

# Faith journeys

True faith is a wonderful thing, but what happens when that sense of certainty is shaken, either by a personal challenge or when a religion becomes linked to scandal or extremism? Is doubt inseparable from belief? *Psychologies* meets three people whose faith has been rocked BY KATHERINE BALDWIN PHOTOGRAPHY TINA HILLIER

When Mother Teresa revealed, in private letters released after her death, that at times she had doubted the existence of God, many believers breathed a sigh of relief. If one of the greatest religious icons of our day had crises of faith, surely this meant it was all right for the rest of us to question.

Many sceptics and atheists, meanwhile, took the nun of Calcutta's admission of her struggle in the face of God's deafening silence, published in her posthumous autobiography *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (Rider), as proof that her faith was built on fantasy.

## Voices of doubt

It seems that faith, no matter how strong, can be shaken. And while questioning can be an intensely private tussle, events of recent years have prompted a much more public airing of doubts about religious faith.

The extremism behind the 2001

attacks on New York's Twin Towers and the 2005 London bombings not only challenged the faith of many Muslims but also spawned a new, combative atheist movement that says all religion is wrong because it causes conflict. The sexual abuse scandals that involved Catholic priests, meanwhile, had a profound impact on believers around the world.

'A lot of people were shaken by the revelations of what went on in the Catholic Church,' says David Voas, professor of population studies at Manchester University. 'In Ireland, for example, secularisation is proceeding quickly, cramming a process that in Britain went on for a century and a half, into a couple of decades.'

Despite these headline-making events, however, religious faith has been

in decline in Western society for many decades for much less dramatic reasons, including societal and cultural changes, and a rise in individualism.

## Believing without belonging

'We are now less inclined to defer to authority,' says Voas. 'We're capable of deciding what we do or don't believe without instruction from religious authorities, and we think that God – if we believe there's a God – will understand the decisions we make, even if they're not approved by the Church.'

Nevertheless, the picture is complex. Not all religious groups are shrinking, while many of us qualify as 'fuzzy faithful' – people with an abstract belief in God and a vague loyalty to Christian traditions. >>>

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## «I was so angry with God»

**Linda Morris**, 38, is a PA in an engineering firm

I was raised a Catholic and although I stopped attending mass, I never stopped believing in God and the values I was brought up to cherish. I always prayed, but I didn't feel I needed to be sitting in a church for God to hear me. When we started IVF, I hoped he'd been listening and my prayers would be answered.

We conceived on our third IVF cycle, but heartbreakingly we found out two days before her birth that our beautiful daughter had died. It was a devastating time and religion and faith were suddenly hugely important. I had an overwhelming need to have Florrie blessed and laid to rest in a Christian ceremony.

It took a long time to come to terms with Florrie's death. Why us? As the anger lessened, her death became part of our lives and I know Florrie is playing in heaven waiting to greet her dad and me one day.

Eighteen months later, I miscarried twin girls at 11 weeks. Their loss really rocked my faith. I hated God for giving us that hope, only to steal it away again. He only gave up one child but had taken three of ours. I was so angry - I'd kept my faith after Florrie's death, not out of obligation but because I really believed in God.

But Catholicism has taught me that God works in mysterious ways and perhaps there's a reason for all this pain and suffering, even though I'll never understand it in this life. I still feel I need God in my corner.



>>> In the 2008 British Social Attitudes survey, which had a special focus on religion, 17 per cent said they had no doubts God existed while 18 per cent said they did not believe in God. The majority were somewhere in between – not knowing, believing or doubting sometimes, or believing in a higher power of some description. In the 2010 survey, 50 per cent of those surveyed said they had no religion.

Grace Davie, professor of sociology at the University of Exeter, says there's a growing trend in Europe of 'believing without belonging' and spirituality is alive in many forms. For example, we are exploring angels, gurus from the East, meditation, reincarnation theories, as well as fresh forms of Christianity.

### Faith healing

So why do so many of us continue to believe? 'I would say humans are inherently faithful – they have faith in something,' says psychologist Eolene Boyd-Macmillan of the University of Cambridge's Psychology and Religion Research Group. 'This might be faith in their group, in technology, in a socio-political system or whatever, but they're going to have faith in something.'

Humans also have a capacity for self-awareness, and we are concerned with finding meaning in our existence. Scientific evidence has shown that faith has a key part to play in making meaning and can, in turn, bring benefits.

'Religious faith is associated with a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life and, as a consequence, a higher level of wellbeing,' says Leslie Francis, professor of religions and education at Warwick University.

Studies, many of them from the United States, have supported the idea that religious people tend to be happier

than the non-religious. But a new global study, published recently in the *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, shows a more complex picture. It found that religious people are happier than non-religious people only in societies under stress or in difficult circumstances. In societies where most people's needs are met, religious people are no happier than their non-religious counterparts.

Studies have also shown that the social aspects of religion – belonging to a community and friendships built in faith groups – lead to greater life satisfaction and, for some people, this may be more important than theology. Faith, particularly Christianity, can satisfy our need for unconditional love, especially if we did not get this from our parents, says Tony Yates, a London-based psychotherapist who treats the clergy as well as lay people.

### Testing times

But what happens when events in our lives do not tally with our image of an all-loving God or shake our belief system for other reasons? A sudden bereavement or a sickness in the family, the loss of employment or the end of a relationship can prompt people to question their faith or even the point of their existence. If our faith is severely rocked or even lost, it may be that it was too rigid or inflexible, according to psychologists.

'Sometimes, when people's faith is shaken, it's because the way their faith has been constructed is no longer working for them. Maybe it was very black and white and that's no longer helping

them make sense of their lives,' says Boyd-Macmillan.

We may also have a crisis of faith if we've been using religion to resolve issues that belong in the psychotherapist's consulting room, says Yates. But how we respond to trauma could also depend on whether our faith community is able to support us on our journey or through our doubts. If it fails to do so, we may turn towards an alternative faith or spirituality, or look to a non-faith group, a cause or a movement that better serves our needs.

Others, though, will emerge from a time of questioning with a more mature faith and the period of disenchantment will have become a necessary growth step. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St John of the Cross referred to the 'dark night of the soul' as a painful and lonely period on the road to spiritual maturity. Mother Teresa's dark night seemed to last almost 50 years. For others, it will be short-lived.

'Doubt is definitely part of the faith journey, and it's a valuable part of the journey,' says Boyd-Macmillan. 'People can emerge from a tragedy with their faith strengthened. They've found it to be a place where God has met them and brought comfort.'

## «Religious faith is associated with a greater sense of purpose in life and a higher level of wellbeing»

## «I had my first crisis of faith at 17»

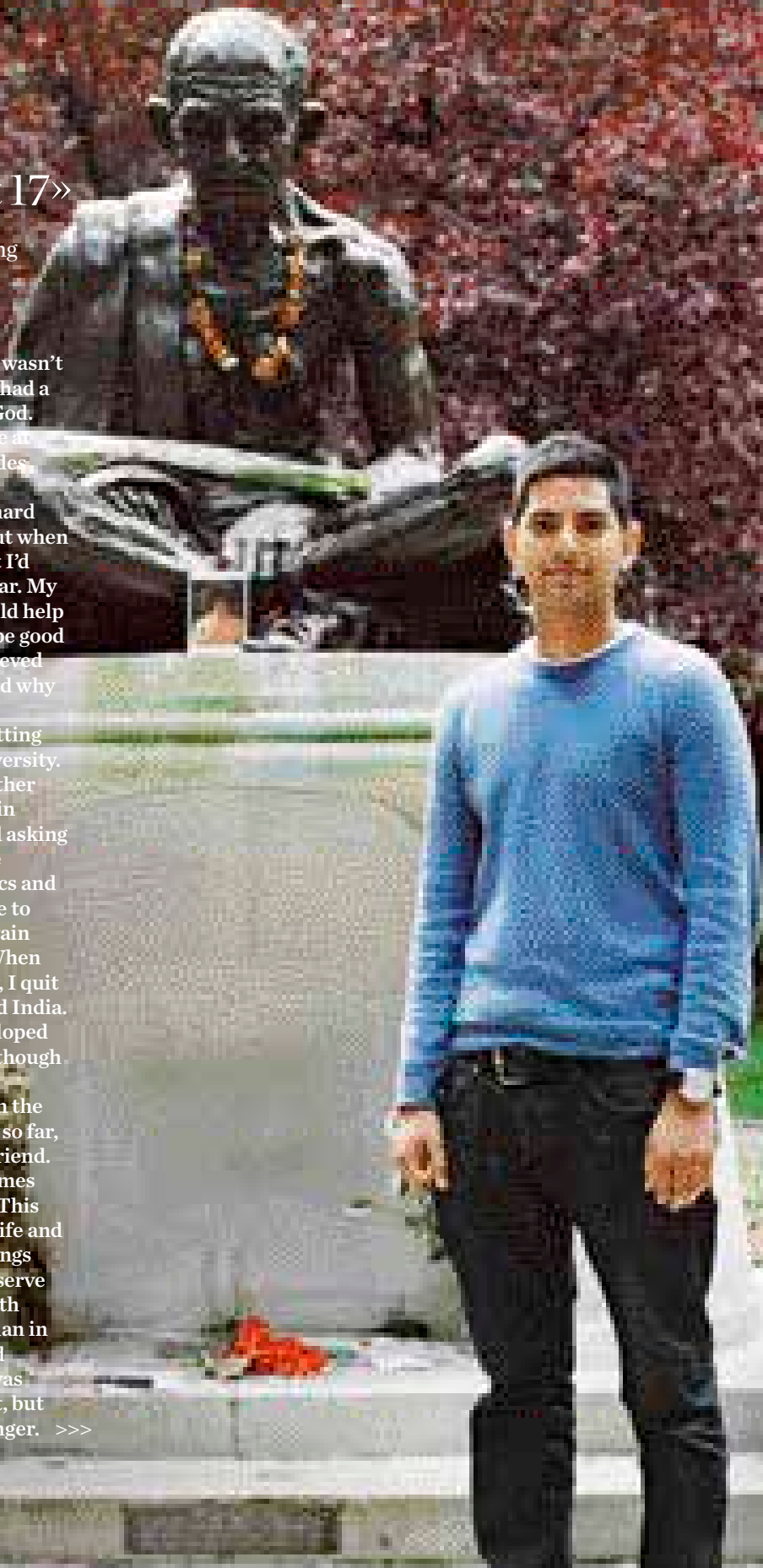
**Kunal Vohra**, 29, is studying for a PhD in physics

I was brought up in a Hindu tradition although my family wasn't overly religious. But I always had a firm faith and deep belief in God.

My first crisis of faith came at 17 when I just missed the grades I needed to go to my chosen university. I'd been working hard and waiting to leave home. But when I missed my grades, I thought I'd have to stay home another year. My faith taught me that God would help me if I worked hard, tried to be good and lived an honest life. I believed I had, so I couldn't understand why God hadn't helped me.

Fortunately, I ended up getting into my second choice of university. Then at around 22, I had another crisis. I'd been working in IT in quite a good role but I started asking if this was all there was to life – putting up with office politics and backbiting to get a pay cheque to buy things I didn't need in a vain attempt to make me happy. When a close relative died suddenly, I quit and went backpacking around India. Over this time, my faith developed into a broader spirituality, although it was based on Hinduism.

Recently, I've gone through the biggest period of questioning so far, after breaking up with a girlfriend. I called out to God so many times but I felt he wasn't listening. This forced me to re-evaluate my life and get back on track with the things I held sacred. Difficult times serve as a catalyst to spiritual growth – we're never closer to God than in our moments of darkness and despair. Each time my faith was shaken, I felt close to losing it, but somehow it's come back stronger. >>>



## «I can't call myself a Muslim now»

Narjes Jafari, 29, is a civil engineer

I was born into a strict Muslim family in a small and very religious city in Iran where my grandfather was a religious leader. I moved to the UK when I was 19. There were many challenges to my faith, but the biggest came when I started a relationship, since, according to my faith, it was unacceptable to have an intimate relationship with a man before marriage.

Although I was torn by guilt, I needed to feel loved. After three years together, I agreed to move in with my boyfriend but I had to lie to family and friends. He was Muslim, too, but from a family who thought living together was tolerable provided you intended to marry.

I lived with him for seven years. I could see we weren't right for each other but this was a marriage in my eyes and I was taught to believe you marry for life. Finally, I decided to end it, which shook my faith as I realised how much I'd changed. I didn't agree with living in suffering just because you were expected to.

I can't call myself Muslim the way others do. For many, this word seems to come with ideas and rules I don't agree with or follow. I remember, after the terror attacks in London, hating the groups behind them, what they represented and the way they'd used the pure name of Islam to support their fantasies.

But it also doesn't feel right to say I'm a non-practising Muslim. I believe in many things Islam stands for, but what I believe is common to many religions. I believe there's a power that created us all, which we call God. I believe we need to be good to one another, respect everyone's choices and be fair to each other.

