

The task of love

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I've been thinking about doubt. It started when I read a [recent piece over at Pete Enns' blog](#) about a pastor who confessed his doubts about the existence of God in front of his congregation. It continued when a friend pointed me in the direction of [The Liturgists](#) podcast, and particularly the episodes where the host (Michael Gungor) and co-host (Mike McHargue, or "Science Mike") discussed their de-conversion and re-conversion narratives.

Especially interesting was the shape of the faith that was eventually returned to. Gone was the black-and-white faith of their evangelical upbringings. In its place was a postmodern faith more comfortable with gray, increasingly open to mystery, and less certain about the doctrinal content of orthodox Christianity.

Even more interesting were the "[axioms about faith](#)" that Science Mike had come up with as the "scaffolding" for this new approach to faith.

A few examples:

God is AT LEAST the natural forces that created and sustain the Universe as experienced via a psychosocial model in human brains that naturally emerges from innate biases. EVEN IF that is a comprehensive definition for God, the pursuit of this personal, subjective experience can provide meaning, peace, and empathy for others.

Prayer is AT LEAST a form of meditation that encourages the development of healthy brain tissue, lowers stress, and can connect us to God. EVEN IF that is a comprehensive definition of prayer, the health and psychological benefits of prayer justify the discipline.

Science Mike goes on to apply the same approach to things like faith, sin, the Bible, the church, and others. In each case, his project is the same. *Even if* our Christian convictions about these things turn out to be pure fiction, he says, they are

*pragmatically* useful. They can be demonstrated to lead to human well-being and ought therefore to be encouraged.

I like McHargue's axioms. I think it's an interesting way to look at the life of faith in a culture of deep skepticism about truth claims. It's good for us to occasionally ask the "OK, let's suppose I'm wrong about all this—then what?" question. Yet it also strikes me as the kind of project that is uniquely suited to the hyper-cognitive American evangelical approach to faith—a view of Christian faith that is primarily concerned with the truth and falsity of the propositional statements about the nature of God and reality. This is not an unimportant task, to be sure. But it seems to me that this is not and has never been the sum total of what faith is about.

In his books [\*Desiring the Kingdom\*](#) and [\*Imagining the Kingdom\*](#), Jamie Smith pushes against this idea of faith as "truth content in our heads" and asks us to reframe the question. Instead of being concerned always and only with the question, "What do I *know*?" he asks us to pay attention to the equally important questions, "What do I *love*?" or "What do I *desire*?" Truth is important, obviously. And it is deeply embedded in the questions around the shape of our love and desire. But human beings are not cerebral machines whose chief purpose in life is to arrive at enough cognitive clarity about enough propositional statements about reality. That is a losing game. We will never know enough, never be right enough, if only because our time is short and our brains are small.

Cognitive doubts about God and reality will likely never disappear. They will always be a part of the furniture of our experience here. To be a person of faith is to consistently and stubbornly hold up an underperforming reality to an incredible ideal. It is to stand in this often uncomfortably vast chasm between the ideals that grab us and hold us—ideals like love, unity, peace, flourishing, joy, forgiveness, salvation—and a world that so frequently exhibits their opposites, a world where we look around and see hatred, tribalism, war, a world of withering, shrunken lives characterized by sadness, apathy, and pride. There will never be a shortage of empirical ammunition for those who would point to a Christian life and say, "How can you possibly believe all of that?! Just *look* at the world?!"

But what of the question, "How can you possibly *live* like that?" Can a life that is animated by the settled conviction that love is at the heart of reality ever be wasted? Can a life whose guiding principle is that each human being is a deeply loved creation of God and is therefore worthy of care be *wrong*? Can a life that seeks

to extend this love to all that God has made ever be misguided? Could a life devoted to the teachings of Jesus—teachings about peacemaking, love of enemies, simplicity, self-giving love, and others—ever turn out to be a net *loss* for the world, *even if* the truth of the matter turns out to be that Jesus was just some dude that taught some things on a hillside once upon a time? Even if the most important convictions that we have as Christians turn out to be most unadulterated of fantasies, could we ever say that such a life was misspent?

Or, perhaps another way of putting it would be, “Even if all this God stuff turns out to be the fruit of overactive imaginations, could I be proud of spending a life in the pattern of Jesus?” I cannot speak for others, but I can only answer, “Yes.”

One of my deepest convictions is that the life of faith is less about arriving at enough factually correct information about reality than it is about learning what and how to love. I simply do not believe that the task God holds before me is that of dying with enough right information between my ears. No, the task of faith is and has *always* been a task of love. To be a person of faith is to be on the journey of learning how to order one’s desires, how to channel one’s longings, and how to love one’s neighbor as themselves.

I’ve heard a lot from very angry humans who are upset by our local efforts to bring Syrian refugees to Canada. One morning I received an e-mail from a person wanted to know how I could be involved in bringing “those animals” here. I thought about how I had spent the previous afternoon with a Syrian woman in Calgary trying to sort out paperwork for her family to come to Canada. I thought about our conversations about her family in Lebanon, about the shape of their lives before the war, about the pictures she had showed me of nieces and nephews. I thought about the longing she felt for her siblings, her parents. I thought about how astonishing it was that someone could possibly describe other human beings as “animals.”

I thought, as I always do when confronted with angry messages of this sort, about how I might respond, about which data I might marshal, about which news stories I might point to, about how I might refute their claims and seek to convince them that they were wrong.

And then I thought that such a response would be a very poor idea indeed. Not because I don’t believe that this person has gotten the facts badly and hurtfully *wrong*, but because I know that such a response would likely be wasted. The main

problem, after all, isn't with their information. It's not *primarily* that they have the wrong facts between their ears. It's that they don't know what or how to love. They are longing for and desiring the wrong things. They don't have enough faith.

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