

Celebrating Doubt as a Catalyst on the Faith Journey

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Since you've been here tonight, you have, no doubt, had many doubts running through your head - did I make the right choice giving up my evening for this; I'm not sure I turned off the stove; why does that woman think that shirt looks attractive on her? Doubt is an important and integral part of who we are, yet it has been named an enemy of Christianity. Across the world right now, people will be listening to stories in churches, secretly wondering if they can believe some of them, but not saying a word. I say Christianity because I recently stumbled across words from an Eighteenth century Zen master that I wish I had encountered in my teenage years. He said "At the bottom of great doubt lies great awakening. Small doubt: small awakening. No doubt: no awakening."

Some twenty-nine years ago, I wrote a book *In Defence of Doubt: an Invitation to Adventure*. The book was very popular and was updated and re-published in 2012. Why did I write about doubt? Because you should write about what you know and I certainly knew a lot about doubt! The book was written in "white heat," the summer our family moved back to the United States from Australia for a second term. Changing countries is always dislocating because you leave behind old friends, familiar rituals and quite a bit of your history, but such moves are also "first day of the rest of your life" moments where you have a chance to re-examine your life and goals before getting caught up in a new schedule. I grew up in Australia as a God-intoxicated, evangelical Christian, which meant I could not sit beside someone in a bus without feeling I had to witness to them before they got off at their stop - their destiny was my God-given responsibility. Engrained in my head was that warning - what is they died that night and did not go to heaven! Yet all the while, I secretly doubted many of the teachings from an infallible bible that simply had to be believed. I blamed *myself* for this weakness and for my arrogance in thinking that I could question issues of such magnitude. And I desperately wanted to be rid of my doubts because, in my church tradition, doubt was frowned upon. In fact, the more you could believe without question, the better Christian you were. Although the disciple Thomas asked a sensible question about seeing the evidence before he believed, he was demonized forever as "doubting Thomas" because of the verse that followed -- "Blessed are those who believe *without* seeing the evidence".

I went to university, gaining a graduate degree in science. In the university Evangelical Union, we dissected Bible verses with great skill, thinking ourselves great scholars, but there were always hidden walls into which I would bump if I questioned certain things like the resurrection, the virgin birth, inconsistencies in the Bible - and, of course, these were the things that worried me. I remember the agony of convincing myself each night before sleep that Jesus' bodily resurrection did actually happen, only to wake next morning with the first question in my mind, "Did it *really* happen?" After a career in science and then in the arts, I finally went back to university in mid-life to do religious studies to find answers to my questions. I could no longer live with the emotional torture my doubts were still creating and I was prepared to walk away from God and the church should it prove necessary. The moment I began New Testament studies, I discovered that all my questions had been openly debated in theological circles for centuries, yet this had not reached lay people in the pews. "Why weren't we told?" was my cry, as it is with so many people when they realize they have never been introduced to these discussions. Many of my classmates in religious studies were training to be ministers and priests, responsible for passing on what they learned once they graduated, but they would not. What *further* incensed me was that faithful lay people were giving sacrificially towards the education of these future clergy, yet would be left with their doubts. When I finished my Ph.D. in theology, my goal was set - to write for laity, to ensure others did not go through the traumas of doubt I did without access to biblical scholarship.

This was why, in the summer of 1988 in America, I started putting down on paper what had been composting in me -- religious doubts are not negatives, but the positives they are in all other areas of life, the sand that irritates the oyster long enough to produce a beautiful pearl. It was time to pay attention to my doubts rather than shamefully hiding them and squeezing my feet into someone

else's certainty. At this time, unlike today, books celebrating religious doubt were rare – most talked instead about successfully *overcoming* doubts once and for all. In fact, when my book came out in 1995, some questioned the title - 'Why didn't you call it in defence of questioning'. Although they acknowledged they had doubts, they felt more comfortable being a questioner than a doubter, which proves my point about negativity surrounding doubt.

I had no idea how my book would be received when it was first published, but letters and phone calls flooded in from people who, for the first time, felt validated to own *their* doubts. The funny thing is that the book did not give new interpretations of key doctrines or problematic Biblical texts. It simply pointed out that doubt, in *any* area of life, is *healthy* - the way we move from outdated, inadequate ideas to new, useful knowledge. When you state it like this, it seems blatantly obvious, like arguing we should be thankful we have enough to eat, yet for many, doubting religious beliefs is *not* OK and doubters have been and still are silenced and blamed. I did a swift google of doubt and sin as I wrote this and, in the Articles of the Catholic Faith under “The First Commandment”, it says “*Voluntary doubt* about the faith disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief. *Involuntary doubt* refers to hesitation in believing, difficulty in overcoming objections connected with the faith, or also anxiety aroused by its obscurity. If deliberately cultivated, doubt can lead to spiritual blindness”.ⁱ So as not to implicate only Catholics, I went to a Christian Q & A website for advice. It said, “Doubt will lead to unbelief if it is not dealt with properly. To overcome doubt (which will not be 100% possible in this lifetime) we must pray and cry out to God to help our doubt, go back to the bible and search for the answers to our doubt and to ask him to strengthen our faith in his Word. God is the one who gives us faith”.ⁱⁱ The solution in both cases is more faith, more confession, less pride, *rarely* an affirmation the doubter might be *right* and that some doctrines simply leak like sieves.

The condemning of doubt in Christianity has been about power and control and a large dose of fear if people think for themselves. I call this silencing of people theological *abuse*. We use the metaphor of *family* for the church, but many families are quite dysfunctional. Not only is the doubter violated by those in authority who wish to silence her, but she must internalize the belief that someone else's authority can *rightly* substitute for her experience and that the violation is *her* fault. Doubters are expected to adopt a position of intellectual dishonesty while blaming themselves for their problem. As the late iconoclast Christopher Hitchens said, "... the religion which treats its flock as a credulous play-thing offers one of the cruellest spectacles that can be imagined: a human being in fear and doubt who is openly exploited to believe in the impossible".ⁱⁱⁱ As an aside, the best thing about new atheists like Hitchens is that they say out loud what the rest of us are thinking, or need to think about! If doubters *do* publicly admit their doubts, it is usually at a point of desperation. Martin Luther endured years of agony before challenging church teaching. He wrote, “Although much of what the Church said seemed absurd to me and completely alien to Christ, for more than a decade I curbed my thoughts with the advice of Solomon, “Do not rely on your own insight (Prov 3:5).” I always believed there were theologians hidden in the schools who would not have been silent if these teachings were impious”.^{iv} Religion scholar Karen Armstrong wrote of hiding her doubts as a seventeen-year-old in a convent:

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. As a result, I had warped and incapacitated my mental powers.^v

When Armstrong finally voiced a particular doubt to her superior, the sister agreed it could not be proved, but added, “Please don’t tell the others!”

Everybody's faith story is different, but our particular story makes us who we are today and set us on the paths we pursue. Some people tell me they simply walked out of church in their teens or twenties when their doubts became too great and they never went back; while others identify with

my long struggle, remaining in the church with the hope that, one day, my questions would be addressed. Some tell me that doubts have never worried them while others simply want permission to address their doubts. A professional colleague who visited us soon after my doubts book came out was stunned when I explained what it was about. Because we went to church, she assumed we believed all the traditional doctrines. She had been raised in a church where everything had to be believed, under threat of hell, but longer attended because she could not just believe. Yet she was riddled with guilt about this, especially as her family saw her as a backslider. After a few days talking together over some of the issues, she was a different person. She did not need new explanations for worrying doctrines – that could come later. All she wanted was *permission* to listen to her *own* logic and question boldly what did not make sense and which had controlled her for years. “My chains fell off, my heart was free” was true in reverse - she had been freed *to doubt*. Jennifer Michael Hecht, in her wonderful history of Doubt, says:

The only thing such doubters really need, that believers have, is a sense that people like themselves have always been around, that they are part of a grand history ... to be a doubter is a great old allegiance, deserving quiet respect and open pride.^{vi}

Hoads of people are walking away from churches today. In Australia's last census, 28% of young people between 15 and 34 reported no religious affiliation at all. Scandals have been perpetuated by God's representatives, to such a degree that, in Australia, a Royal Commission into sexual abuse of children in church institutions is in process, revealing horrific statistics. 7% of Catholic priests in Australia have been shown to be involved in child sexual abuse, with 40% in one particular religious order – and other denominations are not free from abuse cases. Conservative Christian lobby groups are claiming that same sex marriage will destroy the fabric of Christian marriage, even though only 29% of marriages in Australia in 2011 were performed by a religious leader of *any* religion and most were performed *outside* a church building. New atheists receive attention today, both from those following their message and from those disenchanted with inadequate answers in churches. Yet the majority of churches still promote a Christianity that demands we don't ask questions, just believe. Religion has done a first-class job of packaging ultimate, not-to-be-challenged claims in interlocking doctrines which, like a row of dominoes, may all collapse if one section falls. When Alice, says to the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, “I can't possibly believe that,” the Queen replies, “Perhaps you haven't had enough practice. Why, I have believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!”

The funny thing is that, while Christianity has tried to condemn doubters in the pews, honest creative doubt has long been integral to its history. We have not acknowledged this because we have called our heroes and heroines brave questioners rather than the doubters they were. The psalmists raged against God's absence and Job refused to be quiet, challenging God's fairness. Early Christianity was a ferment of doubt as different teachings about Jesus created conflicting theological camps. Fourth century Roman Emperor, Constantine, insisted that the bishops agree on one orthodox truth to be spelled out in creeds, yet still they argued. And medieval theologian Peter Abelard said, “The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning ... for by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we arrive at truth”.^{vii} I could go on and on with this list, but there is no time - you will have to read the book where I give many examples. Doubters are still all around us in the most surprising places, often hidden from view because we still pretend that all is beyond question. Mother Teresa always springs to mind as an example of great faith, yet letters to her confessor published after her death tell of her years of darkness and doubt, even as she accomplished so much. She wrote:

...this terrible sense of loss -- this untold darkness -- this loneliness -- this continual longing for God -- which gives me such pain deep down in my heart. --Darkness is such that I really do not see -- neither with my mind nor with my reason. -- The place of God in my soul is blank. -- There is no God for me. -- When the pain of longing is so great -- I just long and long for God -- and then it is that I feel -- He does not want me -- He is not there.^{viii}

This was not a fleeting experience, but continued through her life. In 1985, she told her confessor:

Father, I do realize that when I open my mouth to speak to the sisters and to people of God about God's work, it brings them light, joy and courage. But I get nothing of it. Inside it is all dark and feeling that I am totally cut off from God." ix

A large part of the problem is that doubt has traditionally been promoted in hymns and sermons as the *opposite* of faith or belief. St. Francis' prayer says, where there is sorrow, bring joy; where there is doubt, faith. Hymns talk about driving the "dark night of doubt away". One Sunday recently in church, three of the four hymns said something negative about doubt. Yet the opposite of faith is to be without faith. The opposite of belief is unbelief. Neither of these is doubt. Doubt is rather the *discrepancy* between faith and belief, between what we experience and what we are told to believe. Doubt emerges in the gap when belief systems do not line up with our reason or experience. Such doubt is not weakness but the strength we cherish in every *other* area of life to help us make decisions and move forward with integrity. This is hard to do in Christianity where talk of our sinfulness and inadequacy has knocked the self-esteem out of us - we have much re-learning to do.

Another problem with doubt is that Christianity has promoted the idea that "having faith" equals "certainty". The more certain we are about what we believe, the greater our faith. A friend of mine became increasingly excited exploring progressive ways of thinking but, when I mentioned this to a mutual friend, he said "Oh, she's lost her faith". More of us need to "lose our faith" if this is the case. The ex-Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Richard Holloway, wrote:

The perils of being right points to one of the dangers of religion: our certainties - in a world where so little is certain - can make us haters and persecutors of the certainties of others, something that religion is all too prone to. But by contrast ... our doubts and loves can cause all sorts of lovely flowers to bloom, such as tolerance and compassion ... Faith has to be co-active with doubt or it is not faith but its opposite, certainty. More faith and less certainty would make the religions of the world more humble and compassionate, something that is devoutly to be wished". x

In our postmodern world, we are learning to live with uncertainty and even celebrate it. I have called uncertainty a gift to the church because it allows us to move forward, as in science, open to whatever we may find, rather than continually shrinking back into a closed room and leaning against the door against any new ideas and experiences. While this may feel safe, it is not real life because we live every day with doubt and uncertainty. Peter Rollins, in his book *Insurrection: to believe is human: to doubt, divine* says:

I would love to see churches take seriously the idea that mystery, unknowing, brokenness, doubt and mourning should be expressed in the very structure of the church itself. Religion is a system that gives us a sense of being right, of having the answers and knowing how to stay on the right team. I want to see churches that break religion open through the sermons, music, and prayers; churches that bring us face-to-face with the truth of our unknowing and pain. Not so that we despair, but so that, in bringing it to light and sharing it, we can find healing and light. xi

My revelatory moment with doubt was finally realizing it was not an aberration but an ongoing, necessary part of faith and life – they danced together! I used to pray that all my doubts would go away and I would permanently ‘arrive’ as a believer – ‘once I was blind but now I see’ is how others confidently talked - but this is ridiculous because, as culture and knowledge changes, new challenges are made to religious ideas. Life is a journey where doubts constantly produce new answers and new doubts. We live this way in every other aspect of life – why not in religion? Doubts are not red warning flags, but auditors of our belief systems. Doubt is the divine discontent that allows us to hear new voices. As successive bottoms fall out of doctrines that no longer fit our worldview, we do not “lose faith” by asking questions – we open ourselves to nudges urging towards growth. Doubts are nagging inconsistencies that force us to challenge the status quo so new light can emerge. We need to celebrate them as *gifts*, drag them from under the rug and dust them off. Paul

said, “if Christ makes you free, you shall be free indeed,” but it can be reversed to - “If Christ does not make you free i.e. if what you are taught is not liberating Good News, you are in bondage to an inadequate belief system.”

A lot of water has flown under the bridge since my book was first published in 1995, hence the revised version in 2012. We are now in a postmodern era where, as Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay says, we have the freedom “to choose our own ‘realities’, to distrust theory, to reinterpret the past and to incorporate uncertainty into our world view”.^{xiii} The internet has shown us how many alternatives there are, and we have entered a time when we keep options open, wait and see, and where doubt and uncertainty have become respectable and celebrated. People are learning to trust their own experience and reason, listening to the world around them. We no longer make gods of people in authority – lawyers, doctors and priests – we are encouraged to think for ourselves. Consequently, there have been many religious mini-revolutions in and outside the church in recent years. Today we are reading the writings of the Jesus Seminar scholars who make scholarship about the historical Jesus accessible to the general public, yet their first book was published only 20 years ago. The books that projected Bishop Jack Spong into the public eye were published around the same time, as was Marcus Borg's ground-breaking book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), a year before my doubts book. The blossoming of progressive Christianity around the world has also happened within the last twenty-five years. This is not to say that questioning is new – we can find pockets of heretics throughout church history who asked awkward questions and challenged the ecclesiastical status quo -- but this current momentum of small progressive groups is new, meeting together, sometimes in churches, but often initiated and led by lay people meeting outside churches because their doubts have not been welcome *within* the walls.

Claims long protected by the scaffolding of religious tradition are being bombarded, even though many Church institutions are unwilling to let them fall. The public market place is full of books inviting us to think and scholarship no longer belongs exclusively to religious institutions to selectively dispatch. We need to be open to new scholarship and trust the doubts that arise when our reason challenges theological givens. Theology, no matter how obscure and abstract it might seem, is simply the limited attempts of human beings to talk about God from their particular experience and place using available knowledge and language. We all need to do our own theology and find a working theology that can function in our personal, professional, and public lives. Of course, no one can read all the theological books written over the centuries, but we are responsible to choose what makes sense to us so that what we believe is not simply someone else's truth. Finding a working theology is not once-for-all but a life process that involves a constant dance with belief, faith and doubt. This is why I wrote my latest nook *Testing Tradition and Liberating Theology: finding your own voice* – to give lay people a history of changes in theological thought down the centuries so they realize there has never been only one way to think and that doubts have always been at work to move people into new thinking for new times.

How can we change this fear of doubt that lingers in our churches? First, we must recognize it as a natural, essential part of life and ask, loudly and constantly, why is it being demonized in religious traditions? This may be a big call for us if our challenge is to the authorities. Letty Russell, a pioneer American woman theologian, knew the dangers of challenging her male colleagues and teachers in the 1950's, especially about the role of women. Rather than making direct statements, she repeatedly asked “Why?” “Where does that come from?” or “Who said that?” when certain theological claims were assumed. Rather than dismiss her as a difficult woman, her male colleagues had to answer her questions and produce evidence for their claims and, after enough “Why's,” they had to admit their truths about women's place were culturally shaped, not theologically based.

How can we affirm doubts and disagreements in faith communities without it polarizing or causing some to leave? This is a big question for churches where progressive thinking is engaging some but not others. The most obvious answer is creating communities of love and respect that do not depend on uniformity of belief - it is hard to refuse to listen to someone else's questions if you

respect them as a person. We need to create safe places of hospitality where doubts can be expressed without fear of ridicule or a fall from grace. Many people struggling with theological doubts are the backbones of their churches and, so long as their doubts about core doctrines are seen as unacceptable, they will keep quiet in order to stay in the camaraderie of the faithful. Clergy can help here by offering in their sermons the *scope* of theological debate over certain beliefs that has produced different options of thought. Simply knowing that others have asked the same questions and there is more than one answer gives comfort and validity to doubters. A minister from my childhood took me to coffee after I had finished my first degree in religious studies. Now I was “in the club” as it were, he listed all the doctrines he did not believe. I was very frustrated as I had sat listening to his sermons as a teenager, struggling with doubts over these very doctrines, yet never a hint of questioning had passed his lips. When another clergyperson told me he didn’t raise such issues in his sermons because he didn’t want to pull the rug out from under people who have never questioned them, I told him, from my experience talking around churches, the comfort rug is already out from under the *majority* of church people and those who have left, and people long for a new theological rug beneath their feet.

An hospitable space giving permission for *everyone* to doubt includes the pastor. Many clergy preach certainties on Sundays and weep alone during the week in an arid spiritual desert. A new book, *Caught in the Pulpit: leaving belief behind*, is a study from Tufts University linked with The Clergy Project, a private website providing a safe haven for clergy who no longer hold all the beliefs of their denomination. Many are still in active ministry, caught in financial needs, loss of face or lack of other skills. They went into ministry with confidence and hope but, once in parishes, many encountered troubling experiences, whether rejection of their scholarship, dishonesty and corruption, doubts that increased while religious beliefs slowly departed. One clergyperson said, "You can't be completely honest up there. If you're starting to have doubts ... you can't share that. People don't want to hear that, and you want to keep your pay check and keep your congregation growing". But what if pastors *could* share their doubts and uncertainties from the pulpit, questions about “who or what is God” or about the divinity of Jesus, inviting the congregation on a joint journey of exploration? Such religious communities would become less like testimony meetings where only *successes* are reported and more like scientific conferences where people shared their successes, failures, doubts, hopes, celebrating them as normal in the dance of life.

Australian Uniting Church minister John Smith talks about the *progressive* trinity of doubt, deconstruction and discovery, which I find helpful. Once doubt is seen as a friend rather than enemy, deconstruction of doubtful dogmas can take place. We can ask questions about the relevance of biblical laws shaped in ancient desert culture - what to eat, what to wear, whom to marry and which gender we can love. We can accept the equal humanity of women rather than recruit patriarchal Greco-Roman hierarchical codes as God’s will. Such deconstruction has the habit of accelerating once the pillars of a literal, inspired bible and infallible church and creeds have been removed, and it can be an exhilarating ride of freedom, until the reality of "what now" and "what's left" prevails. For many shaped in Christian churches, this move beyond traditional beliefs is not an instant experience. It can be a slow chipping away of layers of old truths, with recurring periods of uncertainty and fear as much once treasured is discarded. In this process, local churches can become impossible for us if the worship is still encrusted in the language and theology we are abandoning. We long for a community where we can say what is in our heart without fear of rejection, and yet we do not wish to leave our friends as if *we* are in the wrong. For many in small communities, there is also nowhere else to go. The third stage of this progressive trinity, after doubt and deconstruction, is discovery, which continues for a lifetime, the dance of life where doubts play their stimulating and essential part and allow us autonomy -- the self-determination and independence of mind that nominates *ourselves* as our final authority in matters of faith and belief, using our reason and experience. The opposite, heteronomy, means a passive surrender of our authority to an external rule, whether scripture, tradition, creeds, clergy, doctrine or family.

I've talked a lot about celebrating doubts in general, but what are specific doubts that plague many today? One of our biggest problems is how we read and interpret the Bible, especially in a faith community. For some people, the Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God. If not directly dictated by God, as Muslims see the Qur-an, God has guided the hands of unknown scribes so it cannot lead us astray which, if we think about it, raises questions when we see the thousands of denominations that have emerged from reading the same book. Because of this idea of an inspired book, community-splitting debates about ordination of women bishops are not so much about the people involved, but about what the Bible says, or does not say, about women. The debate about teaching intelligent design along with evolution in schools is not so much about science or education, but about what the Bible does or does not say about creation. Many people who defend the Bible in this way have little knowledge of how the Bible came to be and how its contents varied over time. With any other book of such magnitude, we would ask questions about authors, origins and editing, about contradictions in its pages and different genres of myth, metaphor and poetry, but this has been discouraged with the Bible -- it has become, for many, a magical item to carry underarm as a sign of faith. When the church is confronted with "hard" social and moral questions, letters to the editor in church papers demand we "Go back to the Bible," quoting odd texts from here and there as if this book, enmeshed in ancient desert cosmology and law, is unquestionably applicable for every aspect of Twenty-first century life. Yet these same folk are *selective* with the texts they quote. Jesus healing blindness with dirt and saliva is rarely advocated today, yet the words from 1 Timothy -- "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man," (1 Tim 2:12) still denies ordination to women in some denominations, even though the previous verses - women must not braid their hair or wear gold, pearls or expensive clothes - are dismissed as culturally outdated. On whose authority is this selection made and who stands to benefit?

I agree -- we *do* need to go back to the Bible, but there we will find, along with noble thoughts and actions, divinely sanctioned violence, abuse of women, acceptance of slavery and skewed family values. As Marcus Borg said, we need to take the Bible seriously as our guide for faith and life, but not literally, especially when outdated laws are used against people, whether women, gays, or people from other religions. We need to distinguish between culturally bound *words* in the Bible and the *Word* or Spirit encountered in these ancient stories and in our lives today. This puts the emphasis where the Bible does -- on the Spirit always working, through tradition, reason, experience *and* scripture, helping us discern what is "useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness."

Once we allow ourselves to see the Bible as the writings of various people in ancient times to describe their encounters with Divine Mystery, we can ask the biggest questions that lead to doubt -- questions about God. Anything we say about God, even the three letter term itself, is metaphorical, since we have not seen God. Our metaphors matter because they determine how we act towards God and if we can believe in God at all. Metaphors are word pictures borrowed from a particular culture to help describe something otherwise hard to describe, and they work best in the culture in which they were created. They are also limited by the knowledge of that time, thus they can enlighten, confuse or deceive when transposed to a different era. Let me give an example. In Central Bougainville, the Willy Wagtail lays its eggs in the open while Golden Plover nests are never found. According to a local story, a spirit asked Wagtail to do something and Wagtail failed the task. The spirit gave Plover the same task and Plover succeeded. The spirit told Wagtail that, because she failed, she would always build her nest where people could see it and steal the eggs. Plover, on the other hand, would lay its eggs where no one could find them. To this day, no one has seen a Golden Plover nest in the North Solomon Islands. This wonderful tale was "true" for those people, but they did not know that the Golden Plover *never* nests in the Solomons but breeds in the Arctic before flying south. They created their truth within the limits of their knowledge, but lacked one vital piece of information.^{xiii} So it is with metaphors for God, as humans are always limited by their small grasp of the world - which serves as a warning against using ancient God descriptions as truth today.

The Bible came out of a tribal culture where God was described as a Warrior, destroying Israel's enemies "by the edge of the sword, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys" (Joshua 6: 21). Because of this warrior metaphor, violence in God's name has been justified down the centuries. Didn't we all sing "Onward Christian soldiers, going as to war, with the cross of Jesus, going on before". Is this Divine mandate to kill still valid in our complex world today where weapons are so deadly and leaders so in love with military power? It makes us ask what God-images were in place in Christian Germany, the leader of European scholarship at that time, that created and justified a culture of violence and anti-Semitism that lulled so many Christians into complicity? Some Christians claim this violent Old Testament God was replaced by the loving, non-violent New Testament God, yet the traditional explanation of Jesus' death, coming from the context of feudal medieval England, describes a Father God, affronted by human disobedience, demanding the murder of an innocent Son in the cruellest, most demeaning form imaginable to satisfy Divine affront, all in the name of love.

The God-metaphors we use determine how we act towards God and whether we can believe in a God at all. Images of God as an ageing male on a heavenly throne, micromanaging every deed that happens on earth in response to fervent prayer and Divine whim, cannot survive in a scientific age. Unfortunately, our hymns and liturgies are still full of God-images from a pre-scientific age with its three tiered universe – Sing praise to God who reigns above" and "The Lord Jehovah reigns, his throne is built on high". We need metaphors for God that at least sit comfortably with what we know of the universe today. Recently, NASA announced it has discovered seven "Earth-sized" planets orbiting a nearby star and relatively well positioned to support life. They are roughly the size of Earth and roughly the same distance from their star. The science reporters began to recount the literally billions of planets in the universe and how *these* new planets are roughly 40 light years away – it would take roughly 44 million years to get to these planets using modern technology. Hearing this, I was again bowled over at the paucity, the ignorant arrogance of our theological language describing God with metaphors from ancient desert culture and medieval theology. Theologian Sallie McFague puts the need for rethinking the triune God in perspective:

God is embodied in one place and one place only: in the man Jesus of Nazareth. He and he alone is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1: 15). The source, power and goal of the universe is known through and only through a first-century Mediterranean carpenter. The creator and redeemer of the fifteen-billion-year history of the universe with its hundred billion galaxies (and their billions of stars and planets) is available only in a thirty-year span of one human being's life on planet earth. That claim, when put in the context of contemporary science, seems skewed, to say the least.^{xiv}

The beauty of the progressive movement has been the permission it has given us all to doubt, to ask questions, and find a theology that fits. Let me leave you with the words of the late Charles Birch, an Australian scientist and dedicated lay theologian:

To take risks is the safest thing for a Christian to do. The sturdiest faith comes out of a struggle with doubt. One thing I know for sure: in the business of living one must not live with certainties but with visions, risks and passion. Visions: to see the future in hope and expect the best of people and situations. Risks; to venture forth in faith and not count the cost. Passion: to feel with all one's heart, to show emotion, to share one's deepest experiences. This is to be saved by hope.^{xv}

ⁱ www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm

ⁱⁱ christianity.net.au/questions/overcome-doubt

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality* (NY: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2012), 25

^{iv} *Against Latomus*, in *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan & Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86) 32: 140-41

^v Armstrong, Karen. *The Spiral Staircase: a Memoir* (Harper Perennial: London, 2005), 168

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- ^{vi} Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: a history* (New York: HarperOne, 2003) 494
- ^{vii} Abelard, from *Sic et Non* (c.1120), quoted in Frederick Denison Maurice, *Mediaeval Philosophy, or A Treatise of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy* (1870), 138
- ^{viii} Mother Teresa, *Come be My Light: the private writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"*, Brian Kolodiejchuk ed., (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 1-2
- ^{ix} *Ibid*, 306
- ^x Quoted in Webb, *In Defence of Doubt; an invitation to adventure*, 2nd edn (Northcote: Morning Star 2014), 171
- ^{xi} Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: to believe is human: to doubt, divine* (Great Britain: Hodder, 2012), 189
- ^{xii} Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief: how we find meaning, with or without religion*. (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2006), 210
- ^{xiii} Don Haddon, *Birds and Bird Lore of Bougainville and the Northern Solomons* (Alderley, Qld: Dove Publications, 2004), 88, 239 – 40.
- ^{xiv} Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: an ecological theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 159
- ^{xv} Charles Birch, *Regaining Compassion for Humanity and Nature*, North American edn. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 39