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## The Relation Between Concepts of Faith and Doubt

Emily Dickinson's poetry covers a broad range of topics, including poetic vision, love, nature, prayer, death, God, Christ, and immortality. There is a unity in her poetry, however, in that it focuses primarily on religion. Full of contradictions and varying moods and perspectives, her poems offer a glimpse into a complex and intelligent mind that struggled for a lifetime with religious belief. Clearly, she resisted conforming to the expectations of her church and school that she publicly identify with the community of believers and accept their traditional doctrines without question. She chose to define her own beliefs rather than accept the "limitations" of a structured religion's mold: an issue that she struggled with until her death. This struggle is characterized in her poetry by a constant questioning of God's goodness, an identification with the sufferings of Christ, and, ultimately, by the lack of a connection between a suffering Christ and a loving God, and between a triumphant Christ and hope for humanity.

Although Dickinson's struggle was deeply internal, external influences played a significant role, particularly in the realms of science, philosophy, religion, and literature. The traditional Protestant worldview was being challenged by a gradual shift towards naturalism, due in part to Darwin's publication of "The Origin of Species" in 1850 (when Dickinson was twenty years old). Dickinson poses questions and raises doubts about accepted knowledge and worldviews that sound almost ahead of her time. She maintains an unshakeable confidence that absolute truth exists, but with keen observations of realistic detail, her deep insight into human psychology, and unique gift of poetic expression, she frames questions that still continue to be debated in literature today.

Closer to home, the religious climate in Amherst was hardly harsh and puritanical, as is commonly supposed, but was rather characterized by a "curious mix of Whig republicanism and evangelical moralism" (Lundin 13). The strict Calvinism of the Puritans had blended with the American culture to produce a religion of inner reform, self-restraint and service to an orderly, pious society. Some of Dickinson's poetry reveals her disdain for religious hypocrisy and outward attempts to appear righteous. Poems like "401" and "324" are examples of this rejection, not only of hypocrisy, but of conformation to those outward standards that supposedly constituted righteousness and spirituality according to society and the church. In "401", she pokes fun of "These Gentlewomen" (2) who appear as "Soft - Cherubic Creatures" (1). Underneath the outward and exaggerated facade of perfection, however, they are really only "A Horror so refined" (6). They are shallow, with no deep-rooted convictions, and have the blemishes of "freckled Human Nature" (7) like everyone else. Poem "324" is also a playful jab at religious people, and has a self-exultant tone: she keeps the Sabbath her own way. She is not bound by church walls or by time, and especially not by the expectations of the established

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church of her day. It is important to recognize and distinguish between Dickinson's rebellion against these kinds of societal and religious expectations and her questions and doubts about God Himself.

Dickinson was also influenced by leading transcendentalist poets such as Emerson, but she never fully embraced transcendentalist philosophies. The romantic emphasis on the self and intuition and on nature as a spiritual emblem is evident in her poetry, but she does not share the transcendentalists' strong faith in nature's power to reveal God or spiritual truth. She focuses much more on the hidden and paradoxical nature of God and on the seemingly unexplainable suffering and death in the natural world. In between the literary ages of romanticism and realism, she speaks "with a new voice that combined enduring elements from both ages, the old and the new" (Perkins 872).

All of these factors and more, no doubt, influenced Dickinson's decision to turn inward, to retreat from the limitations and uncertainties of the outside world into the realm of infinite possibilities her mind provided. "I dwell in possibility" (657, 1), she asserts in a poem

Celebrating her freedom as a poet. She is not limited - the "Hands" of her "occupation" reach out "To gather Paradise" (657, 12). Dickinson, "With Will to choose, or to reject" (508, 18), deliberately chose her path in life, and in turn, rejected another. At Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary, she steadfastly refused to publicly declare faith in Christ as her Savior. She did not pretend to be unaffected by the pressure and later expressed regret over her missed opportunities, indicating that she really was experiencing a strong, internal inclination to become a Christian (Habbegar 202). Poem "576" is similar to "508", in that she is looking back on a childhood during which religious expressions were forced on her. In "508", she exalts the baptism of her own choosing, considering her first one as trivial as her dolls and "stings of spoils". Poem "576" has a far different attitude toward her childlike prayers. This poem, along with the general tenor of her entire life and works, demonstrates a consistent desire to overcome doubt and believe:

And often since, in Danger I count the force t'would be  
To have a God so strong as that To hold  
my life for me. (576, 14-17)

As she entered adulthood, her simple child's world became complex, filled with ongoing doubts and struggles to understand "parts of his far plan/ That baffled me" (576, 10-11). The strict religious environment in which Dickinson was raised likely left little room for doubt, and probably required complete acceptance of the church's dogma. Perhaps she thought that total confidence would be desirable, and would ensure great security. However, her doubts do not allow this confidence: "How would prayer feel - to me - / If I believed" (576, 4-5), she wonders. She eventually came to believe that "her critical consciousness had shut her out from the innocence

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of childhood and had somehow made the assurances of Christian belief unavailable to her in conventional form" (Lundin 47). She longed for a simple faith that would sustain her with joy and hope, but the failure of her critical mind to understand her suffering, along with a stubborn refusal to trade her independence for identification with the community of believers, made such faith impossible.

Perhaps the most threatening stumbling block to her faith was what she perceived as the distance and silence of God. One of her poems begins:

I know that He exists, Somewhere - in Silence - He has hid his rare life  
From our gross eyes.  
(338, 1-4)

That God seems hidden or silent is not the most disturbing of Dickinson's charges. Poem "724" is a rather shocking indictment of God's use of His power and authority. Overall, the poem questions God's purpose for his creation and for the suffering of man. Does He even have a plan, or is He playing some sort of game? Are His actions fair to man? Did He just create the world as a show of His authority and might? God seems to be acting spontaneously, almost haphazardly, in this poem - "inserting Here - a Sun - / There - leaving out a man - " (11-12). It is easy for him to invent a life, but just as easy to "efface it" (5). Death seems to be a quick-fix solution to this spontaneous creation of life:

It's easy to efface it - The thrifty Deity Could scarce afford Eternity  
To spontaneity - (5-8)

Hinting that the blame for death rests ultimately on God reveals her questioning of the doctrine of man's depravity. Though we may "murmur" against it, His "Perturbless Plan" (10) proceeds.

Dickinson is convinced that "This world is not Conclusion" (501, 1), that ultimate truth lays beyond the visible and temporal world. It is "Invisible, as Music - / But positive, as Sound - " (501, 3-4). Exactly what this truth is, however, remains largely a mystery to her, and thus "her thematic sense of religion lies not in her assurance, but in her continual questioning of God, in her attempt to define his nature and that of his world" (Magill 805). This mystery "beckons and it baffles" (501, 5), but escapes the grasp of philosophy and sagacity of men. The crucifixion of Christ showed it to us, but faith is still not satisfied and blushes to be seen searching for "a twig of Evidence" (501, 15). Even the "Narcotics" (501, 19) of religion cannot satisfy the yearning of the soul. Dickinson identifies with the human desire for visible evidence, for clear answers to questions about God and His plan for humanity. This poem contains evidence that she ultimately found the revelation of the natural world (commonly thought of as God's general revelation) to be limited. But more importantly, she reveals her dissatisfaction with God's special revelation, the person of Jesus Christ.

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That the crucifixion is included in a list of unsatisfying and disappointing avenues toward truth is an idea echoed in another poem: Embarrassment of one another And God Is Revelations limit (662, 1-3)

God's revelations to man have limits; this is why those who have chosen faith must blush and feel ashamed of their fellow believers and of God. Dickinson's attempts to seek God seem to meet with limitations as well. Prayer is often a source of frustration in her poems: "Of course - I prayed - / And did God care?" (376, 1-2). She also writes in her letters about her frustration with prayer: "I seek and don't find, and knock and it is not opened" (Johnson 107), and "We pray to Him, and He answers 'No.' Then we pray to Him to rescind the 'No' and He don't answer at all yet 'Seek and ye shall find' is the boon of faith" (Johnson 290). Dickinson truly believed she was a seeker, but echoes of frustration in her poetry (and letters) indicate that she had not found what faith had promised.

Dickinson explores the relationship between the Father and the Son in poem "357" by using a metaphor of the legendary courtship of Miles Standish. God, at home in His distant heaven, sends his Son to "woo" humanity. It is as if God fears that, like Priscilla, mankind will "Choose the Envoy - and spurn the Groom - " by not realizing that they are one. Dickinson certainly seems to be wrestling with complex questions about Jesus' origin and identity. Could she trust that Jesus had really come from God? Is Jesus really the answer to all her questions about the Father? Although it is a difficult concept, the Scriptures are clear that the mission of Christ was to reveal the great love of the Father. God is love, and Christ was His ultimate manifestation of that love to humanity: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4.9). Dickinson surely had no problem understanding this from the Bible, but something in her own experience kept her from believing it without hesitation. Somehow, her identification with the suffering Christ was not adequate to dispel her doubts about His Father. So, in her poetry, the Father remains "a God who does not answer, an unrevealed God whom one cannot confidently approach through Nature or through doctrine" (Wilbur 130) - or, as I would add, through the life and revelation of Christ.

The suffering that drew her to Jesus was usually brought on by death. Although she lived a reclusive life from about age thirty on, she maintained very active correspondence with quite a few friends. In a letter, she responded this way to the death of a friend's daughter: "I can't stay any longer in a world of death" (Johnson 145). She even notices the cruelty of death in nature:

The Frost beheads it the flower at its play - In accidental power - The blonde Assassin passes on - (1624, 3-5)

As the critic, Alfred Kazin, writes: "She never got over the impermanence of everything she saw, the fragility of human relationships, the flight of the seasons, the taste of death in winter" (143).

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This problem of death, especially the deaths of her close friends and family members, haunted Dickinson, so she turned from a silent, distant Father to the fellow human sufferer, His Son.

In poem "698", Christ spans the distance between God and humanity. Although for man the uncertainties of death remain, Christ's death justifies him:

Death - We do not know - Christ's acquaintance with Him Justify Him - though - (2-4) Christ was not only acquainted with death, but with all aspects of earthly life:

All the other Distance He hath traversed first - No New Mile remaineth - Far as Paradise - (9-12)

"I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true - " (241, 1-2), she writes in another poem. While many people pretend optimism, Dickinson rejects the romantic view and chooses instead to see death as it really is - a stark reality that renders life meaningless without explanation. The life of Jesus, therefore, held great appeal for her; forsaking heaven to experience undeserved suffering and death made him true, genuine, and trustworthy:

The Savior must have been A docile Gentleman - To come so far so cold a Day For little Fellowmen - (1487, 1-4)

Over and over in her poems about Jesus, he is the solution for the distance between God and humanity. Another poem describing the incarnation of Christ brings out his divinity and worthiness: although humans' weak faith may cause the "Bridge" to "totter" or seem "brittle", God "sent His Son to test the Plank / And he pronounced it firm" (1433, 7-8). The fact that Jesus came and that he was sent by God reveals his divinity and his love, and this is a strong basis for faith.

Yet Dickinson's faith in Christ still seems to waver. She questions Jesus in "217", but not in the same way that she questions God. Her questioning of God is often accusatory in tone, but in this poem she seems timid and childlike, hoping that Jesus can help her, yet fearful that he cannot. Will he remember her, and will her heart be too heavy for him? Jesus is her fellow sufferer, but what can he do about her suffering? Sometimes he, too, seems to be unreachable, or perhaps not able to reach her. In another poem she is praying, "knocking - everywhere - " (502, 4), but is still unable to find him. His hand is in creation, but "Hast thou no Arm for Me (502, 8)?" she asks. These poems evidence a childlike timidity and fear, unlike the bold independence she asserts in other poems. Perhaps her most disconcerting fear was that Christ would offer no comfort in death. As she envisions herself "Dying! Dying in the night" (158, 1)! she frantically asks,

And "Jesus"! Where is Jesus gone? They said that Jesus - always came - Perhaps he doesn't

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know the House -

She wrote the following to her friend, Abiah Root: "when trial grows more, and more . . . whose is the hand to help us, and to lead, and forever guide us, they talk of a 'Jesus of Nazareth' will you tell me if it be he" (Johnson 39)? She believes in the divinity of Christ, but as Lundin notes, "When theology turns into anthropology, Jesus becomes merely a pioneer in the endless process of bearing pain . . . [He becomes] trapped with us in our finitude" (5). Dickinson's poetry dwells heavily on Christ the sufferer, but pays very little attention to Christ the risen Savior. His triumph in the resurrection does not seem important in her poetry, perhaps because she could not identify with that part of his experience as she could with his suffering. Times of doubt are not uncommon, even in a believer's life, but Dickinson never seemed to rise above the anguish of her suffering. She longed for the joy she saw in others when they accepted Christ as their Savior, but never seemed to experience it herself. The presence of Christ in one's life does bring about a radical new perspective on suffering that Dickinson does not seem to have - the perspective the Apostle Paul writes about in Romans:

We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. (5. 3-5)

God turns the result of evil - suffering - into a way to work "for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8. 28). In Dickinson's poetry, suffering seems only to frustrate her desire to know and understand God's love, and any comfort she has lies in her shared sufferings with Christ instead of his healing power and promise of a new life through his resurrection.

Having come to this conclusion, however, it would be unfair to ignore the poems that seem to contradict it. As one critic states, "In Dickinson's poetry, God himself is paradoxical: he is both attached and detached, near and far, compassionate and indifferent, generous and jealous" (167). If this is true, then Dickinson herself is paradoxical, clinging stubbornly to faith and hope even while expressing rebellion and fear. While the dominant tone in the overtly religious poems seems to be one of doubt, at times she does evidence a simple but sure faith: "Christ will explain each separate anguish / In the fair schoolroom of the sky" (193, 3-4), she writes hopefully. Her ride with Death in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" includes Immortality as his companion, and their final destination is "Eternity" (24). Another poem uses a simple illustration from nature to demonstrate her confidence in God and an afterlife. Just as she knows what a moor and the sea look like without having actually seen them, she says:

I never spoke with God Nor visited in Heaven - Yet certain am I of the spot As if the Checks were given - (1052, 4-8)

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That such simple assurance and hope can be expressed by a critical mind so keenly aware of mystery, so prone to doubts and fears, and so bruised by disappointments and death reveals Dickinson's inner strength and courage, and the power of the human imagination.

It is difficult, and probably impossible, to definitively discern the underlying message of some of Dickinson's poems. The contradictions - the various expressions of both doubt and belief, joy and pain, peace and turmoil - may simply be reflective of her emotional distress, or may be evidence of a lack of true spiritual commitment, or a refusal to trust completely in God. The mind of Dickinson may remain a mystery, but her poetry still offers us access into a mind that sought independence and individuality and struggled to "still the Tooth" of doubt and suffering "That nibbles at the soul" (501, 19-20) with belief that hope lay beyond the cruelty of death.

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