

In Defense of Doubt

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What do Bertrand Russell and Woody Allen have in common? Doubt. According to Bertrand Russell, “Throughout the long period of religious doubt, I had been rendered very unhappy by the gradual loss of belief, but when the process was completed, I found to my surprise that I was quite glad to be done with the whole subject.”¹ Woody Allen, on the other hand, said, “I am plagued with doubts. What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case I overpaid for the carpet. If only God would give me some clear sign: like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss Bank.”

I have been asked to talk tonight about doubt, the topic of a book I wrote ten years ago now which is still in print and apparently still read. Most months I get a note from somewhere in the world from someone who has just read it and found it liberating -- not because it gives new certainties to replace the old but because it gives the reader, often for the first time, *permission* to doubt. For centuries, religion has done a first-class job making ultimate, unchallengeable claims and packaging them neatly in interlocking doctrines which, like a row of dominoes, may all collapse if one particular section falls. Not only must these doctrines not be *questioned*, but the doubter is made to feel there is something wrong with *them* if they doubt. I wrote the book because, ten years ago, there was very little in the public marketplace that invited the thinking lay person to challenge the teachings and still survive within the church. Today, we have a plethora of books by the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg, Bishop Spong etc, and also groups like this whose purpose is to ask hard questions and offer new ways of thinking. Popular fiction has added its influence with books like *The Da Vinci Code* which introduce the ordinary reader into the world of religious debate so they discover that things are not as simple as the three steps to salvation might suggest! Unfortunately, many religious leaders spend more time today refuting the new ideas and discounting their writers, than seeing it for what it is – a public interest in ideas many folk have already toyed with in their unspoken doubts!

Why did I write about doubt? Rule number one -- write about what you know! I’ve always felt sorry for the disciple Thomas, who probably had the worst press over the centuries, shared only with Judas who, with this new Gospel of Judas, may yet have a reprieve. Thomas doubted that Jesus had risen, refusing to believe unless he put his fingers in the nail-holes. Actually, this was an entirely reasonable request, given the nature of the news, yet he has been blamed ever since and even had a syndrome named after him -- “A Doubting Thomas.” Yet when we look more carefully at the texts, Thomas was actually the resourceful one who insisted the disciples go *with* Jesus when Lazarus died and later reminded Jesus that, if he was off to prepare a place for them, he should at least *tell* them how to get there. Thomas stories don’t stop with the New Testament. Legend has him evangelizing the Parthians and founding the Thomas Christians in India who are still alive and well. An early manuscript, the Acts of Thomas, recounts his missionary activities and the Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945, has given invaluable insight recently into our four Gospels. Despite this evidence suggesting Thomas was a rather remarkable man, he is remembered today as an object lesson for the weak in faith who cannot just believe without the evidence. A later story backing this stereotype has Thomas refusing to believe Mary was bodily assumed into heaven and so Mary, on her way up, drops the girdle of her robe onto him and his eyes are opened. What also interests me about Thomas’ downward career path is that Thomas did *believe* once he saw the evidence, yet Peter denied Jesus three times and became the first pope! Perhaps the church could cope with Peter, a rough and tumble ‘sinner’ like the rest of us, but not with Thomas’ enquiring mind, so he became the stereotype to silence doubt and reason.

A little personal history is in place. This book began writing itself in me long before I put pen to paper. I grew up in a religious climate where doctrines were there to believe. Their authority was claimed from Scripture, but it was rather the particular religious community's *interpretation* of scripture. It was not that we couldn't ask questions -- we constantly dissected Biblical words in minute detail, thinking ourselves quite scholarly, but there were certain "givens" to be believed whether they made sense or not. Unfortunately, these were the ones I doubted! Interestingly, last month I was advising a student on his Master's thesis and he said he would start from the "givens" of theology, which he then listed. By the end of our chat, he was stunned to realize that the "givens" he named had more grounding in Greek philosophy than the Biblical text, and that he had been trying to fit his own research into those givens, even though it kept creeping out of his orthodoxy bucket like a trapped octopus. The problem with doubt in a close-knit religious group is that any challenge is not just to the doctrine but to the group -- family, friends and community -- and the more tightly the group clings to its truth, the less hospitable it is to doubt. Amish people shun rebellious members, but there are equally effective ways of shaming a doubter who thinks beyond the religious box. Bertrand Russell tells of his youthful doubts in such a community:

I had been getting more and more out of sympathy with my people. I continued to agree with them in politics, but in nothing else. At first I sometimes tried to talk to them about things that I was considering, but they always laughed at me, and this caused me to hold my tongue. ⁱⁱ

I also remember, after I began Religious Studies at the University, trying to discuss the exciting, new ideas with a religious friend. As I ploughed on, his eyes glazed over and his forehead creased into a frown, then he said, "I'll pray for you."

Most people will put up with a certain amount of compromise when the beliefs taught do not make sense, for the sake of being included in a group. They switch off to discrepancies so as not to lose the camaraderie of the faithful, but when the compromise with one's *own* reason or experience become too great, the choices are to stifle their doubts -- or leave. For many, leaving is too hard. I often wonder how many people sit in church pews today, having left their doubts and sometimes their minds at the door. Martin Luther did for years. He wrote later in his address to Latomus:

Although much of what they said seemed absurd to me and completely alien to Christ, yet for more than a decade I curbed my thoughts with the advice of Solomon, "Do not rely on your own insight" (Proverbs 3:5). I always believed there were theologians hidden in the schools who would not have been silent if these teachings were impious.

Clergy who believe their lay people do not doubt or that their congregations are hospitable spaces where doubts can be aired safely should take a closer look. There are hoards of 'backbones of the church' whose lives have been, and still are, a constant struggle with doubt about Christian beliefs -- I meet them regularly in sessions like this! There are hundreds warming pews, simply switching off their nagging internal questions. There are thousands seeking the sacred elsewhere, forced out of childhood religion by irrelevant and alien beliefs. Religious historian Karen Armstrong tells of her early years in a convent where constant claims from older nuns of religious experiences made her believe her doubts were her own weakness and immaturity. She writes,

For years I had told myself that black was white and white black; that the so-called 'proofs' for God's existence had truly convinced me; that I might not be feeling happy but that I really *was* happy because I was doing God's will ... I had deliberately told myself lies and stamped hard on my mind whenever it had reached out towards the truth.

ⁱⁱⁱ

When she finally confronted a senior Sister about the historicity of the resurrection, the sister agreed that it could not be proven -- “but please don’t tell the others,” she added. Karen later wrote:

I was convinced that I had not been alone in my doubts; there must be hundreds – thousands – of Christians who suppressed similar misgivings, stamped on their rebellious thoughts, and felt all the while a sinking loss of intellectual and personal integrity. These people must be crippling their minds as I had done by confining them within an untenable doctrinal system.^{iv}

Why has such abhorrence and fear of doubt happened in religious communities? My first degrees were in science where healthy doubt is the source of new knowledge; and sponge-like absorption of answers is indoctrination. Without scientific doubt, the earth would still be flat; diseases would be attributed to evil spirits and travel to the moon a fantasy. Human progress *depends* on people who doubt received truth, but somehow in religion, when doubt rears its head, we are expected to abandon all creative questioning and “believe,” like the crowd who watched the naked Emperor parade by. Doctrines are paraded before us today with trappings from earlier eras which scarcely cover their “nakedness,” but where are the little boys and girls who cry out, “They’re naked!”

Someone once asked me in a seminar, why I called my book “In Defense of Doubt” rather than “In Defense of Inquiry” or “questioning.” They had enjoyed it but felt uncomfortable being called doubters, even though they *did* – which proves my point that doubt does not earn many religious brownie points. Inquiry or questioning are acceptable, but doubt is different -- it moves from noble inquiry to a personal slur – a *doubter*, and, since doubt is about questioning authorities, *religious* doubt sounds like we doubt – well, God – a very different league! To doubt God is not OK; therefore the problem must be our fault, our need of repentance and belief, not discussion. This blaming the doubter is reminiscent of domestic violence and incest -- not only is a person violated by another, but made to see it as *her* fault and thus keep silent about it. While we condemn such family dysfunction today, we perpetuate this treatment of doubters within the church family -- more obedience, more submission, more prayer is required, or -- if all else fails -- adopting a position of intellectual dishonesty, unable to make sense of the argument yet blaming ourselves for our problem. To quote Karen Armstrong’s convent instructions:

When we were tempted to question the ideas, principles and customs of the order, we must remember that as yet we were simply not in a position to understand. We were like babies, learning an entirely new language. One day, in the not too distant future, when we had developed spiritually, we would see all these matters quite differently. Until then, we just had to wait patiently, in what the mystics had called the cloud of unknowing, and all would be revealed.^v

A major problem is that *doubt* has been promoted as the antonym, the opposite, of *faith* or *belief*. St. Francis’ prayer says – where there is sorrow, bring joy; where there is doubt, faith. We still sing “drive the dark night of doubt away.” As long as this continues, doubt will never get a fair hearing, since the Church’s task is to encourage faith and so -- by corollary -- dispel doubt! Yet the opposite of *faith* is to be *without faith*, and the opposite of *belief* is *unbelief*. Neither equate with doubt. Furthermore, *faith* and *belief* are not a package deal. *Faith* is our response to or trust in, an experience of something, while *beliefs* are human doctrines formalized within our traditions. It is the difference between “What do you believe?” and “On whom or what do you set your heart?” It is possible to doubt *beliefs* as human descriptions of God, yet still have *faith* in Something. I argue that doubt is instead the awareness of a *discrepancy* between *faith* and *belief* -- the difference between what we are taught as truth, and what we experience or intuit. Doubt emerges in that gap when belief systems do not line up with our own reason or experience.

Despite what people say, belief systems did not drop from heaven in some eternal form, but emerged within different communities and contexts in response to the community's experiences of the Divine. Beliefs have changed over the centuries and continue to change, as evidenced by this group here tonight. If they had not, theological education would require one textbook and a few weeks of study. The problem arises when *particular* beliefs are claimed as ultimate truth, with no access to any other "truths." Unfortunately, religious "truth" is not demonstrable by scientific experiment or comparative analysis. In science, certain paradigms or theories serve as authoritative until too many exceptions emerge through experimentation and a crisis occurs. Scientists return to basics and construct a new paradigm adequate for the new information. Such paradigm shifts are not restricted to science. A paradigm shift occurs when a toddler can no longer rely on a nappy being there for her and when teenagers realize colleges do not employ mothers to make beds and pick up clothes. Paradigm shifts occur in *religious* thinking when doctrines based on outdated worldviews no longer explain new knowledge and experience. Ptolemy said the planets revolved around the earth, supporting the theological belief in the earth as the center of God's universe. When Copernicus claimed the earth was merely one planet revolving around the sun, he was charged with heresy since his new science did not fit with Church teaching, yet in the end the Church had to accept the new science and readjust their religious paradigms. Unlike science, however, truth in religion is not about demonstrable evidence but about choosing *authorities*, whether a book or person. The majority of people in church pews could *not* cite the historical arguments establishing whether or not Jesus was divine – they simply accept what their church authority tells them, unless dastardly doubt gets the better of them.

To get back to my own experience, I took my doubts from high school to university, obtaining graduate degrees in science. In the sixties, my religious group fielded the science and religion debate with scientific "explanations" for biblical events as varied as squaring the creation story sequence with the stages of evolution; to arguing some rare molecular congruence in the water which allowed Jesus to walk on it. If such explanations could not be found, science and religion were said to speak different languages, thus avoiding any real discussion between the two. I had been trained in the scientific method, so found it difficult not to expect the same rigid critique of doctrines, especially when they literally meant life or death. I would later learn that to claim "God says," whatever the context, is a *faith* statement based on faith in the authority who says it. Doubt is the discrepancy which tugs at our mind when what God is said to think does not add up with how we experience God's world. Doubt is therefore not weakness but strength, the ability to listen to our own authority, our own experience of truth. Yet this is hard to do when traditional Christianity has knocked the self-esteem stuffing right out of most of us, courtesy of the Adam and Eve story read as human sin and corruption -- we have much re-learning and reinterpreting to do.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg has called Feminist theology the single most important theological development in his life-time because it gives us another vantage point from which to view the Christian tradition. Feminist theology emerged from women's doubts voiced aloud. For centuries, women have been told their divinely ordained place -- subordinate, obedient, less intelligent, less reliable, and a host of other characteristics packaged with female body parts and woven into female DNA. Although these truths owed more to Greek philosophy than anything else, they were substantiated with Biblical texts. Many women secretly doubted these dictates, but could do nothing because, given their inferiority in the order of beings, they were discredited when they voiced their doubts with insubordination, sin, rebellion, and lack of faith. Not until enough women attained a public voice did they discover the problem was not *them* but the system which named them -- the argument of my book *Why We're Equal: introducing Feminist Theology*.^{vi} It seems incredible today that women were attacked for wanting to vote on matters which affected them and their children, yet their exclusion was argued on their inferiority, claimed as Divine law.

I mention feminist theology because, in retrospect, I realize that my youthful doubt had a lot to do with being a woman growing up in the Fifties and Sixties. Despite receiving honours in my university science career, I had to choose between being an academic and a mother and watch my male colleagues, with lesser grades, take the jobs I would have loved, and be fathers as well. Only after our children were in High School did I go back to university for the long pilgrimage to a Ph.D. in theology. I had reached a point where I could no longer blame myself for my doubts. I could see inconsistencies in the religious arguments, yet everyone else seemed to accept these with a certainty that included miraculous parking spots and frequent text-messages from God. I knew I had to face my doubt squarely, even at the risk of leaving God and the church as well. Many friends told me I would lose my faith studying theology – what I lost was my outdated belief system and what I found was a host of doubters before me, some of whom had been held up as icons of faith. The Psalmists doubted God’s presence; Job doubted God’s justice; Peter denied Jesus under stress; Augustine searched many religions and philosophies, despairing of finding truth; Luther was filled with doubt; and the Nineteenth Century biblical scholars doubted enough to blow the ecclesiastical lid off traditional truth claims. As German theologian Rudolf Otto said about entering the University at Erlangen to study theology,

The earth disappeared from under my feet ... I went (to Erlangen) not so much to quest for truth, but more to vindicate belief. I left with the resolve to seek nothing but the truth, even at the risk of not finding it in Christ. ^{vii}

Process theologian John Cobb, son of missionary parents in Japan, found his beliefs undercut in his first year at the University of Chicago. Although fearing spiritual death, he resolved to face his doubts head-on rather than spend, as he says, his next three years ‘hammering nails into the coffin of his childhood God.’ ^{viii} Such stories are legion and so we have to ask why many of our clergy, exposed to similar new thinking at university, do not share it with people in their pews but leave them stranded in their doubts. I remember one of my childhood ministers, after I had finished theological training, confiding in me that he always had a problem with the Virgin birth and some other doctrines, yet I had sat at his feet for years, hoping for just a hint that he might have similar doubts, but never a word was said to give me comfort in mine.

These are survivor stories, yet unresolved doubts have lead many to secret despair. William Cowper, who wrote such hymns as “O for a closer walk with God” and “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform,” lived his whole life convinced he had committed the unforgivable sin and was damned to hell. Nothing convinced him otherwise and he died in torment. Friedrich Nietzsche struggled with doubt before he finally declared God dead in 1882, yet in a poem written before he went mad near the end of his life, he pleads with his murdered God to return:

*No! come back,
With all your torments!
Oh come back
To the last of all solitaries!
All the streams of my tears
Run their course for you!
And the last flame of my heart –
It burns for you!
Oh come back
My unknown God!
My pain! My last — happiness ^{ix}*

Religious communities usually condemn the doubters who leave, yet these are often the most ardent seekers; and they walk away reluctantly. Australian historian Manning Clark was raised in an Anglican parsonage and was plagued with doubts from childhood, yet found no one with whom he could talk. He finally abandoned belief, but not because he wanted to. He wrote:

Perhaps life was my stern tutor, perhaps my temperament prepared me to be a doubter. Whatever the cause a passionate lover and believer became a doubter, but the doubter never lost his thirst to love or his thirst to believe. ^x

My revelatory moment was when I finally realized that doubt was not an aberration but an ongoing part of faith and life – they danced together! I used to plead that all my doubts would go away and I would ‘arrive;’ with belief a total package that nothing could ever disturb again. This was how others talked, but this is ridiculous because, as culture and knowledge changes, new challenges are made to religious ideas. Life has to be an ever-changing journey where doubts produce new answers and new doubts. We live like this in every other aspect of life – why not in religion?

What then must we do to change the dreaded profile of doubt? Firstly we must recognize it as a natural and essential part of life and then ask, loudly and constantly, without apology or dilution, why have we tried to silence or stifle it in religious traditions. Doubt is a challenge to institutions whose leaders claim God’s truth and use this power of interpretation to oppress laity, women, gays, the poor, other races and other religions. Letty Russell, an early American feminist theologian and Presbyterian pastor, found that, rather than attack the male establishment, she repeatedly asked “Why?” “Where does that come from?” or “Who said that?” whenever universal truth claims were made with which she disagreed. Rather than dismiss her as a “doubter,” the claimants then had to produce their evidence and, with enough “Why’s,” eventually admit that many of their arguments were as much cultural and theological. Claims of God’s truth are *always* interpreted by human agency and to doubt them is not so much to question *God* but that particular human mediation of God. This is not to say we do not need authorities to guide us into truth – of course we do -- but we need to choose authorities that do not demand we surrender our *own* authority and integrity to them. There is a lovely section in John Calvin’s writings that gives the congregation permission to be “discerners of truth” along with the pastor, legitimately confronting him or her when something does not seem right.

Doubts are not red flags indicating weakness, but auditors of our belief systems. As successive bottoms fall out of successive doctrines that no longer fit cultural and scientific world views, we do not “lose faith” by asking questions – we are seeking God in the doubt. Doubts are warning road signs of “God at work,” sometimes the *only* place the Divine can work within the limits our institutional dogmas impose. Doubts as nagging inconsistencies force us to challenge the status quo so new light and truth can emerge. We need to celebrate them as *gifts*, drag them from under the rug and dust them off. What if we treated religious doubts like other doubts – as signs of health; grains of sand irritating the oyster to produce a pearl; catalysts for new ideas; tantalizing carrots enticing us into new territory, rather than the preying forces of evil? What if we saw them as Divine nudges wooing us towards richness and celebrated them as such? Australian scientist and theologian Charles Birch once said, “To take risks is the safest thing for a Christian to do. The sturdiest faith comes out of a struggle with doubt.” ^{xi}

Yes, there is pain in dealing openly and honestly with our doubts as we have lived so long with guilt and uncertainty. Let me share some prose I penned during a critical yet silent struggle with doubt, smiling all the time on the outside:

To want so much to be in communion with God, this Being whom I cannot see, cannot hear, cannot explain. To be prepared to give everything to God, to live for God’s cause, but to be so unsure of it. I can see why people cling to rules and guarantees of salvation. There is no pain in weekly confession, in saying the rosaries, if it comes with an assurance that this mechanical, measurable action will guarantee the goods. It was so easy the other way of ‘do’s and don’ts, truth and heresy, for now I am alone, even in the middle of a worship service, a barrage of God talk, action, prayer. I feel as alien as a blond in a Middle Eastern bazaar. What also worries me is knowing there are others hiding in this

sea, swaying *internally* to different music like me, but still dancing to the music of the crowd outside ... Dancing so well, like me, that it is impossible to fault their steps, to spot an unfamiliar move, a hint that they too are wired to a call of a different kind.

In Scott Peck's Road Less Traveled, he says that the majority of people will not act on their doubts because it involves, not just adding few new ideas to their belief systems, but major work and upheaval in challenging the core of their understandings of God.

Some people ask me, is *all* religious doubt creative and positive? What about people for whom everything is always relative and in flux? While a few people may make a hobby of this, they are the minority – and are also on a journey. Just as many people *pretend* to believe in order to stay in a church community, others adopt as *their* defense some form of agnosticism or atheism, or a refusal to consider any arguments at all. Most people have been exposed to only one idea about God that came in a package of beliefs about sin, salvation and God's judgment. When parts of this package cease to make sense, many simply reject God along with the package, unaware that there are *numerous* ways of describing the Divine Intent. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Spong all offer different ideas – why else are there so many denominations -- and part of paying attention to our doubts is to seek a place where we find answers that fit our reason and experience. Paul said, "if Christ makes you free, you shall be free indeed," but to say it another way, "If Christ does not make you free i.e. if what you are taught is not liberating Good News, then you are in bondage to an inadequate belief system." Doubt is the divine discontent that encourages us to hear a new voice amongst the commotion of others.

One of the first steps in taking our doubts seriously is to examine our image of God. Whatever comes to mind when we say "God" *matters*, because it makes God credible or incredible, plausible or implausible, distant or near. It also determines the way we *relate* to God – to a picky judge we are nervous sinners; to a parent, we are obedient children; to a companion, we are friends; to a co-creator, we have self-esteem and purpose. When people tell me they don't believe in God, I always ask "Tell me which God you don't believe in and I probably don't believe in that one either!" We have zeroed in on a few biblical images of the Divine, building complex theories of salvation, atonement and judgment on these images, while ignoring other images that better express today's experience of life and transformation -- but more of that tomorrow!

Treating doubts as positive nudges from God can be threatening for many church communities, especially those ruled by creeds and confessional statements. To challenge such foundational beliefs, or even interpret them in a different way, exposes a person to censure or even exclusion. This has been particularly true for clergy who have taken stands, in response to doubt, against traditional doctrines or denominational corporate statements – I am sure you can name such people in your local context. Lloyd Geering and Bishop Spong spring to mind on the wider scene, their books and lectures simultaneously liberating doubters and scandalizing believers! Geering has been brought before church courts and Spong has been censured repeatedly, yet they have had the courage of their convictions and have shared it with their congregations. Until this happens, we will continue to be trapped in repeated re-frosting of the cake without checking if the cake itself is stale.

How can we encourage doubt within faith communities, yet stay together as a community? Ten years ago, I suggested in my book that the glue was mutual love and respect – relationship rather than doctrinal conformity. I still hold to this, but would add that, while love keeps us talking to each other, we need fresh injections of what to talk about. As I said at Wesley Church yesterday, I believe the *greatest* challenge for religious communities today is to do our homework on how we interpret the Bible. Controversies about homosexuality, evolution and abortion are not about these issue in themselves but about what the *Bible* says, or not say, about them. It is absolutely vital that church folk become educated about theology -- not as something eternally

written in stone but changing through the centuries and continuing to change with new information, experiences and worldviews. Denominational belief statements must also be seen, not as unchanging truth, but as evolving descriptions of God's story through the ages. Lay folk need to *know* that the questions they themselves ask silently are the same hard questions asked within Christian tradition down the centuries, with varying answers. In the past, orthodoxy and conformity worked to exclude any opposing views, but they were always there, bubbling away on the edges. To grow hospitable communities, we need to fling open our doors to the corridors, balconies and gardens where people sit outside the hall of orthodoxy. If we don't, those on the verandahs hoping for a discussion will simply wander off to another open door. This has happened in the last decades as thousands seeking the sacred *within* churches have been forced out into what has been called New Age or individualistic spirituality. When people ask me what I think about these new movements, I say they are proof positive that churches have failed to provide safe arenas for doubt and discussion for some of its most intelligent and spiritual members.

Hospitable space includes permission for *everyone* to doubt, even the pastor, and to share doubts as part of a journey to be celebrated. Many clergy preach certainties on Sundays and weep alone with their doubts during the week in the arid desert into which congregations exile them. I suggest that a religious community be less like a testimony meeting and more like a regional scientific conference where people share their progress reports -- successes, failures, doubts, questions, and hopes. The problem with testimony meetings, the usual way of talking about our faith, is that only *successes* can be reported -- doubts are admitted only *after* they have been eradicated. What if doubts were celebrated as normal, thus offering encouragement to others despairing behind smiling faces? What if pastors shared *big* doubts from the pulpit -- like does God exist -- inviting the congregation to walk with him or her on this journey of exploration? Manning Clark talks of his clergyman father's life-long struggle with doubt, a situation more common than we think.

My mother, (he said), could not understand why (my father) needed to 'err and stray' from God's ways like a lost sheep. She stood on entrenched ground; my father was never to know the peace of standing on such ground. My mother was never visited by doubts, she never needed to say to herself, "Help thou my unbelief." My father always uttered these words with a fervour which measured the longing in his soul for certainty, anything which would quieten the uproar inside him.^{xii}

Although religious communities like to think they are the proactive ones in our world, it is the *secular* world that usually raises the questions, with churches hurrying to catch up. The *global* community has brought other religions to our doorstep, with the local doctor Hindu and our child's school teacher Buddhist. The arrogant declaration that Jesus Christ is the only way would be laughable if the consequences were not so tragic for those we colonized in the past with such a message. How can we look into the face of the Dali Lama and say he has no truth, or Gandhi and say he was deluded because he never espoused the Jesus he so admired as the only way to God? If this is how we think, voicing our doubts aloud about Jesus as the one and only way to salvation will not only lead us away from the violence accompanying such declarations, but will also expose us, should we choose this mission, to a plethora of fresh images, courtesy of other faiths who have sought the Unknowable, like us, in different times and places. Interreligious dialogue no longer means we either convert the other or are converted, but that we each bring to the conversation who we are and, through dialogue, leave as more nuanced whatever-we-were-before's.

There is so much more to say, yet no more time -- you will have to read the book -- I have copies here tonight! In summary, by exposing religion's manipulation of doubt as a negative, I invite you to doubt boldly and to cherish your doubts as gifts that lead to richness and freedom,

not alienation and self-blame – and I urge you to share this message with the thousands who are still captive. I will end as I end the book.

What is the promise? Not constant sunshine, instant success, unlimited wealth, immortal health, or a personal genie of the lamp. Rather, it is the promise that, if we open the windows of our lives and allow fresh winds to blow through -- and sometimes cyclones, tornadoes and thunderstorms -- we may also feel a caress that lightly touches our face and may discover that we can call It God. ^{xiii}

ⁱ Russell, Bertrand. *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967, 48

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 52

ⁱⁱⁱ Armstrong, Karen. *The Spiral Staircase: a Memoir*. Harper Perennial: London, 2005, 168

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 261

^v *Ibid.*, 52

^{vi} Webb, Val. *Why We're Equal: introducing Feminist Theology*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999.

^{vii} Almond, Philip C. *Rudolf Otto: an Introduction to his Philosophical Theology*. Chapel Hill and London; The University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 12

^{viii} Webb, Val. *In Defense of Doubt: an Invitation to Adventure*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995, 59

^{ix} Friedrich Nietzsche. Quoted in Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4000 YEAR Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 358

^x Clark, Manning. *The Puzzles of Childhood: His Early Life*. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1989, 74

^{xi} Birch, Charles. *Regaining Compassion for Humanity and Nature*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993, 39

^{xii} Clark, Manning, 38

^{xiii} Webb, Val. *In Defense of Doubt: an Invitation to Adventure*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995,