

In Defence of Doubt

ocn Ireland and pcnBritain, June-July 2013

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What better way to start than with Woody Allen? "I am plagued by doubts," he said. "What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case, I definitely overpaid for the carpet. If only God would give me some clear sign; like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss Bank".

Since you've been sitting in this audience, you have, no doubt, had a string of doubts - did I make the right choice giving up an evening for *this*; I'm not sure I turned off the oven; why does that woman think that shirt looks attractive on her? Doubt is an integral part of who we are, yet the Christian tradition has, for centuries, treated doubt as the enemy. In many places right now across the planet, people will be listening to Christian doctrines expounded and be secretly wondering how on earth they can make themselves believe them. I say *Christian* because recently I stumbled on these words of 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."

Seventeen years ago, I wrote a book called *In Defence of Doubt: an Invitation to Adventure*. This book was written in "white heat" the summer our family moved for a second time to the United States from Australia. Such moves are dislocating because you leave behind old friends and familiar rituals, but they are also "first day of the rest of your life" moments where you have a chance to

examine your life and priorities before getting engrossed in a new routine. Since I am new to most of you in this country, it might help to give a bit more of my background. I grew up a God-intoxicated, evangelical Christian. I could not sit beside someone in a bus without feeling I had to witness to them before they got off at their stop. Yet all the while I doubted many of the Christian "truths" from an infallible bible that simply had to be believed. I blamed *myself* for both my weakness and also my arrogance in thinking I could question issues of such magnitude that had been discussed by so many wise theologians. In *my* childhood tradition, doubt was frowned upon -- the more you believed without question, the better a Christian you were. Although the disciple Thomas asked a very sensible question about seeing evidence before he believed, he was demonized as "doubting Thomas" because of the verse that followed -- "Blessed are those who believe *without* seeing the evidence".

I will be using the term GOD as a three letter symbol for that which describes peoples' understanding of the sacred, but with no specific theological shape assumed.

After degrees and careers in both science and the arts, I went back to university in mid-life to do religious studies, in order to find some answers to my doubts. I had decided I could no longer live with the emotional torture they created and I was prepared to walk away from God and the church should this prove necessary. 'Why we're we told?' became my question the moment I entered my first course of New Testament studies, when I discovered that the doubts I was not allowed to express from the pew had been discussed by long lines of theologians before me. Some of my classmates were ordinands training for ministry within my denomination and responsible for telling what they had learned once they graduated but, like many before them, they would not. I was incensed that faithful lay people in the pews were giving sacrificially so that these students could have free theological education, yet the same laity were being kept in ignorance by these same people with respect to their doubts. Once I finished my Ph.D. in theology, my mission was set - to ensure others do not go through the traumas over doubt that I did.

So, in the summer of 1988 in America, I began putting down on paper what had been composting in me -- that religious doubts were not negatives but the positives they were in all other areas of my life, including science -- 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.

When I began this book twenty-five years ago, books for lay people celebrating doubt with no strings attached were rare within church walls, unless they talked about people successfully overcoming them once and for all -- the religious testimony format. In fact, when my book finally came out in 1995, many doubters were uncomfortable with the title. 'Why didn't you call it 'in defence of questioning,' some asked, feeling much more comfortable as questioners. As religious historian Karen Armstrong said about her doubts as a young nun 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. ⁱ

When Armstrong confronted a senior nun about the historicity of the resurrection, the sister agreed that it could not be proven but added, "please don't tell the others."

I find it interesting to look back over our religious journeys to trace the various tides of influence and challenge that have swept over us. Everyone's story is different but *our* particular story makes us who we are today and sets us on the paths we pursue. Some people tell me they simply walked out of church in their teens or twenties when the doubts became too great and never went back, yet others fully identify with my long struggle. The Billy Graham crusade of 1959 with its high-powered, American style evangelism intent on converting all in sight with a simple, set formula, had a profound impact on Australia, yet a few years later, Bishop John Robinson's little

book "Honest to God" also grabbed public attention, raising many of *my* questions -- but it was condemned in most Australian churches now filled with Billy Graham converts. Thus Robinson's message did not get through to laity and, for clergy who responded to Robinson's ideas, the attitude of "Let's not pull the rug out from under the laity" prevailed -- and this attitude continues to rule in many churches today, even though the rug under many laity is threadbare. Why is it there is often more pastoral concern about keeping one group of church members in their innocence than about feeding serious searchers who are quietly walking out the door?

Hoads of people are walking away from churches. You know *your* statistics, but in Australia's last census, 28% of young people aged between 15 and 34 reported no religious affiliation. Scandals are perpetuated by God's representatives. The number of children sexually abused in church institutions in Australia over the last fifty years, especially by Catholic priests, is so grave that the government has recently set up a Royal Commission to investigate abuse and cover-up at the highest levels. Conservative Christian lobbies protest about same sex marriage destroying the fabric of Christian marriage, yet Australian statistics show that only 29% of marriages in 2011 were performed by a religious celebrant of *any* religion. 71% of all marriages had a civil celebrant and were mostly performed outside a church building. New atheists preach in public places offering insightful critiques of any God-talk at all and progressive Christians happily question everything, but the *majority* of churches still continue to promote a Christianity that demands we just believe without question. In fact, they feel noble in upholding this stance.

For centuries, religion has done a first-class job of making ultimate, not-to-be-challenged claims and packaging them neatly in interlocking doctrines which, like a row of dominoes, may all collapse if one section falls. In *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice said to the Queen of Hearts "I can't possibly believe that," the Queen replied, "Perhaps you haven't had enough practice. Why, I have believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!" It was to help reduce the number of impossible beliefs before breakfast that this updated edition of my book emerged last year.

Denigrating religious doubt is a matter of power and control -- and a large dose of threat for religious authorities if people think for themselves. Yet honest creative doubt has long been central in church history. The psalmists raged against Divine absence and Job refused to be quiet. Early Christianity was a ferment of doubt and disagreement until Emperor Constantine insisted on one orthodox truth recorded in Church Creeds -- and still they argued. 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".ⁱⁱ And Martin Luther finally spoke out after years of blaming himself. "For more than a decade," he wrote, "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".ⁱⁱⁱ Luther's words should trouble all teachers and preachers who stay silent, hiding their own doubts while speaking with certainty on the outside.

The Enlightenment, with its celebration of human reason, weakened religion's hold on truth; and theology has not been the same since. With the church no longer the sole repository of learning and revelation, doubts could flourish. John Wesley added a fourth leg to his resources for an intelligent, individual faith -- scripture, tradition, reason and also *experience*. Theologian Frederick Schleiermacher argued that the personal "experience or feeling of dependence on something" was authoritative for every individual in this time of great optimism in human ability. But two world wars would erode this confidence and the strong voice of theologian Karl Barth turned liberal theology upside down. It is not what humans think about *God*, he preached, but what God has to say about humans. We can only know anything about God, the totally other, through Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture and preached by the church. Under this umbrella, doubt and any confidence in human reason again became a sign of rebellion or arrogance. Barth's emphasis on eternal truths as independent of human circumstances and interpretation was, according to Paul Tillich, like "throwing the message at those in the situation like a stone". Yet anything read from scripture and

preached is always *interpreted* by human minds and many of Barth's critics felt that he preached as if he had been privy to God's hand of cards. It would take voices like Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich to loosen Barth's overwhelming rebuttal of any human questions or natural theology and allow doubts to gush out once again. According to Tillich:

Bultmann saved the historical question from being banished from theology ... He showed it cannot be silenced, that our whole relationship to the Bible cannot be expressed in paradoxical and supernatural elements, not even if it is done with the prophetic power of Karl Barth. ^{iv}

It is impossible in this time frame to highlight all the struggles that doubters have had in religion -- you will have to read the book, where I give many examples of both survivors of such abuse and those who did not survive this squelching of doubts. Mother Teresa always springs to mind as an example of great faith, yet letters to her confessor published ten years after her death tell of years of darkness and doubt, even as she accomplished so much. As a young Loreto nun, she experienced a close union with God, but once she stepped out on her own and formed her Missionaries of Charity to work with the poor, darkness enclosed her. 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. ^v

This was not a fleeting experience, but continued throughout 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." ^{vi}

Part of the problem is that, traditionally, doubt has been promoted in hymns and sermons as the *opposite* of faith or belief. St. Francis' popular prayer says, where there is sorrow, bring joy; where there is doubt, faith. Hymns about "driving the dark night of doubt away" reinforced this dichotomy. Yet the opposite of faith is to be without faith. The opposite of belief is unbelief. Neither equate with doubt. Doubt is the *discrepancy* between faith and belief, between what we are taught and what we experience; and emerges in the gap when belief systems do not line up with our reason or experience. Such doubt is not weakness but strength, the ability to claim our own authority and experience. For many, this is hard to do since traditional Christianity has knocked the self-esteem out of us with tales of our sin and corruption -- we have much re-learning to do.

Instead, we need to be open to life, new experiences and scholarship and to trust any doubts that arise when our experiences, reading and reason challenge theological givens. Theology, no matter how obscure, dogmatic, opinionated and abstract it might seem, is simply the limited attempts of human beings to talk about God from their particular experience and time using available knowledge and language. *All* of us have to do theology -- to find a *working theology* that can *function* in our personal, professional, and public lives. No one can critique all the theology that has been said over the centuries and cemented into doctrines, but we are responsible that what we *do* believe is not someone else's formula, but makes sense for us and how we live. And finding a working theology is not a once-for-all event but an ongoing life process which involves a constant dance with beliefs, faith and doubts.

Traditional Christianity has promoted over the centuries the idea that "having faith" as a religious goal equalled "certainty". The more certain we are, the greater our faith. A friend of mine was becoming increasingly excited exploring progressive possibilities of thinking and, 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. As 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".^{vii}

A lot of water has flown under the theological bridge in the twenty years since my Doubts book was first published. You are celebrating 50 years since John Robinson's *Honest to God*, but the current progressive momentum in the United States and Australia has emerged, for the most part, during those twenty years. I use the word "momentum" rather than movement, borrowing Australian progressive John Bodycomb's description. Rather than something structured that can be measured, it is "a stream of thinking that is slowly but inexorably spreading over the religious landscape like a river spreading on a flood plain ... It is a grass-roots cry from members of all mainstream denominations, (together with those who have walked out) for a faith worth living and dying for. It cannot be quantified, neither can it be denied or stopped".^{viii} The early 90's in America saw the rise of the Religious Right that mobilised religious progressives to work at countering it. The first Jesus Seminar research published was in 1993, two years before my book, addressing doubts about the church's teachings on Jesus, the Galilean peasant. Marcus Borg's ground-breaking book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, was published in 1994 and the major books that projected Bishop Spong into the global public eye were published between 1988 and 1994.

Progressive thinking can, of course, be traced back through the last few centuries, but this exciting stage of the journey over the last twenty years has made scholarship available to laity, with many of Australia's progressive groups lay inspired and lay led. People are trusting their own experiences and reason, listening to the world around them. The public market place is now full of books inviting us to think about religion. Religious scholarship no longer belongs exclusively to institutions to selectively dispatch. We can read and doubt for ourselves, knowing we are not alone. Claims long protected by the authoritative scaffolding of religious tradition are being bombarded; yet sadly, many religious institutions are unwilling to let them fall.

At a recent progressive Christianity meeting in Australia, Rev. John Smith framed his presentation around the progressive trinity of doubt, deconstruction and discovery. Within progressive circles, doubt no longer causes the hairs on the back of the head to bristle in the way it once did. We think nothing of examining everything critically. Once doubt has been accepted as friend rather than enemy, deconstruction can take over, accelerating when the pillars of a literal, inspired bible and infallible church and creeds have been removed. It is an exhilarating ride until the reality of "what now" and "what's left" prevails. For many people shaped in Christian churches, the move beyond a received faith is not an instant "once I was blind but now I see" experience. It is a slow chipping away of layers of old truths, with recurring interruptions of uncertainty and fear as much of what was once treasured is discarded. For some, church eventually becomes an impossibility if totally encrusted in the language and theology one has abandoned, and yet many of us do not wish to leave friends as if *we* are the offenders. We long for a community where we can say what is in our heart without fear of rejection. The third of John Smith's trinity is discovery, the stage we continue for a lifetime, the dance of life where doubts play their stimulating and essential part. In my youthful struggle with doubt, I longed to *arrive*, to be free of doubt, until I realized that doubt was an integral part of being human and without it, we have no autonomy.

Autonomy is a defining value of progressive thought. It suggests self-determination and independence of mind and nominates ourselves as our final authority in matters of faith and belief, based on our reason and experience. The opposite, heteronomy, means a passive surrender of this authority to an external rule, whether scripture, tradition, creeds, clergy, doctrine or family. In the past, this is what many of us did and those who claimed their autonomy were often labelled heretics, a term that began as the positive meaning of "choice" between various schools of thought but turned negative once Christian orthodoxy was declared in the fourth century. Today's progressive Christians and communities, while they receive input from *many* sources, claim their right to determine what they think and believe against other authoritative claims.

So, in order to pay attention to doubts and claim our autonomy, what sources have doubters and progressive Christians used? The Jesus Seminar has been an important resource for recovering the Jesus of history as an itinerant Jewish sage within the Roman Empire who preached a gospel of liberation from injustice through parables and aphorisms. The writings of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, early members of the Seminar, have enthralled lay people as well as clergy around the world. Process theology, developed from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead by theologians like John Cobb, Charles Hartshorne and Sallie McFague, has helped us image whatever we call God, not as an external interventionist sending floods on the wicked and finding car parks for the faithful, but as part of the constant flow and change of the universe, thus rejecting any mind/body or supernatural/natural dichotomies.

The rise of contextual theologies has proven helpful. These begin with the circumstances or context in a certain time and place, rather than eternal, unchanging truths imposed regardless of the situation. Seventy years ago, one would hardly argue in a theology class that Augustine's theory of original sin had more to do with his own personal struggle with his sexuality than a revelation from heaven, nor would we claim our own experience as valid critique of the tradition, but contextual theology has given us that permission. The experiences of South American poor in the sixties led

priests working amongst them to rethink their theology and promote Jesus as the man for the oppressed and God on the side of the poor rather than the religious establishment -- a liberation theology that spread to other areas of oppression. Their reading of the Bible with a hermeneutic of suspicion -- that is, looking beyond the winners in the stories -- encouraged feminist theology to challenge a God portrayed almost exclusively in male images, and Christologies that depended on the maleness of Jesus. Feminist scholars also challenged the gender bias of Trinitarian language modelled on Greco-Roman hierarchical orders, where fatherhood and masculinity are permanently linked with divinity through a begetting Father God, and motherhood and femininity are permanently associated with humanity and bodiliness through Mary. What would our Jesus story be like, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza asks, if we saw Jesus as the son of Mary and Sophia Wisdom's prophet instead of the Son of God, the Father? ^{ix}

Coming back to doubt, Feminist theology played an an important part in my evolution. When I was first introduced to feminist theology at an academic level, it suddenly dawned on me that many of my childhood doubts about Christianity came from being a *girl* raised in the fifties and sixties. While I was encouraged to achieve the highest grades in school and gained first class honours in science at university, the unspoken message was always that this was a fall-back position in case I did not marry – *good* Christian women were preferably helpmeets, wives and mothers. I *did* marry and have three lovely children, but I also watched my male colleagues with lower grades take the prime research jobs I would have loved, and be fathers and husbands as well!

Marcus Borg calls feminist theology the most important theological development in his lifetime, because it gave us another way to view our Christian traditions. ^x Rather than start with what the bible and church says about women, it begins with women's experiences and reflects on what might be good news for them, then challenges traditional doctrines that are bad news. For centuries, women had been named subordinate to men -- less intelligent, less reliable and a host of other

insufficiencies somehow wound into their DNA. These claims were created by men with power to write the rules, yet women secretly knew this did not fit their experiences. Had they not borne children at great risk, carried great loads and heavy toddlers and held family and community together when men went to war? Their doubts, however, were discredited as insubordination, ignorance or sin.

Not until enough women entered theological colleges in the late sixties did they find other women questioning these ideas. They realized how much the Bible had been translated and interpreted in the interest of male power and was *itself* the product of a patriarchal culture describing God's will in male-favouring cultural terms. Women scholars asked, therefore, whether *anything* said about women could be applicable today if it came from a culture that saw women merely as disposable male property. The Bible approved the slaughter of Jephthah's daughter as Jephthah's bribe to God for military victory and Jephthah was listed as a great man of faith in the letter to the Hebrews. The Bible did not condemn Lot for offering his virgin daughters for gang rape by the mob at his door, in order to protect his male house guests. In the New Testament, the pastoral letters of Timothy and Peter renege on Jesus' egalitarian attitudes towards women by demanding they be silent in church and obediently subordinate to husbands. My book *Why We're Equal: introducing Feminist Theology* came out of my reflection on such doubts.

Feminist theology learned to call itself feminist *theologies* when women of colour, indigenous women and lesbian women challenged white heterosexual academic explanations of a homogenous women's experience. Contextual theology became contextual theologies when people realized that different contexts produce different theological insights and conclusions. I believe it is time for progressive theology or progressive Christianity to be called progressive theologies and progressive Christianities, in order to represent adequately the broad spectrum of ideas, emphases and actions. At first, feminist *theologies* sounded a bit awkward but it soon became common sense that women of colour would have different issues from white western academics. Womanist

theology, as it came to be called, was concerned about the *whole* black community, men *and* women oppressed under white domination, not just women against oppressive husbands and male leaders. Black women needed to boost up their men as much as struggle for their place as women, and white western middle class women were part of their *problem*, not the solution.

Many progressive Christians have resisted affirmation statements of what progressives believe in order to respect this diversity and keep open the future in this fluid time of discoveries. Obviously, there is need for some beginning statements to define progressive groups to themselves if not to others, but we have been rightly hesitant about universal statements, in part because we do not want to become locked into new "boxes" that will, in time, move from general affirmation of similarities to confessional statements with power to bind and exclude.

Recently, an energetic email dialogue erupted amongst a large group of progressive theologians and authors around the world when a hymn by Andrew Pratt concerning the Oklahoma tornado disaster was circulated. The hymn included a reference to God and produced a plethora of comments. While all rejected an interventionist God in this disaster, they disagreed as to how God could be spoken of in tragedy. Opinions ranged from God as the reality or "Isness" behind the terms sacred or mystery: God as love itself; God as the personification of what we take to be the highest and most indispensable human ideals and values; and God as nothing at all - we now simply need to get on with living the best possible human life. Two camps seemed to be evolving with progressives, with a smattering of opinions in between -- those who see a reality behind terms such as the sacred, mystery etc; and those who do not see any God-reality at all behind such terms. We can talk more of this in the question time if you wish. *All* these people call themselves progressive yet do not agree on this central issue of God. It is obvious that the one unifying thing about Progressive Christians is that we have all emerged from doubts and know what we reject, rather than any universal blueprint, however brief, as to what beliefs we now hold in common.

This is why many still struggle with being classified as "progressives," not only because the word can suggest a superiority to those who have "not progressed", but also because having a separate identity based on different theological understandings of God and Jesus divides us from others who work, for example, for the same issues of justice, integrity and faith, but with different theologies. It makes us *choose* the box in which we will sit. Do I sit with others working for justice and ecology, regardless of their Christology, or do I sit with progressives, regardless of their commitment to justice and ecology? Do I sit with interfaith dialogue partners, despite different understandings of the Sacred, or do I sit with progressives who may or may not wish to explore other religious traditions? Because of the range of theological positions progressives hold, it can be uncomfortable if the progressive label applied to us suggests to others that we all hold the same opinions, which is certainly not the case.

Many progressives talk about "what we do is more important than what we believe" as a way to move beyond the theological arguments to living the best life we can. Although I understand what is being articulated here, my theological genes are not sure it is as helpful as it might sound. I believe it is both...and. The two cannot be set in opposition. Who we are contributes much to what we do, and who we are has evolved from the mix of experiences and teaching that make up our past. If we have endured crippling theologies that demeaned us as human beings and dismissed the planet as a motel to trash as we pass through to eternity, this will influence what we do and how we think about ourselves and others. The "doing" has to go along with the learning or, more importantly, the unlearning. If we imagine God as energy, love or interconnectedness within the universe, we will desire to protect the earth, shedding the image of a divine policeman up there judging everything we do. Only as we see the sacred in each other, rather than trying to convert them, can we properly "do to others as we would have them do to us". Only as we live in this world as "Earth beings in solidarity with Earth" to use Norm Habel's phrase, rather than "God-like beings who happen to be

sojourning on Earth”,^{xi} can we live deeply grounded in the world everyday. What we believe is important because it shapes and changes the way we act or do, and vice versa.

You may be interested in a short description of the progressive momentum in Australia. A recent survey of groups across Australia conducted in preparation for the book *Why Weren't We Told: a Handbook for Progressive Christianity* showed that 75% of groups originated within the UCA, an Australian amalgamation of Methodists, Congregationalists and some Presbyterians. Most groups are lay led but a few have active clergy support. Groups read progressive authors together, including some sixteen or more current Australian authors. Regional groups with a range of denominational affiliations, or none, have smaller numbers, but the capital cities have larger, more established groups with monthly speakers and events. The largest is the The Progressive Christian Network Victoria which has over 400 members and their monthly Melbourne forums attract up to 140 people. Since its inception seven years ago, \$96,000 of progressive books have been sold at their monthly gatherings. Of special interest, a sub-group of active and retired UCA clergy meets monthly with up to 50 members and hosts a monthly progressive service at a church.

The first national gathering of progressives in Australia, *Common Dreams 1*, was held in Sydney in 2007 with 1400 registrants meeting over four days. Hundreds more came for the evening sessions with Bishop Spong. As a result of this success, organizers sponsored *Common Dreams on the Road*, hosting international speakers in various cities and, in 2010, *Common Dreams 2* was held in Melbourne. CD3 is in Canberra in 3 months time. An inter-denominational Progressive Christian Voice (Australia) lobby has also emerged to counter the conservative Australian Christian Lobby which claims loudly in public and political arenas to speak for *all* Christians.

Many progressive groups have a few clergy members, some retired from prominent Synod positions. They speak of opposition to progressive stances during their active ministry, both from their synods and from conservative congregational members, such that many avoided expressing

progressive views. Some active clergy, including some state moderators, express progressive leanings privately. Since there is little emphasis on, or introduction to, progressive Christianity in most church theological halls, and often opposition, the situation may not change significantly in the near future. A recent clergy questionnaire in the Uniting Church, however, showed that almost half followed progressive theologies with some regularity and more than half said progressive theologians were important to the church, regardless of whether these clergy publically support progressive groups or feel supported by their institutions in this interest.

I mentioned our theological colleges. Australia's colleges are small because of our population, and many operate as consortiums across denominations in order to share staff. In the Uniting Church colleges, of which I am more familiar, there is usually only one, maybe two theologians on a faculty and, at present, mostly trained in the neo-Barthian tradition which is hardly sympathetic to progressive thought. The Anglicans have some great progressive theologians, but there is currently a move by one of their colleagues to censure them at an upcoming synod. The question always is: who decides "correct" theology? Having said all that, I have recently finished a chapter on Progressive Christianity within the Uniting Church in Australia which I was asked to write for an upcoming book on the 35 years since the UCA was formed, which is a recognition that this momentum is playing a significant role.

Which brings me back to *In Defence of Doubt*. Many of us here have already moved from doubt to deconstruction to discovery and all this may seem old hat, yet billions still sit in theological prisons of others' making. Recently, Lauren Drain was banished from her family church, Westboro Baptist in Topeka, Kansas. These extreme folk hold up banners at funerals of American soldiers saying "Thank God for dead soldiers" whom they claim God has killed in righteous judgment against an evil nation, in particular, homosexuality. Lauren began to question this theology. She says in her recent book, "I didn't want to fight ... so I accepted that certain things were fundamental beliefs of

the church, but I never felt satisfied. My name was already associated with words like tension, strife, and contention. Church members liked to say that I stirred up strife. They thought I was trying to change the rules, that I was up to no good, and that I was trying to find loopholes. I was not intentionally trying to be contrary or malicious. I was just trying to logically understand".^{xii}

This new edition of my book, while preaching to the progressive choir, offers permission to many others to treat doubt as a positive and not push it under the carpet as weakness. One reviewer, who read the original version, said, 'It continues to be a book which gives permission to us all to go on doubting and growing, but also throws a lifeline to those caught in oppressive and imposed theologies. I am even more enthusiastic now than I was when I first read it.'^{xiii} This message is urgently needed by those who still sit in church pews switching off to their doubts; and also those who have left, often in sorrow that their church has not been able to understand or accept their questions. The latter often call themselves spiritual rather than religious because they still experience or desire an interconnectedness or need beyond themselves that is not addressed by organized religion.

This new edition retains the simplicity of the first, not offering obtuse theological explanations but simply granting permission, although there is plenty of theology undergirding my encouragement. There are chapters on famous doubters who changed the religious world; on some who did not survive the church's assault on their doubts; on paradigm changes in religious thinking and different stages of faith; on process theology, biblical criticism and progressive movements; on hospitable and inclusive church communities and on dialogue with other religious traditions. It is encouraging to note how some things have changed over the last twenty years, but it is even more imperative for us to spread this message about healthy doubt at a time when institutional Christianity is circling the wagons and reinforcing its boundaries against number seepage.

After half a lifetime of struggle, I no longer think about doubt as a separate entity but as a natural part of a healthy life, but it has taken years of study and unlearning to come to this place. Let me finish with a challenge from American process theologian Marjorie Suchocki:

Theology is like a garment we have produced, not a universal truth. The garment, like all garments, will fit some, and not fit others. Should garments be thrown out then, because they do not fit everyone? Ah, then we should freeze in the winters of our loneliness! Better we should simply adjust the fit and see to helping others as they, too, weave their mantels. ^{xiv}

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

ⁱⁱ Abelard, from *Sic et Non* (c.1120), quoted in Frederick Denison Maurice, *Mediaeval Philosophy, or A Treatise of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy* (1870), 138

ⁱⁱⁱ *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

^{iv} Quoted in Val Webb, *In Defence of Doubt: an invitation to adventure, second edition* (Melbourne: Mosaic Press, 2012), 30

^v Mother Teresa, *Come be My Light: the private writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"*, Brian Kolodiejchuk ed., (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 1-2

^{vi} *Ibid*, 306

^{vii} Quoted in Webb, *In Defence of Doubt*, 171

^{viii} Rev. Dr John Bodycomb, private communication

^{ix} Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: critical issues in feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 22

^x Quoted in Val Webb, *Why We're Equal: introducing feminist theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 95

^{xi} Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009)

^{xii} From newspaper report on her book Lauren Drain with Lisa Pulitzer, *Banished, a Memoir: surviving my years in the Westboro Baptist Church*, (Grand Central Publishing 2013).

^{xiii} Rev. Dr. Sue Emeleus review

^{xiv} Suchocki, in Webb, *In Defence of Doubt* 2nd edn, 88