

## *Faith: A Letter to Oliver\**

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Richard Dawkins, a zoologist and prominent atheist, once wrote a letter to his ten-year-old daughter, Juliet. Dawkins used age-appropriate language and illustrations to steer his daughter toward the truth as he saw it. Not surprisingly, Dawkins advocated for the sort of truth that can be proven through scientific investigation. The entire letter is worthy of contemplation and discussion, but I want to focus on the contrast Dawkins draws between science and tradition.

“Dear Juliet,” his letter begins. “Have you ever wondered how we know the things that we know? How do we know, for instance, that the stars, which look like tiny pinpricks in the sky, are really huge balls of fire like the Sun and very far away? And how do we know that the Earth is a smaller ball whirling round one of those stars, the Sun? The answer to these questions is ‘evidence.’”

Dawkins tells his daughter that evidence is a good reason for believing something is true. But tradition, authority, and revelation are bad reasons. He describes a conversation he once had with a large group of children, all of whom were being brought up in religious homes as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, or Sikhs. Their beliefs, he charges, had no connection with evidence. They were rooted in tradition.

“Tradition,” Dawkins explains, “means beliefs handed down from grandparent to parent to child, and so on. Or from books handed down through the centuries. Traditional beliefs often start from almost nothing; perhaps somebody just makes them up originally, like the stories about Thor and Zeus. But after they’ve been handed down over some centuries, the mere fact that they are so old makes them seem special. People believe things simply because people have believed the same thing over centuries. That’s tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

Is Dawkins right? Do we pass tradition along to our children without thinking about it? Is tradition a bad reason for believing something? What exactly *is* tradition? These questions remind me of another letter, written two thousand years ago by the apostle Paul to another young person—Timothy. This ancient letter makes for a fascinating conversation with the letter written by Dawkins:

[From] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded

of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:1-7)

So there you have it—two different letters to two different young people, Juliet and Timothy. These two letters prodded me to enter into similar conversations with my own children. Here is the letter I wrote to my then eight-year-old son.

Dear Oliver,

I want to write to you about something that is important to me and to your mother. We love you very much. Among other things, our love leads us to think about, and talk about, your future. Don't worry. We have tried to keep our hopes for you wide and not narrow broad and not constricting. We haven't picked out a college or a job or anything like that. You will figure all this stuff out in due time.

Still, as your parents, we can't help having a more general set of hopes for you. We hope that you will always think with rigor and act with integrity. We hope you will have good friends, enjoy the beauty of the world, and have plenty of opportunities to laugh. We want you to feel safe, and hope that a community of trusted companions will always surround you—especially when times are hard. We hope you will remain courageous, compassionate, and creative throughout your life.

We also hope—as you get older and eventually become an adult—that you will have faith. This is why I am writing to you today.

When you were baptized, your mother and I promised to raise you in the Christian faith. We promised to teach you the Christian tradition. Now, the Christian tradition is a pretty big thing. Yes, it includes the Bible stories that you enjoy. It is also our prayers before eating and at bedtime. It is singing the hymns in church. It is eating the bread and sipping from those tiny glasses of juice that you find so funny. It is lighting the Advent candles in December, and it is listening to the list of names of all those people who have died in our church when they are read out loud on All Saints' Day.

Tradition is practices and rituals and stories and songs that tell us who we are.

For this very reason, some people say that tradition is a dangerous thing. Some warn us to think twice before we let some funny old stories tell us who we are. They point out that our tradition includes odd and even upsetting stories and downright unsavory people. They also remind us that our tradition has been used to support some pretty bad stuff.

I know that you have heard about slavery in school. Slavery was a terrible thing. It allowed people to buy and sell other people, and to force

those people to work. Did you know that in this country, in the 1800s, there were Christian people who used our tradition, our Bible, to claim that God was in favor of slavery? It's true. It's also true that there were people who used the same tradition—the same Bible—to argue that God wanted the slaves to be set free.

Our tradition has things in it that are shameful, and it has been used in ways that should make us feel sad and sorry. Yet our tradition has also inspired countless men and women to do good. It has empowered people to work on behalf of the poor and the outcast in ways that make me proud. In the end, we Christians will always need to be careful about how we use our tradition. Tradition, like science—like any sort of knowledge, really—can be used for purposes that are good and purposes that are evil.

Now, since I have brought up science, I want to talk about it for a bit. Ollie, some people want to put faith and science at odds with each other. The other night you asked your mother, “Can a person be a scientist and still believe in God?” The answer to that is definitely yes. There are many scientists who are also people of faith. However, some scientists, and some religious people, want to divide the world into an either-or discussion: either you believe God created people, or you believe we evolved from apes; either you have faith, or you trust in science.

I think you know, Son, that I don't like the either-or way of looking at things. So you probably have guessed that I think it is silly to make science and faith into enemies. I am a big fan of science. I find scientific inquiry in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology to be fascinating. No one can dispute that human beings engaged in scientific work have brought about great advances for the world. Science has given us lifesaving medicines, more productive crops, and accessible energy. Science has given us a remarkable insight into how the world, and even the universe, works.

To be sure, science and scientists are not perfect. They have made some big mistakes, too. There are things that have been done in the name of science that have hurt people. Still, I am a fan of science, and I am thankful for what most scientific advances mean for the world.

So, why do science and faith often get put at odds? I think it has to do with how each looks at the world. Many of the discoveries brought about by scientists have come about through something called the scientific method. You already know about this. A person following the scientific method first asks a question, then makes a guess (a hypothesis) about the answer, then experiments to see if the guess is correct, and eventually decides if the hypothesis is true or false.

This method works great if you are trying to figure out whether the earth goes around the sun or whether the sun goes around the earth. It works great if you are trying to figure out if a statement about the natural world is true or false.

It doesn't work so great if you are trying to answer a more open-ended question like was *The Avengers* a good movie or what is the purpose of my life.

This is where religion, philosophy, and the arts come into play. These activities concern themselves with meaning and purpose, with the shape of human life, with tragedy and comedy, with heroism and cowardice, with brokenness and triumph, and yes, with good and evil.

This is also the point where religion and science can get crosswise with each other. If you believe that the only good, real, and true explanations of the world and the people who live on this planet result from the scientific method, then you probably think that religion is silly, unverifiable stuff. Those who go down this path conclude that religion is a distraction at best or, more likely, a mistake that needs to be weeded out, like a dandelion in Grandpa's lawn.

As you know, I think this is wrongheaded. As I said earlier, I don't think that scientific method, while a remarkably helpful thing, is a tool that can accurately measure the truth or falsehood of everything it encounters. How can you test to see if a painting by Picasso is true? How can you measure whether a sonnet by Shakespeare accurately depicts the real world? And what about religious tradition? How do you know if it is true?

Remember that Sunday when we baptized five babies in the sanctuary? Can you measure the truth or the meaning of that moment using scientific method? I guess you could try. Before the baptism, you could weigh each baby. You could take their temperatures and x-ray their bone structures. After they are doused at the font, you could repeat the measurements and look for differences. Has baptism physically changed them? You could enter the names of all baptized children into a database and compare that database over time to those children who have not been baptized. Do baptized babies live longer? Are they less likely to get sick, to get in trouble, to do bad things, to go to jail? We could study baptism scientifically and conclude that nothing measurable or meaningful was happening in this ritual. But that would, of course, be missing the point. We would be missing the joy of grandparents and friends. We would be missing the hopes and fears etched on the faces of parents who are shouldering a huge responsibility for raising these babies and who want a community's help in this undertaking.

We would also be missing the deep truths embedded in our tradition—truths that cannot be measured by microscopes or oscilloscopes or any other kind of scope, although this makes them no less profound or life-changing. When babies are baptized, we say they belong to God, they are beloved of God, and they are meant to serve God's purposes in the world. When babies are baptized, their parents (and the whole congregation) make promises to care for them and to bring them up in our praying, storytelling, hymn-sing-

ing, Jesus-following tradition. When babies are baptized, I scoop water on their heads and say, as Christians have said for two thousand years, “Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

This is our tradition. We do not engage this tradition (and allow it to engage us) because we are pathetic robots whose programming prevents us from doing anything else on a Sunday morning. We do not participate in this tradition (tell these stories, sing these songs, light these candles) because we are foolishly enslaved to something that we have not thought about in critical ways. We do this week after week, Ollie, because the tradition that surrounds us in story and song and ritual—the tradition that we act out in church—makes deep sense of the world in a way that nothing else does for us.

To sum up, science helps us in wonderful ways to understand and navigate the world. Curiously, this is much the same reason I am still trying to follow Jesus. I believe (and I think) that Christianity makes sense of the world: of who people are; of the mistakes that we make, and make again; of the brokenness that we embody. And then, our faith offers the most hopeful picture of what we might become that I have ever encountered. I continue to wrestle with and be blessed by this tradition. I have never encountered anything so terrible, so beautiful, and so true as the story of Jesus of Nazareth. I believe that if any story is worth telling, it is that one, and if any One is worth praising, it is the God proclaimed to us by him.

Faith reminds us, every day, who God is. Faith pushes everything else to the side and focuses our thoughts and our actions on the Creator of all that is. Faith is our journey, our quest to have a deep and abiding relationship with God. Faith is what grows in our hearts when we place our trust, first and foremost, in God’s guidance and God’s care.

Ollie, I trust as you and your sister continue to grow up that this faith, which lived first in your grandmother Nell, and then in your mother Amy, will live on in you and will kindle the gift of God that is within you.

Your Dad

\*“Faith: A Letter to Oliver” is excerpted from the forthcoming work *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God’s Justice*. © 2022 Scott Black Johnston. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press. All rights reserved.

### Notes

1 Richard Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 242–43.