“I Doubt. Therefore, I Believe”:
Facing Uncertainty and Belief in the Making

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Human affairs are characterized by “isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of
uncertainty” (Arendt 1998: 224). Religion has often been considered an effect-
tive response to the existential crisis of uncertainty and more specifically to
personal or social crisis, through providing supposedly infallibly true answers
to natural and existential questions. But religious “belief” does not necessarily
insulate people from uncertainty or doubt.1 Particularly among self-identified
believers in Western European contexts, belief is often complex and messy,
with people’s beliefs regularly subject to oscillations and periods of doubt.
2013). The relationship between doubt and belief takes various forms in indi-
viduals. One is acceptance of doubt as an integral part of belief, which may be
expressed as: “I doubt. Therefore, I believe.” At the opposite end, people strive
to reduce or to avoid doubt while searching for pure religion (Roeland et al.
2010), which often results in the rigidification of religious identities and beliefs
(Pargament 1997: 351–358). Intermediate situations include considering doubt
as an inescapable part of a believer’s experience, which is nevertheless actually
useful for strengthening belief.

In this chapter, I locate expressions of the relationship between belief and
doubt in a pragmatist frame of “belief in the making.” Combining pragma-
tist approaches with empirical research on various forms of lived religions in
Western European contexts, I identify three ideal-typical modalities of belief:
believing as aspiration and trust, believing as self-discipline, and believing as an
experience of being together (Lamine 2014b). These modalities may practically
alternate or combine within a given person. It is through observing the way
people grapple with belief and doubt in ordinary, practical ways that we can
shed light on the act of believing as a lived experience, rather than as a simple
intellectual assent to religious or spiritual ideas. This more nuanced approach
to belief is important for the study of religion in times of crisis. It provides

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1 Although doubt relates to personal attitudes, whereas uncertainty refers to situations, in this
chapter both terms will be used as synonyms.
insights into how potential crises of doubt are negotiated at the micro-level, helping us understand how “believers” may become radicalized or develop more open, transigent perspectives.

**Experiences of Belief and Uncertainty from a Pragmatist Viewpoint**

My conception of “belief in the making” is rooted in pragmatist approaches in which belief is not primarily assent to a granted-for-true proposition (Engel 1998), but is also based on experience. Contemporary pragmatism is inspired both by pragmatics in the linguistic field (such as Austin’s analysis of performative utterances, Greimas’s semiotics, Wittgenstein’s language games) and American pragmatism (Peirce, Dewey, James). Following Michel de Certeau (1984) and other pragmatists, I focus on acts of enunciation and action more than on statements. In the “Introduction” of his *Creativity of Action* (1996), as well as in a few other texts, Hans Joas champions such an approach through underlining three limitations of action theories which depart from rational action, “whether they have a narrow or a comprehensive, a utilitarian or a normativist or communicative notion of rationality.” These action theories “assume, first, that the actor is a being able to act in a purposeful manner. Second, they assume the actor as being able to control, to dominate or to instrumentalize his or her own body. And third, they assume the autonomy of the individual actor toward his or her fellows and toward the environment” (Joas, 1994: 66). By way of contrast, a pragmatist viewpoint bestows a central importance on experience and on inquiry, because it views knowledge as resulting from practical problem situations.

While keeping in mind that pragmatism is in no way a single unified perspective, some of its common features are important for understanding belief. First, this approach strives to overcome “Cartesian dualisms” such as antagonisms between objectivity and subjectivity or between rationality and irrationality (Bernstein 1983). Second, its focus on experience helps us understand the actions vital to “belief in the making,” which also allows including bodily dimensions. We can therefore expect pragmatist approaches to allow adequate descriptions of the experience of believing, which include its dimensions of doubt and uncertainty.

The critique of Cartesian dualism is relevant for our purpose of analyzing belief in all its dimensions of experience and action. As Hans Joas understands it, pragmatism “emphasizes the constitution of knowledge in practical problematic situations.” It starts from a critique of Cartesian doubt. This critique is a “defense of true doubt.” It is also a “defense of the anchoring of cognition to