kind of survival instinct. We do it without thinking about it. We witness the loss of independent thinking in a wide variety of settings—in offices, training camps, schools, political parties, clubs, families, and other religious assemblies. We’re instructed to believe and to silence our questions and our imaginations. Like Orwell’s Big Brother, Uncle Ben thrives when questioning is out of the question.

Open-ended questions such as “What on earth are we doing here?” and “Are we going crazy?” might occasionally give us enough air to keep breathing, but we’re very often suffocating. We have just enough religion to be afraid as we go through our days, as we wake up and fall asleep. We feel pressure to believe—or pretend to believe—that God is love, while suspecting with a sinking feeling that God likes almost no one.

William Blake captured this hateful spirit most effectively by naming him *Nobodaddy* (nobody’s daddy, non-father, Father of Jealousy). As a being of hatefulness and perpetual accusation, Uncle Ben might be called a Satanic perversion of the idea of God. However we choose to name him, his voice (or its voice) is at work within our world.

For the record, I don’t believe in the nonloving, fear-producing image that is Uncle Ben, but I hasten to add that I’m not without my own doubts. The intensity of the struggle ebbs and flows. When people ask, “Are you sure God isn’t like Uncle Ben?” I tend to reply, “Most of the time.”

Deliverance Begins with Questions

I readily confess that, in my darkest hours, the fear of an Uncle Ben, *Nobodaddy*-driven universe still has a hold on me, even as I hope and pray that my children and their children will find such an unworthy image of God to be almost comical. In my own religious upbringing, nobody ever told me that the Creator of the universe was a hellish handler of human beings. But as a child, I had a way of filling in the blanks with my imagination. Images sprang out of what I was told must be in the Bible somewhere. And some very dark ideas arose when talk of baptism and the age of accountability and assurance of salvation came up. I suppose such prospects motivated me, at least partially, to *share* my faith

with other people. But would I really be doing others a favor if I managed to convince them of my own little nightmare? What should one do with a Nobodaddy on the brain? Is deliverance possible?

I believe deliverance begins with questions. It begins with people who *love* questions, people who *live with* questions and *by* questions, people who feel a deep joy when good questions are asked. When we meet these people—some living, some through history and art—things begin to change. Something is let loose. When we're exposed to the liveliness of holding everything up to the light of good questions—what I call “sacred questioning”—we discover that redemption is creeping into the way we think, believe, and see the world. This *re-deeming* (re-valuing) of what we've made of our lives, a redemption that perhaps begins with the insertion of a question mark beside whatever feels final and absolute and *beyond* questioning, gives our souls a bit of elbow room, a space in which to breathe and imagine again, as if for the first time.

I had specific convictions concerning God and sin and eternity, but I also understood that my concepts, however well I might articulate them, were flawed, broken, and always in need of rehabilitation. When I heard Leonard Cohen proclaim in his song “Anthem” that there are cracks in absolutely everything, I sensed he was describing my life. The cracks, Cohen croons, as if we should all know it by now, are how the light shines in, and it is only by remaining aware of our imperfections that we remain open to redemption and reform. When we have questions, illumination is possible. Otherwise we're closed and no light can enter.

My inner Nobodaddy remained. Something clicked when a woman in northern Ireland told me her own Uncle Ben story. She said she'd heard it from the Jesuit priest Gerard Hughes.² Until I heard her story, I didn't have a good way of talking about this

binding, bad concept of God. I might even say that I didn't know this death-dealing negative image was there. I didn't know what had hold of me. The story, as stories will, prompted a lot of questions concerning the presumed goodness of God, the idea that *God is love*, and what it might mean to affirm, as I do, that God conquers rather than sponsors death.

The light began to shine through the cracks. Stories, I find, help the light to shine.

Move On

In no small way, I think I owe my ability to hear and interpret stories to my Granddaddy Dark, a farmer, a minister, and a math professor with precise ideas concerning the way the parts of the Bible all add up into the irrefutable, always logical word of God. He saw no use of musical instruments in the New Testament accounts of the early church, so worship services he conducted did not use them. It was rumored that he once broke with a congregation when a kitchen was to be added to the church—there being no mention of attached cooking facilities in his King James Version.

But near the end of his life, my grandfather spake unto my father a saving word that was handed down to me. Seated in the car with my father, he observed that all the straight lines he'd drawn in the sand concerning what God wanted and what the Bible said were drawn because, as far as he could tell, this is what the Lord had spoken. "But," he told my father, "if it ever turns out that I'm wrong about these things, any of it, move on."

I don't suppose Granddaddy Dark will ever be characterized as a postmodern Christian, and he wasn't what could be called a moral relativist. But he did understand he was a pilgrim whose progress would prove to be finite, limited, and all too human in

the grand scheme of things. He had his religion—those practices and ideas to which he committed himself—but he also understood, religiously, that he didn't *have* God. He knew that his attempt to understand God was relative to where he stood in space and time and that God's purposes might be borne witness to even as they wouldn't be contained, exactly, by any religion. In this sense, he didn't want my father to feel duty bound to remain in a stagnant religion. My father's duty was to honor his father by questioning him and by keeping his view of God open to question too. And, should it ever prove necessary, he would honor him most by moving on.

As something of an open-minded fundamentalist, my grandfather held tightly to what he thought he knew in faith. What else can one do? But he also understood that *as far as he knew* and *as far as he could tell* weren't far at all. He even remained open to the possibility that he was most wrong when he was most intensely sure of his rightness. Call it a religious sensibility.

This admission strikes us as counterintuitive in a culture that so often views *staying the course* as a virtue in itself. This is the madness that comedian Stephen Colbert lampoons with the term *truthiness*, that sense of what's true that trades the demands of critical discernment for what Colbert calls "the gut brain"—go ahead with your gut no matter what and call it strength of purpose, improvising an insane justification for your own folly as you go. Against this all too common culture of insane self-assertion, the expressions "as far as I can tell" and "as far as I know" and "to my knowledge" signal a vigilant awareness concerning our own limitations. I'd like to see this self-criticism more frequently displayed by pundits, politicians, and professional religious figures who confuse their gut feelings for integrity and a changed mind for weakness. What the pundits call wishy-washiness, the Bible calls repentance. I understand there's no salvation without it. While

pride and self-satisfaction might play well on TV, the Lord detests the proud face.³ It's the look of impenetrable ignorance. It doesn't ask questions. It has no reverse gear and won't admit to ever flip-flopping. When there is no soul-searching, is the soul still there?

Various traditions affirm self-questioning as wisdom, the posture of being ever prepared to receive the revelation that you are deeply mistaken. My grandfather might have cited the apostle Paul's observation that we all see reality "through a glass, darkly."⁴ The need to think otherwise—that we always know what we're talking about, that we're objective, that we know where we stand and where we're coming from—might be one of the burdens my grandfather believed he was being delivered from by the grace of God. Perhaps he hoped to help my father remain open to the sweet, saving realization that we don't actually understand much of anything. There is a joy in knowing that you're only a human being among other human beings, all of us dreadfully cracked and in need of mending. My fundamentalist grandfather, for one sacred, saving moment, confessed to his sense that, despite his sincerest efforts, he was doubtless a naive idolater in one way or another. My father took him at his word.

Sacred Questioning

As an inheritor of this sensibility, my father never met a joke he didn't like. He liked jokes because they have the power to break through our tidy realities and our small, defensive kingdoms. He suspected that the Bible and other religious texts, when read properly and seriously, would function like jokes, uproariously ripping down whatever we thought we knew about the way things are. He figured these religious texts were always building up something new, undoing our doctrines, taming our religious pride—in short, humbling our imaginations *and* liberating them. He found

the comedy of it all to be divine. It was as if he believed lightness of spirit to be a biblical imperative, a religious duty.

I don't think of the Uncle Ben story as a joke, although when I tell it out loud, I sometimes do find myself laughing. It's not funny in a laugh-until-it-hurts way, but funny like a song by the Decembrists or a Terry Gilliam film, funny because it's true and all too familiar. Telling the Uncle Ben story aloud gives us the space to question it, to examine it, and, finally, to protest it.

There was a time in my life when I viewed the Uncle Ben story, despite its nightmarish quality, as an accurate depiction of the way things work. Protesting it would have seemed cosmically useless, given that this God doesn't suffer questions, doubts, or complaints. But I eventually came to suspect that any God who is nervous, defensive, or angry in the face of questions is a false god. I began to realize that I often ascribed to God the traits of people who are ill at ease, anxious, and occasionally hateful and who even presume from time to time to speak on God's behalf. I began to wonder if the Bible backs up the contemptuousness they carry around.

Over time, the Bible ceased to be a catalog of all the things one has to believe (or pretend to believe) in order to not go to hell. Instead, the Bible became a broad, multifaceted collection of people crying out to God—a collection of close encounters with the God who is present, somehow, in those very cries. Far from being an anthology of greeting-card material, those accounts of joy, anger, lamentation, and hope are all bound up in the most formidable array of social criticism ever assembled in one volume.

And Christianity, far from being a tradition in which doubts and questions are suppressed in favor of uncritical, blind faith, began to assume the form of a robust culture in which anything can be asked and everything can be said. The call to worship is a call to complete candor and radical questioning—questioning

the way things are, the way we are, and the way things ought to be. As G. K. Chesterton observed, the New Testament portrays a God who, by being wholly present in the dying cry of Jesus of Nazareth, even doubted and questioned himself.⁵ The summons to sacred questioning—like the call to honesty, like the call to prayer—is a call to be true and to let the chips fall where they may. This call to worship is deeper than the call to sign off on a checklist of particular tenets or beliefs. It is also more difficult.

Some version of the Uncle Ben story works its way like an ominous thread throughout history and is woven throughout various religious traditions. There is no proof against it. Natural and man-made disasters seem to confirm the logic of Uncle Ben. We can feel it. We can testify to it.

Life does, indeed, feel this way. It appears that only wickedness prospers, that might makes right, and that things don't seem to be changing for the better. The poet, the prophet, the psalmist, and the singer are among the first to say so.

This is an image of God that can be discerned in environmental devastation, cutthroat consumerism, and economic Darwinism, whose reflection is especially evident in the paving over of paradise with parking lots, whose will, it is assumed, underwrites the plundering of natural resources that advertises itself as progress and efficiency, whose affections don't extend to those consigned to an early death by virtue of where they were born, those the God of "progress" is willing to leave behind.

But this image of God *will not suffice*. We must resist, in word and deed, this God who is no God at all. Determined to look evil squarely in the eye, the tradition of sacred questioning is driven to insist: this can't be right. There's a conspiracy of hope afoot, a beleaguered assembly of voices determined to oppose the apparent power of evil in the world. There are cracks and fissures in the prison walls, and light is shining in. There's a way out, and

the big, black boot of power (Orwell's image) won't be pressed on the human face forever. Another world—a world of hope and love—can exist among us. Maybe God isn't against such a world. Maybe God is *for* it, *behind* it, and *within* it in ways we have yet to understand. Maybe God is never *not* redeeming and has long been at work among people in our past and our present who cultivate more redemptive ways of being in the world. And maybe this redemption is even now under way, on the earth, as it already is in the heavens.

You Have to Believe It, and You Hate It

One of my favorite instances of an exchange between a dire, dutiful, fear-driven view of God and a lively, determined curiosity occurs in the back of a pickup truck in the film version of Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*.

Throughout the film, ten-year-old Jess Aarons has his sense of competitiveness, propriety, and what's fair questioned by a creative, free-spirited ten-year-old girl named Leslie Burke. In the woods adjoining their homes, they journey out on a daily basis to adventure in an imaginary realm they created. Their play, centered around an old dilapidated tree house they've reassembled, regularly calls into existence the magical kingdom of Terabithia.

One Friday, when they've been rained out, Jess laments that Saturday's chores will take precedence over Terabithia and that he's got church the next day. When Leslie asks if she can come, Jess feels certain she will hate church (females are expected to wear dresses), but Leslie insists, suspecting she'll find it all incredibly cool.

"I'm really glad I came," she observes on the ride home with Jess and his little sister, May Belle, in the back of a truck. "That whole Jesus thing is really interesting, isn't it? . . . It's really kind of a beautiful story."

Reared to believe that Christianity is never to be talked about in such casual tones, May Belle protests with an exasperated lisp, “It ain’t beautiful. It’s *scary!* Nailing holes right through somebody’s hand.”

Then Jess chimes in, “May Belle’s right. It’s because we’re all vile sinners that God made Jesus die.”

“You really think that’s true?” Leslie asks.

“It’s in the Bible, Leslie,” Jess interjects with a tone of resigned finality, as if such grim consent to the bleak ways of the divine is where all rightly informed people eventually arrive.

“You *have* to believe it, but you *hate* it,” Leslie notes with a puzzled smile. “I don’t have to believe it, and I think it’s beautiful.”

“You gotta believe the Bible, Leslie,” May Belle asserts, interrupting Leslie’s meditation.

“Why?” Leslie asks.

“‘Cause if you don’t believe in the Bible, God’ll damn you to hell when you die.”

Taken aback by the image of God as an angry judge who would consign those who fail to believe rightly to eternal agony and by the difficulties of reconciling this image of a God known most fully in Jesus, Leslie asks for her source. May Belle can’t quote chapter and verse, but she can turn to Jess, who reluctantly agrees that somewhere in the Bible it can be plainly discerned that failure to comply with its contents will result in a fate worse than death.

“Well,” Leslie said, “I don’t think so. I seriously do not think God goes around damning people to hell. He’s too busy running all *this*.”

And Leslie raises her arms (it seems to me in praise) to signal an awareness of the wind, the sky, the trees, and the entire bright and beautiful landscape through which they’re driving.

Leslie doesn’t step into this age-old conversation with an

argument; she enlivens it with a witness. She calls on her peers to behold along with her the majesty of the wonderfully weird world they're in. She asks them to consider the possibility that their view of the Creator might be limited, mean, and perhaps a little tacky. She dares to imagine that God's redemptive purposes extend to life *before* death as well as after. In her limited experience of their religious tradition, she senses that the call to worshipfulness continues outside of their weekly "worship service." She even reckons that, one way or another, "that whole Jesus thing" is a call to revere others, ourselves, and our surroundings more intensely, a call to esteem life sacredly.

Maybe questions are how it happens. Maybe God *likes* questions.

Politics of Reverence

Suggesting that questioning is crucial to a life of devotion to God runs counter to many accounts of the meaning of religion, but the notion is borne out in the deep, life-bearing streams of many religious traditions. The religious impulse begins with a sense of awe, a sense of not knowing the fullness of what we're looking at. It is only when we're blessed by a feeling of finitude that we can begin to perceive the holy, that sense of a whole before which our limited understanding is dwarfed.

A work of art such as *Bridge to Terabithia* can sometimes bring us to this place. A view of the Grand Canyon can too. Images taken from the Hubble telescope can shut us up for a moment. Take a talkative three-year-old to the zoo, and you will note that out of silence and a sense of awe come questions. Religion is born out of questions, not answers. Only a twisted, unimaginative mind-set resists awe in favor of self-satisfied certainty.

We often call such a mind-set "fundamentalist," but we might

simply call it “bad religion.” And for the sake of humility—a characteristic crucial to sacred questioning—we might do well to confess that we’re capable at any moment of such bad religion ourselves. We’re capable of reducing other people to a cartoon character or caricature. We tend to be unwilling to treat what we perceive to be the opposition in a proper manner. Instead of dealing with others with a sense of graciousness and fair-mindedness, we devalue them in the very ways we fear they devalue us.

More humility might characterize our talk of God if we believe that the whole truth can never be entirely ours and that our attempts to nail God down are always well-intentioned human constructs at best and idols at worst. We might become more self-aware and pay closer attention to how our ideas about God affect the way we treat other people. We might commit ourselves to asking and receiving questions. Living this way, *anyone*—even someone sporting an offensive bumper sticker—might be a bearer of the wisdom we need and a speaker of a word from the Lord. Perhaps we should occasionally place our hands together like Buddhists and bow to them. Or, as a Celtic prayer has it, we might sense the spirit of Christ in the heart of the one we speak to *and* the one we listen to.

When we don’t speak agreeably to someone with whom we disagree and don’t know how to ask questions because we think we already possess most answers, we’re practicing bad religion. We aren’t curious or kind (save to our fellow believers), and we can’t be made to question, even for a moment, our fear-hardened beliefs. As best-selling atheist Christopher Hitchens put it, we’re breathing in the religion that poisons everything.

This refusal to question, to listen, and to think past a certain point has tragic consequences, easily discerned in the morning headlines. Self-described people of God are wreaking havoc in our world. They revere their own faith, but their irreverence for

the faith of others is the loudest voice in the room. Perhaps that irreverence for others is an unconscious attempt to make peace with the Uncle Ben God. The God of our false beliefs seems pitiless, so maybe we're supposed to be as well. Maybe that's how we get on his good side. Maybe that's how we (gulp) make peace with him. But at what price? Is dwelling in nervous, habitual hostility toward most people, the people with whom we disagree, a form of peace, salaam, or shalom in any verifiable or discernible way? Are we mistaking our religion for our God?

I believe the living God calls us to refuse to “make peace” with such idols. Instead, we're called to wrestle with a God more complex and more deeply affectionate toward all of life than whatever God we have in mind. Due reverence toward other people, in this sense, is a work that is never complete, a work that is ever before us. Anything less is bad worship, bad theology, and a plain old bad idea. As that very famous prayer involving debts and trespasses reminds us, the peace we make (or don't make) with others—those who vote differently or believe differently or who happen to have been born in a different country—is the same peace we have (or don't have) with our Maker. Peace with God and peace with others are never separate issues. When we say we love God while hating others, we lie and the truth is not in us.⁶

I'd like to suggest that the deepest call of most religious traditions is the call to reverence, specifically the revering of other human beings, no matter their creed or DNA or documentation. A call to revere God by revering the people who bear God's image is a call to revere all people.

This is very different from the way many religious groups grasp for power to protect their own interests. How can we challenge such deeply ingrained practices? No rabbi, Zen master, prophet, or saint ever said it would be easy. I'd like to think my grandfather somehow sensed this. I know my father did. We're called to

revere. We're called to be afraid of ourselves, our own evil, our own tendency to pervert, to mischaracterize, and to bear false witness. And as we read, look, listen, and create, we're called to ask questions. We're called to remain open to moments of illumination—*religious* moments, if you will. We're each called to ask questions—in the name of life and hope—as if our souls depend on it.

Sacred questioning (and the reverence that generates such questions) makes witness to God possible. Without reverence, there is no witness.



Questions for Further Conversation

1. What's up with Uncle Ben? Does this story speak to your understanding of God? If it doesn't, how does your experience differ? What hesitations might accompany a radical break with the Uncle Ben image of the divine? What might be gained in such a break?
2. In the "Move On" section, Granddaddy Dark seems to make a distinction between what he understands to be the will of God and the God who always surpasses his understanding. How does this distinction function in his advice to his son? And what does the advice say about the nature of the God in whom Granddaddy Dark ultimately placed his trust?
3. How is sacred questioning an essential aspect of faith?
4. What's at stake in the conversation between the young theologians in *Bridge to Terabithia*? Does Leslie have a higher view of God than her companions? How would you distinguish between her sense of reverence and theirs?

5. How might people with an Uncle Ben-like view of God respond to the idea that questions—lots of questions—are a good thing? Is there a danger in becoming too attached to our questions? What are the pitfalls, and are they worth it? What do we lose when we don't ask questions?
6. How might our understanding of God impact our response to economic practices? Do we imagine that God is somehow divorced from economic concerns? Why might we find it necessary to imagine God's relationship to our world in this way? Does God's kingdom challenge our less than humane economic practices? If so, how?