I

Uncertain Truths

I propose to establish progressive stages of certainty . . . But the mental operation which follows the act of sense I for the most part reject; and instead of it I open and lay out a new and certain path for the mind to proceed in, starting directly from the simple sensuous perception.

—FRANCIS BACON[1]

But eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which it is not permissible to doubt - and not out of frivolity or lack of forethought, but for valid and considered reasons.

—RENÉ DESCARTES[2]

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At the dawn of the seventeenth century two thinkers laid down foundations for modern science and modern philosophy. Francis Bacon affirmed the importance of the empirical, and matters of sense. René Descartes took the opposite approach, denying that anything could be proved other than the existence of the mind, and whether it was doubting or cogitating. Both thinkers have come to influence successive centuries of scientific and philosophical thought. While science has taken the Baconian “new and certain path,” philosophy has found it difficult to escape the Cartesian emphasis on both doubt and the centrality of the reasoning mind, the cogito. Each in their own way sought a solid foundation for their respective discipline. Yet the treatment of doubt within each thinker was remarkably different.

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[1] Bacon, *The New Organon: Or True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature*.

[2] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 16.

Today it is philosophically and theologically fashionable to critique the Cartesian reliance on the cogito, especially in light of the negative consequences this has had for our understanding of the status of the body. The dualism that places mind over body has not been healthy for society or theology. In turn, the Cartesian emphasis on the cogito has been connected with the production of other disconcerting dualisms, such as the hierarchical ordering of male over female. However, in the legitimate rush to exorcise theology from an over-dependence on the mind, or cogitation, the important role of doubt within the Cartesian cogito has been neglected. It can be argued that religion and theology have also found themselves divided between Baconian and Cartesian approaches to certainty and doubt. Both are strategies for dealing with doubt, but while both saw doubt as something to be overcome, Descartes also intuits that doubt is uniquely important in developing deeper understanding.

Both Descartes and Bacon assumed that it was ultimately possible to escape doubt by providing solid rational foundations for knowledge. Yet in their different approaches, each created a different route for subsequent scientists and philosophers. As has recently been comprehensively argued, while science has continued to thrive using the empirical foundation developed by Bacon, subsequent philosophy has never been able to agree that Descartes’s solid foundations were any bit as firm as he believed.[3] While the history of science is the history of building on the sturdy empirical foundations of Bacon, the subsequent history of philosophy is the story of a continuing questioning and doubting of whether reason alone can ever provide a firm foundation.

The desire to evade doubt was common to both Descartes and Bacon. But Descartes also recognized that doubt played an important role in constituting the subject. It was not simply something to be avoided, it was also a mechanism for helping discover the true foundation of thought. By contrast, doubt for Bacon was merely something to be avoided. At the same time, while Descartes assumed that belief in God was essential to the foundations of his rational system, Bacon’s system had no need

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[3] Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 115–28.

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of God. And so while Bacon's system was able to thrive without God, Descartes's system was undermined both by its inability to totally exclude doubt, and also, in time, by the apparent idiosyncrasy of a rational system that incorporated monotheistic belief. Neither Bacon nor Descartes could ever rid themselves of doubt, and as Giorgio Agamben has written scientific method may well have encouraged doubt for Descartes:

> The view through Galileo's telescope produced not certainty and faith in experience but Descartes's doubt, and his famous hypothesis of a demon whose only occupation is to deceive our senses.[4]

Doubts about God and doubts about whether reason could really provide certainty undid Descartes. Yet trust in the verifiable and empirical reality of the external world ensured Bacon's views would remain abidingly influential. While Descartes continues to have a reputation as an arch-rationalist, his thought was never completely able to avoid something theology has always struggled with: the question of uncertainty.

While doubts are important to theology, there are many examples of Christian practice that appear to leave no room for doubt. Christianity has a far from perfect record in accommodating doubters, and for large sections of the faithful doubt appears to be anathema. This chapter examines why doubt presents such difficulties. It will consider the problems raised by uncertainty, and why this creates challenges both for theology and also for some of its ardent critics. The division between certainty and uncertainty, what for simplicity's sake we will telescope as a division between the Baconian and Cartesian, cannot simply be mapped onto the difference between religious and secular thought. Instead, it will become clear how even quite different religious and secular discourses come to resemble one another in the way that they prioritize either certainty or uncertainty. While religious faith can be strengthened when it is recast as a practice of radical uncertainty, too often it has instead been presented as providing ultimate assurance. If, as Descartes thought, doubt is the origin of wisdom, this chapter will explore what happens to theology when doubt is suppressed and only certainty remains.[5]

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[4] Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 20.

[5] Although Descartes never used the words "doubt is the origin of wisdom" the persistent misattribution of this phrase to him is powerful testimony to the centrality that doubt plays in his thought.

Bacon, like modern science, allows us to articulate and interpret the world in a more certain kind of way. However, in seeking certainty, this approach has to exclude anything that cannot be verified empirically. God clearly cannot be verified through sense experience, and so God can never be the subject of scientific study for Bacon. By contrast, Descartes was willing to broaden the remit of philosophy to incorporate matters of non-sense experience, like the divine. The tragedy of Descartes is that in seeking to discover a universal framework for reason, he ends up creating a rational system that ultimately has just as negative an effect on divinity and doubt as Bacon. Bacon's exclusion of both divinity and doubt in the construction of his system was successful, and the subsequent history of science bears this out. By contrast, Descartes's attempt to provide certain reasons for God at the same time as affirming the revelatory potential of doubt were not as long-lasting. One legacy of this is seen in the comparative strengths of the scientific and theological communities in academia and public life. Most intellectuals assume that somehow science and philosophy cannot coexist with belief in God. Equally, most Western societies today assume that philosophical or religious beliefs are inherently private matters open to doubt. Neither of these positions would have made sense to either Bacon or Descartes. The rest of this chapter will investigate how it is that the drift toward certainty continues to displace God. Along the way it will also become apparent how doubt is of more utility to religion and theology than has previously been recognized.

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The Logic of Certainty

Religious fundamentalism and militant atheism have a number of compelling similarities.[6] Each brooks no opposition, and both are powerfully certain of the rightness of their cause. Despite their very different responses to the question of God, both firmly believe they have a monopoly on truth. Given that many atheists start out as Christian, this is not itself particularly surprising. The corollary of this is that the religiously flexible and the agnostic also have a great deal in common. While an agnostic is uncertain about the existence of the divine, the flexible tend to be circumspect about their deeply held beliefs. Part of this is because they are, legitimately enough, simply unsure. Such a lack of certainty arises out of the intellectual recognition that faith really does not make an awful lot of sense. While some might see this as evidence that such beliefs are shallow or superficial, by contrast, the question that arises here is the status of imagination in religious belief. Imagination in all its accompanying uncertainty, opacity, and mystery can be a route into religious belief. Yet, for those not inclined to surrender themselves to ambiguity the uncertainties of imagination are something to be shunned. While imagination can be celebrated as a gift, it can also be feared as a distraction.

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[6] Using the word *fundamentalism* is provocative: it is certainly not a term of endearment. However, it is hard to find a better term to describe those who seek (and profess to find) absolute certainty in their religious tradition. For the purposes of this work, I will take it as self-evident that a (religious or non-religious) fundamentalist is someone who prizes certainty above all. In contrast to fundamentalism we will speak of flexibilism, flexibility, or those who are (religiously or non-religiously) flexible. *Flexibilism* does not appear to be a word, but I think it is eloquently self-explanatory, pertaining to those who seek flexibility over inflexibility. (Of course, fundamentalists could be designated inflexibilists, but this seems a superfluous neologism.)

The religiously flexible and the religiously agnostic are both uncomfortably aware that they do not know all that there is to know. They are open to the possibility of being wrong, and they are aware of the multiplicity of different ways in which others respond to ultimate questions. The key division in faith is therefore not between those who believe and those who do not. Rather, the real religious demarcation is between those who have the hubris to suggest that they "know what is what," and those who have the humility to agree with John Caputo that "we do not know who we are."[7]

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As we learn more about the seemingly infinite variety of human life choices it is clear that life is irreducibly complex. While some, like the Amish of Pennsylvania, shun the innovations of technology, most are increasingly dependent on technologies that less than a generation ago were the height of science-fiction. Thanks to the internet, cellular communication technology, and wireless communications we live in a world in which information is now more freely available than ever before. On the other hand, there is a growing digital divide between those who have unlimited access to new technologies and those whose access is controlled or impeded for economic, political, or social reasons. New technology in itself has not resolved the problem of economic inequality. Despite the new-found freedom offered by the internet we are only starting to recognize, let alone respond to, new problems of social exclusion generated by the way new technologies are implemented.

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[7] Caputo, *On Religion*, 18.

Even when access itself is not a problem, part of the conundrum facing inhabitants of twenty-first-century cyberspace is knowing who to trust. The United States Postal Service or the British Royal Mail rarely concern themselves with seeing mail intercepted or destroyed on an industrial scale. And readers of newspapers and books rarely worry about their purchase infecting other papers and books with an information-destroying plague that renders all literary artifacts useless. However, as digital consumers know, even the most risk-averse constantly place their own data and information at risk. Whether the threat is from spyware, malware, trojans, viruses, or even the virus-protection software itself, we live in an age of information overload and overkill.

Just as we are becoming more fluent in navigating competing information streams, we are also discovering new vulnerabilities in records and data. Where the library of Alexandria stood for centuries, today the life-cycle of a computer is officially accounted as at best five years. And while we can drink from a cornucopia of information on the internet we also have to contend with an entire ecosystem of out-of-date, misleading or purposefully incorrect information. Once one leaves a few select portals whose credentials are trustworthy we find ourselves in the data equivalent of no-man's land. Examining the phenomena of our interconnected age it is hard not to agree with Taylor: "In the midst of these webs, networks, and screens, I can no more be certain where I am than I can know when or where the I begins and ends."[8] Bewilderment is both natural and ubiquitous in the face of such complexity.

This brings us to the paradox of the information age. Marshall McLuhan defined information as a difference that makes a difference. Yet how willing are we to expose ourselves to different thoughts? Just as potential access to information increases so too can reluctance to engage with difference or diversity. This is not a rule for all people and all places, but it does help explain why an exponential increase in the availability of information has coincided not with a great burgeoning of human understanding, but with increasing polarization and failure to understand. There is no common culture transcending economic, political or religious divides. Society today bears less resemblance to the Roman forum or medieval marketplace where everyone had access to the same public space, and more to a series of autonomous silos of affiliation and information

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[8] Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity*, 231.

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that rarely intersect.[9] It is against this cultural pandemonium that we need to locate, and understand, religion.

The explosion of knowledge in the information age is just one small part of a wider set of societal transitions. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has shown, contemporary society is increasingly characterized by insecurity and uncertainty.[10] While life has always provided stresses and challenges, the last hundred years has seen an exponential advance in the rate of societal change. From decreased job security and economic contraction to increased anxieties about everything from terrorism to global warming there are more than enough reasons to be insecure. New diseases and the threat of pandemics have been a recurring theme of recent decades, and whether it is HIV/AIDS, BSE, or the H1N1 virus the general public increasingly lack the ability to discern the difference between legitimate causes for concern and media-inflicted health scares. With more access to information we are becoming ever more insecure as we learn ever more about the possible threats to living the good life. It does not matter whether these threats are significant or relevant. What matters is the overwhelming creation of a culture of fear and insecurity under the guise of the dissemination of information.

Many have noted the powerful connection between pharmaceutical companies and new diagnoses for previously unknown ailments. We now medicate various complaints rather than take the simple steps required to actually remove the need for medication in the first place. Drugs are easy to prescribe, generate revenue, and give patients the illusion of being in control. The United States remains the world leader in the amount of money it spends on healthcare, by a large per capita factor. While overall it does not have a healthier population, it does have a system that produces the illusion of choice and control (for those who are able to afford it). What is less well understood is that a similar mechanism operates in wider society. If insecurity, and the illusion of insecurity, is the illness afflicting contemporary society, the drug of choice has become certainty. Like commercial counterparts in advertising, religious fundamentalism has been enormously successful in both manufacturing and marketing desire. And while the conventional desires of advertising may appear

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[9] This is not to romanticize the social structures that prevented full and equal participation in both the forum and the medieval market. Access is not the same as participation.

[10] Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*.

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ephemeral, there is nothing less ephemeral than the desire for certain knowledge about the meaning of life, the universe, and everything.

It is important to realize that both atheism and fundamentalism have been around for a significant amount of time. Atheism is often viewed as the culmination of modern rationality, while fundamentalism is more frequently imagined as a form of insulation from the demands of modern reason. Against this false dichotomy, it seems honest to recognize how fundamentalism is prevalent in both the religious and irreligious. This is not to say that atheism or religion are inherently reducible to fundamentalism: each has many non-fundamentalist forms. However, in their fundamentalist versions they share a remarkable set of strategies for dealing with the world. At first sight each apparently cuts its cloth from one particular faculty: "reason" in the case of atheism, and "faith" in the case of religion. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that atheism depends on a form of faith or fideism just as much as religion depends on a capacity to reason. Each depends for its very existence on the opposite faculty to the one with which it is most identified. Neither Bacon nor Descartes could pass for a fundamentalist, for each in different ways assumed that faith and reason were both important and, in different ways, that both were necessary. Descartes sought to unite faith and reason, effectively under the control of reason, while Bacon sought to delimit the scope of reason to merely empirical things. Neither approach intentionally sets reason against faith, although both cleared the way for the supremacy of reason and along with it later atheist rejections of religion. While the seventeenth century laid the intellectual groundwork for the severing of faith from reason, such an idea would have been unthinkable at the time. Only in much more recent times do we find both religious fundamentalism and atheist fundamentalism suggesting a straightforward opposition between faith and reason.

This is illustrated in Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* where we are introduced to two different planets, Terra and Akan. On each planet learning is identified as a threat and steps are taken to limit the population's access to the world of ideas, literature, and imagination. On Terra all the books have been destroyed by a theocracy. Nothing except religious orthodoxy is allowed to survive, and the Library of Congress is bombed as a sign of the radical incommensurability of learning and religion. Meanwhile on Akan all the books have been destroyed by the corporation, a completely

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scientific consumer-producer-led society. On Akan religion is banned, and scientific rationality is the highest form of life. As the narrator notes of both societies: "But they were all true believers, both sides. Secular terrorists or holy terrorists, what difference."[11] When different opinions are systematically silenced, the question of whether this is done in the name of God or of scientific rationality is secondary.

Where religious fundamentalism relies exclusively on faith, it does so in a way that adopts wholesale the language and purposes of reason to articulate how faith is a kind of reason. Equally, where atheist fundamentalism affirms rationality as its central premise, it relies on the language of belief and faith to advocate the singularity, comprehensiveness, and necessity of its trust in reason. There can be no rational basis for the atheist fundamentalist's reliance on reason alone. After all, reason cannot offer decisive arguments for rejecting God, and can no more disprove God than it can agree on what might constitute proper or authentic reason in the first place. Upon closer inspection, reason is as much of a chimera as God: elusive and largely unattainable, but no less important for being so. But for atheist fundamentalists like Christopher Hitchens rejecting God in the name of rationality is a foundational belief.[12] By contrast, other atheists are not able to bow down before almighty reason as having the last word on the subject. They recognize that reason has its limits and that reason may not be able to answer every question. Atheists do not restrict their doubts to deity: they are also able to doubt a whole host of other conceits.

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At their respective cores atheist fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism share a singularity of conviction and a certainty of purpose. Emerging in the nineteenth-century religious fundamentalism is a relatively well-understood phenomenon. Before the rise of modern rationality religious faith was inherently complex, diverse, and differentiated. Nowhere is this clearer than in the field of scriptural interpretation. Until the emergence of modern fundamentalism theological scholars across the centuries understood the need for differing interpretations of Scripture. In the Christian West theologians understood that there could never be only one interpretation of Scripture. One of the great religious classics written over fifteen hundred years ago was Augustine's *On Christian*

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[11] Le Guin, *The Telling*, 63.

[12] Hitchens, *God is not Great*.

Teaching.[13] In it Augustine went to great lengths to provide a framework for understanding the complexity of different levels of meaning within Scripture. And well before Augustine, Jewish rabbinic teaching took for granted the plurality of interpretations and competing readings that the Torah generates. Yet with the emergence of modern rationality and the claims of universal reason religious fundamentalists sought to transpose the singularity of reason onto the diversity of the scriptural text.

While rabbis and theologians have for centuries argued within their own traditions in favor of often quite competing interpretations, the last two hundred years have witnessed the emergence of popular religious thinkers who suggest that there is but one true interpretation. Such an idea would have shocked the medieval mind, and it would have made no sense whatsoever within rabbinic thought. For them the Scriptures are not univocal, literally speaking in one voice. Instead, the Scriptures are multivocal. The Scriptures speak in many voices with different inflections, and identifying often conflicting and differing levels of meaning is part of the purpose of theology and biblical interpretation.

A good example of this inherent biblical complexity in the Christian world is found in the parables of Jesus, where it is absolutely impossible to find a simple singular interpretation. John Dominic Crossan has shown just how necessary it is to understand the parables not as univocal, but as polyvalent, inherently requiring the creation of multiple different interpretations.[14] For Crossan the point is not that human reason is incapable of making final sense of a parable, true as that may be. Rather, the point is that the parables themselves were designed to preclude the identification of one overarching or final meaning. That parables generate multiple meanings, what Crossan calls polyvalence, is not a failure of translation, but an essential dimension to their theological meaning. Jesus did not speak in the language of modern rationality. The parables were written in a deliberately poetic, contradictory, and ambiguous manner. And we do them violence when we make out that there is only one "ultimate" meaning to them.

Against the polyvalence of the parables, the modern constructions of both reason and biblical fundamentalism share a common commitment to singularity and universality—which is ironic, since neither modern reason nor biblical fundamentalism are particularly universal. They

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[13] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*.

[14] Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall*.

are cultural construals with specific pedigrees and not inconsiderable blind spots. Self-authenticating and self-assured, both depend on a cult of certainty that is the antithesis to the ambiguity, mystery and contradiction found within agnosticism or religion.

Atheist fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism also share a remarkable sense of self-righteousness, literally convinced of the justice of their own cause. They also depend on the opposite form of fundamentalism as evidence of the dangers of straying outside their own system. However, while the two appear to be mutually irreconcilable, on closer inspection it is their shared hostility to other ways of thinking or understanding that makes these twin fundamentalisms distinct from other ways of thinking about important questions. Flexible believers, like agnostics and what we shall call self-reflective atheists, share a common commitment to understanding that no one perspective has all the answers. For want of a better term, we could call their approaches postmodern. The postmodern mind rejoices in the contradictions and inconsistencies of human thought, and it does not try to smooth out rough edges and iron out contradictory folds of thought. By contrast, fundamentalism is inherently uncomfortable with the accommodations and changes needed to adapt to a continually changing postmodern world.

Flexible or conventional believers within all major religious traditions insist on engaging with insights from the contemporary world, finding much of religious value in so-called secular disciplines like the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. But for both of the twin fundamentalisms it has been convenient to erect a barrier between matters of religious belief and the study of science and the humanities. Much is made of the supposed conflict between science and religion, but the actual conflict is far more complicated. There are forms of science, which can be called "scientism," that are as assured as religious fundamentalism in believing that only their discipline can account for why things are the way there are. Equally, other scientists have a humbler and more sophisticated understanding of their discipline and its limits. What matters is not the discipline so much as the way the discipline is used. Albert Einstein knew that his ability to understand fundamental laws of physics did not constitute an ability to answer the fundamental existential questions. Equally, theologians and biblical scholars know that the Scriptures do not constitute scientific evidence or commentary on the physics, biology or chemistry of the natural world.

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While the religious fundamentalist is convinced that the Scriptures contain blueprints for understanding all life, atheist fundamentalists are just as profoundly convinced that human reason offers all the explanation necessary for existence. What remains fascinating is how each mimics the other in making exclusive claims, while at the same time shutting down the possibility of engagement with other approaches. It is for this reason that we should no longer talk of a conflict between science and religion, so much as conflict between fundamentalist belief systems and non-fundamentalist belief systems. Atheists, scientists, and religious believers can be found in both types of system. What matters is not so much *what* we believe as *how* we believe. For depending on how we set about believing we find ourselves more or less open to a much richer and varied content to faith. Marshall McLuhan's thesis that the medium is the message is relevant here.[15] In the field of religion this means that the medium of doubt is an essential part of the message of faith. Faith is not the suppression of doubt, it is the affirmation of doubt. Nonetheless, where faith suppresses doubt, the message is clear: refrain from asking too many questions in case a fragile faith breaks apart.

Since the emergence of science, questions of content, or fact, have become dominant both culturally and religiously. Part of the issue here is that believers have sought to justify belief in terms of the content of their belief. A not inconsiderable irony here is how religious fundamentalists have adopted lock, stock, and barrel the language of scientific fact in their treatment of Scripture. What previous generations would never have viewed as literal or scientific truth, has become invested with a quasi-scientific status by religious fundamentalists. By contrast, the religiously flexible who have been accused of playing fast and loose with Scripture, by being open to non-literal approaches and the complexity of adjudicating meaning "once and for all," are using well-tried, several-thousand year-old modes of biblical interpretation.

Whereas religious fundamentalists imagine that they are being loyal to the text of Scripture, the reverse is true. They are being loyal to a particular Enlightenment view of facts, truth, and certainty. While religions across the world understand the importance of metaphor, symbol, story, and ambiguity, the Enlightenment valued scientific truth over all other forms of truth-telling. In adopting a consistently literal reading of the Scriptures fundamentalists have ignored centuries of Judaeo-Christian

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[15] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

insight into the way to approach the Scriptures. While fundamentalists believe in reading Scripture as the Word of God, they are actually reading it as if it were a set of scientific universal truths. Slavoj Žižek puts it clearly when he observes, "A fundamentalist does not believe, he *knows* directly."[16] Within Christianity this habit of proclaiming one's certain or direct knowledge has always been treated suspiciously, hence the distrust of gnostics, literally those who know. In contrast to Gnosticism that proclaims secret knowledge accessible to a few who "know," Christianity has always been more skeptical.

Contemporary fundamentalist approaches to the Scriptures are simply another version of Gnosticism. The obvious problem with such approaches is that the Scriptures are not science, and never have been. Unlike science most of the claims of the Scriptures are inherently unverifiable through empirical evidence. And unlike science most of the truth claims of the Scriptures concern existential, moral, or spiritual realms. Science is not particularly interested in the question of how to love our neighbor. And even if it were, from a strictly scientific viewpoint it has little to contribute. Whatever love may or may not be, as soon as it is reduced to, or translated into, scientific terminology, we are no longer talking about love.

In defense of scientific methodology we need to be clear that scientists rarely claim the kind of certainty that comes so readily to fundamentalists. Although fundamentalism treats the Scriptures as if they were scientifically and objectively true, fundamentalism does this in a thoroughly unscientific way, entirely lacking any mechanism for revising its hypotheses. Scientists understand that an objective account of what happens in the world, a working hypothesis, can always be replaced by an account that makes more sense and fits the data better. A scientist is aware that there is a discrepancy between the way the world is in itself and the ability of science to understand and observe it. Unfortunately, religious fundamentalism adopts only the claims to objective and universal truth, and not the ability to peer review, revise, and improve upon existing theories.

When a scientist is certain of a particular sequence of cause and effect, what a scientist is really saying is that *to date* all the evidence points toward a particular theoretical understanding. By contrast, when a biblical fundamentalist asserts that God's Word tells them to subjugate women

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[16] Žižek and Gunjević, *God in Pain*, 191.

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to men they are asserting that this is a timeless injunction. Whereas science can imagine the world differently and revise an existing theory, fundamentalists deny the possibility of change. Mainstream religion, like mainstream science, assumes that our understanding can deepen and occasionally even actually improve over time. Part of the irony of the fundamentalist dislike of evolution is that it is a religious reality just as much as a scientific one that human understanding changes with time. The Judaeo-Christian Scriptures make it clear that human beings took a long time to arrive at a place where what we take for granted as moral monotheism could take root. Similarly, any observer of religious history can see theology, like science, has evolved over time. Slavery is no longer theologically acceptable, although only up until relatively recently people continued to turn to the Bible to justify such practices. Theology is not always correct, but like science it can self-correct and update. Biblical fundamentalism is not so flexible.

Memory Loss

One of the most powerful challenges to biblical fundamentalists is the notion of time. It is a commonplace to note that the geological scale by which planetary time is measured in millions of years is decisively repudiated by biblical fundamentalists. What is not so well known is that this is repudiated, not for theological reasons, but for quasi-scientific reasons. There is absolutely no good theological reason why the planet could not be hundreds of millions of years old. It really does not matter to a theologian how old the world is. By the same token, whether Jesus was crucified aged thirty-three or thirty-one can have little interest for theologians. But for the biblical fundamentalist these questions of dating and age matter because they are already committed to taking the Scriptures at face value.

Since biblical fundamentalists read the Bible as if it were a scientific document they overlook the fact that the Bible is an edited set of diverse (and often contradictory) narratives and other forms of literature compressed to tell a story. If biblical fundamentalists understood that two or three thousand years ago scientific methodology was not the context of those writing the Bible they would not make this mistake. But as children of modernity, biblical fundamentalists assume that the facts of the Bible can be treated in the same way as empirically verified scientific facts. Once again we see the great irony of how a fundamentalist reading of

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the text actually enacts a terrible violence against the text by refusing to admit its own prejudices. And once again we are exposed to the irony of just how contemporary and recent a phenomenon biblical fundamentalism is.

One of the unique features of religious fundamentalism is that it has no sense of shared memory, history, or tradition. In the Enlightenment science and reason mocked tradition as primitive, irrational, and inherently superstitious. Anything that could not be explained rationally was no longer of value. In Immanuel Kant's classic turn of phrase, the point of Enlightenment was that one would dare to know (*audere sapere*).[17] Religious believers reacted to this onslaught in radically different ways. Some, like Kant, sought accommodation, trying to rethink religious categories within the new language of rationality. Some stuck ever faster to the traditional beliefs and practices they had inherited. But fundamentalists seized upon the Enlightenment to extricate themselves from both the layers of tradition and history that had up to this point formed and shaped religious beliefs and practices as well as the specifics of the new rationality.

In yet another profound irony, the fundamental value that both modern rationality and fundamentalist faith share is trust in the Enlightenment promise that highest values are universal, independent of tradition, and clearly knowable. For the modern rationalist reason is the highest value, while for the fundamentalist it is the Scriptures. However, each rely on an Enlightenment attitude that denies the role played by memory, tradition, and history. Each believes we are to be freed from subservience to the ideas of those who have gone before us. And each believes that this new situation requires a radical break with the past.

The Enlightenment is of course old news. Parts of the Enlightenment have been extraordinarily important in developing our future as human beings. The emancipation of women and the end of slavery are key achievements inaugurated, albeit still far from accomplished, by Enlightenment values (not to mention theological ones). At the same time, Enlightenment also rests upon some pretty un-enlightened privileging of the perspectives of, for instance, white Western males at the center of the world. It is impossible now not to be at least somewhat suspicious of the Enlightenment's desire for universal truths as enshrining certain local Western truths over and against the different experiences and wisdoms of

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[17] Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'"

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others. Kant may have encouraged us to dare to know, but he never for a moment seriously thought that the "us" he was writing for might include women or those from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds.

For those who have been tutored to think that Enlightenment values represent all that is virtuous, and fundamentalist values all that is perverse, it will come as something of a shock to discover how connected they are. But the truth remains that in each case an appeal to universal truth masks deep-seated problems. Tradition, wisdom, and community are all forgotten in the rush to dare to know. For the fundamentalist all that matters is whether you know the text of the Scriptures. While for science knowledge that is unverified is suspect, so for fundamentalists knowledge that is not identified by chapter and verse is no longer important.

As Brad Gregory suggests, the Reformation was a key turning point in the creation of the Enlightenment.[18] With the birth of Protestantism came an explosion of competing religious ideas and the disappearance of any shared religious structure capable of adjudicating between different theological beliefs. After decades of religious wars failed to settle religious disputes Europeans were anxious to find a way beyond the divisions of Protestantism and Catholicism. In Gregory's genealogy, modern reason allied to economic progress emerges as a savior, literally enabling warring parties to finally come to an agreement on questions outside the areas of doctrinal and dogmatic disagreement. The rational pursuit of economic growth becomes a point of convergence across religious divisions, while nonetheless beginning from a shared Christian background. It is not insignificant that Descartes himself was a soldier in one of these religious wars and his philosophical system offers a rational grounding that is inherently non-sectarian, and as capable of being put to use by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Before the Reformation there would have been no suggestion that the Scriptures were somehow universal and free of community, history, or tradition. The belief in the universality and truth of Scripture ultimately depends not on any internal logic, but on a fundamental combination of Protestant Reformation belief and the Enlightenment values that emerge from the Reformation. The fact that such values themselves are increasingly under question and criticism merely serves to illustrate just how hard it is to be a religious fundamentalist in an uncertain world. Founded

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[18] Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*.

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as a religious reaction to the dominance of rationality, fundamentalism has a schizoid relation to truth and reason. It wants to believe in truth and reason, and it believes truth and reason are eternal values free of any grounding in history, culture, or society. With the biases and prejudices of Enlightenment rationality increasingly under question fundamentalism is in a tricky situation. Fundamentalism remains bound to the Scriptures. But it also remains bound to a now very old fashioned trust in unchanging timeless truths that have little to do with the Scriptures. Or to put it another way, in a world where scientific experts and philosophers alike admit they fundamentally do not know everything, fundamentalism is holding on by its fingertips to the idea that its knowledge rests on sure and certain foundations. Such certainty is the bequest of an Enlightenment way of thinking that has long departed the halls of university lecture theaters. Paradoxically, fundamentalism is a powerful reminder of how the quest for knowledge has been deaf and blind to centuries of human experience. The beating heart of fundamentalism is not religious fervour so much as the calculating Enlightenment rationality of one very certain universal truth transposed onto the Scriptures.

On Not Knowing

Admitting that we do not know much about God should be one of the central tenets of orthodox Christian belief (Judaism and Islam seem a lot further advanced on this front). From the great mystics to geniuses like Einstein, Christians have always recognized that our knowledge of God is partial, confused, and far from perfect. And at decisive moments in the emergence of orthodox Christianity the church admitted that it did not and could not understand everything. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 is famous for clarifying the classic understanding of Christ's two natures, human and divine. However, this was not an exercise in explanation. By contrast, Chalcedon affirmed that we do not know how they relate, going on to refute as heresy positions that offered clear explanations of the relationship. While Chalcedon affirmed the complete humanity and total divinity of Christ, the details of how this might actually work were never something it could be clear about.

Chalcedon is less a final word on the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity, and more of a signpost pointing beyond itself to a mystery that is barely capable of being stated (and even less susceptible

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to being understood). It is an example of Christianity speaking of faith rather than providing knowledge. Faith in this sense is attitudinal, an orientation to something or other. Just to make things even more confusing, however, faith is also spoken of as a noun rather than a verb. When we hear talk of the Christian faith, people are thinking of faith as a particular set of propositions, a particular "data set" of beliefs. Ironically, throughout history there have been those who have sought to overdetermine and clarify what can be said about such matters. While heresy remains a byword for unconventional or radical thought, the history of Christianity reveals that heresy was as often as not the province of those who sought refuge in the absolute certainty of propositions. Heretics deserve applause for their intellectual honesty and desire to make everything fit neatly together. Unfortunately, such an approach could only succeed by neglecting the parts that did not want to fit neatly together, which for the early church was actually quite a lot. In contrast, what emerges in the run up to Chalcedon as orthodox Christian teaching is the realization that doctrines such as the divinity and humanity of Christ take time to develop and really cannot be easily reduced to a set of definitive propositions.

Unfortunately, the problem with faith as propositional is that this threatens to make Christian ideas sound as if they are propositions of the same ilk as scientific propositions. Unfortunately, few, if any, of the central ideas of Christianity can be reduced to or compared to scientific propositions. To take just one, the resurrection, is to immediately notice that from a scientific perspective there cannot be a resurrection. There can be a resuscitation of a corpse, or a reanimation of something previously dead. But from its earliest telling, the resurrection has never been simply about a dead body turning into a living body. The resurrection also implies some form of transformation that makes the resurrected body not just the old body alive once more. Whatever resurrection might be in the Scriptures (a very open question), one thing no one, disciple or denier, has ever claimed was that the resurrected Christ was a zombie.

Of course, it would be completely understandable to want to simply reject the resurrection as inherently impossible by the standards of science. Resurrection seems to be somewhat beyond the bounds of what science can imagine, especially when we take into account the ambiguity of whether the resurrected one looked much like the crucified one. Reanimation, however, is not scientifically unthinkable. Nor is it logically impossible for someone to pass out and be taken for dead. Yet, neither reanimation nor not-quite-dying is a coherent explanation for what the

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New Testament claims happened to the person of Jesus. If Christianity is to speak with a modicum of scientific honesty we need to acknowledge that there are some—indeed, quite a significant number—of beliefs that do not make sense scientifically. The question remains whether making sense scientifically (which I contend resurrection does *not*) also means that such beliefs are entirely devoid of meaning.

On the other hand, what seems uncalled for is the unprincipled adoption of the language of science to argue for beliefs that science cannot justify. Resurrection is one of many other beliefs that cannot be scientifically proven. Approaching resurrection as an object of scientific study presents religious believers with a difficult choice to make. They can side with a traditional scientific response and reject resurrection outright, as impossible, as something that is inherently unverifiable, in a class of its own, and lacking a control group of other resurrections to be compared with. Or they can side with a fundamentalist scientific response and argue that the literal word of the Scriptures clearly reveals a new category of scientific event, that of the resurrection itself. However, both these approaches would be neglecting one important piece of context, the fact that the Scriptures do not even hint at the resurrection as an object of scientific study.

In a similar vein in her wonderful essay on the resurrection, Sarah Coakley notes how modern theological responses to resurrection have tended to divide into two dominant camps.[19] There are those who take seriously Lockean and Humean approaches to verification, who argue that any talk of resurrection is to affirm that there is just as much historical evidence for resurrection as for any other historical event. The other camp is represented by Karl Barth and Søren Kierkegaard, for whom resurrection can never simply be a matter of history. For Barth and Kierkegaard, an attitude of faith is the only way of receiving the resurrection. The historical record can raise the question of resurrection, but resurrection itself is ahistorical, only faith can lay claim to it.

Coakley wants to suggest an alternative between arguing for the certain knowing of resurrection as an historical event and the blind faith of those who believe history cannot contain sure-fire evidence for the resurrection. Using a combination of Ludwig Wittgenstein and a close reading of the gospel accounts of resurrection, Coakley shows how a significant case can be built for seeing resurrection as neither an out-and-out certain historical event, nor a matter of blind trust. Instead, she introduces the

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[19] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 130–52.

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possibility that "we 'perceive' at 'different levels,' according to the development of our devoutness."[20] Taking seriously the idea of different levels of perception accounts for why in the stories almost no one recognizes the risen Christ when they first meet him. It also neatly rescues resurrection from being decisively shown to be either scientifically or historically possible. By contrast, Coakley opens up the possibility that some of the deepest and most critical theological questions can still be grounded in historical reality, while not circumscribed by one particular account of that history. In addition, by drawing attention to how the first women witnesses of resurrection were disbelieved, Coakley reminds us that it is the women who were not legally capable of being witnesses who were the first to witness the resurrection. It may not be too farfetched to suggest that scientific method operates today a little like first-century patriarchy did then: blind to that which it cannot imagine. So to suggest that science cannot see the resurrection is not to suggest that there is no resurrection, simply that resurrection is not a proper object of scientific study.

It is not just outrageous religious beliefs that encourage a response of doubt. We also have to countenance the possibility that for all that science and history are critically important to making sense of the world, they cannot reveal everything. Both Cartesian and Baconian knowledge are good at giving philosophical or empirical accounts of reality. However, there is much of human experience that neither the Cartesian nor the Baconian can capture. A Mozart piano sonata can be described in both a Cartesian and a Baconian fashion, but neither account can properly begin to describe the emotional experience that arises from the music. To be human is not simply to be a thinking machine, and much that is most true in life cannot easily be reduced to either the Baconian or Cartesian. Some forms of knowledge have to be of the order of the women witnesses to the resurrection. Knowledge does not always conform to every scientific or historical desire for objectivity, but may nonetheless be utterly true. Given that the Scriptures have no pretensions to being science, but every indication of being stories, it will be important to explore the genre of narrative in more detail if we are to excavate the truth of stories like the resurrection. This critical subject will be one we return to in subsequent chapters. For now what we have seen is how Scripture itself raises questions that cannot simply be reduced to scientific knowledge. Or, to put it another way, stories like the resurrection (and a great many other strange happenings) show how good the Scriptures are at challenging both the

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[20] Ibid., 145.

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certainties of science and religion. Here the obvious point is the important one: there is much that sounds downright absurd, odd and uncertain in the Scriptures. Yet, perhaps that is the point. Precisely by being so obviously *not* scientific, the Scriptures beg to be read not as science but as literature. And as we shall see, the truth of literature (whether sacred or not) cannot be grasped by confusing it with the truth of science. *Romeo and Juliet* is not a story that can be explained by offering an interpretation of what chemicals might have been present in Romeo and Juliet's brains. In the same way, the resurrection is not going to be explained by recourse to the pathology lab.

If, as Caputo argues, we do not know who we are, then it also seems the better part of intellectual valor to argue that we also do not know much about a great many other matters. Chief amongst these would be questions of religious meaning. Echoing Augustine, Caputo suggests that not knowing is actually the highest religious passion. If we do not know who we are, we are left not with nothing but with a particular form of passion: "The passion *of* not knowing, truth without Knowledge, the restless heart. *Inquietum est cor nostrum*."[21] Creeds and councils have produced many doctrines throughout the centuries, but none of these can ultimately be judged as scientific propositions by scientific standards of evidence. Scientifically there is no evidence for resurrection. What remains is the possibility that for the very best rational reasons there are places where rationality simply cannot take us any further—which is not to encourage a retreat to a literal reading of Scripture. Rather, it is to suggest that along with the apostle Thomas a first reaction to the resurrection must be one of doubt. Nevertheless, in voicing our doubt the question remains, does doubt in itself offer the final word? Or is doubt a stage in making an attitudinal adjustment toward faith?

Doubting Wisely

The argument of this chapter is that until there is doubt there can be no faith. The two are co-constituting, inseparable, and intertwined. Faith without doubt is like a wordless book or a cinema without moving pictures: simultaneously void and nonsensical. Seen in this light, perhaps part of the point of central doctrines such as the resurrection is to crystallize that even where reason can go no further, doubt can still encourage a deeper type of thinking beyond simple repudiation or rejection.

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[21] Caputo, *On Religion*, 127.

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But let us be clear that this understanding of the limits of reason is not the same as the sixteenth-century rallying cry *sola fide*, "by faith alone." A lot of contaminated water has gone under a lot of denominational and religious bridges in the last four hundred years. And part of the difficulty is that the return to the religious texts initiated by the sixteenth-century Reformation created its own monstrosities. What began as a purifying and reformist return to Scripture quickly ossified into a new form of scriptural authoritarianism. Martin Luther's *sola fide* was inseparable from a *sola scriptura*, "by Scripture alone." Sweeping away all traditions and reasons that could not be justified on scriptural grounds the reformers did enormous damage to religion, even as they sought to renew and reform it. Indeed, without the Reformation, religious fundamentalism would not have emerged in the way it has.

While Luther deserves respect and admiration for his unerring ability to speak truth to some of the powers of his day, a reappraisal of Protestant pieties is well over due. Luther was rooted in his times, and while his rhetoric offered liberation it also had dangerous and unhelpful results, not least in the field of politics and Christianity's relationship to Judaism. It is also not irrelevant to the current discussion to remember that it was also Luther who argued (against Erasmus) against doubt: "Anathema to the Christian who will not be certain of what he is supposed to believe, and who does not comprehend it. How can he believe that which he doubts?"[22] By contrast, Erasmus argued, quite sensibly enough, that it was not possible to know everything for certain.

We no longer live in the sixteenth century, and solutions for contemporary challenges will not be found there. Instead, it is important to take note of those like James Simpson who have shown how some of the worst fundamentalist traits began as sixteenth-century "reformist" inventions.[23] If it is possible to discover a more sophisticated way of relating to God, there also needs to be critical distance from Lutheran Wittenberg just as much as Catholic Rome or Calvinist Geneva. Solutions to the challenges raised by science and an increasingly complex set of societal shifts are neither going to be found by retreating into the Scriptures nor by turning the clock back to the sixteenth century.

Approaching questions of God and questions of faith can only start to make sense if we peer through the lens of the last two hundred years of doubt. The theme running through the present work is that unless faith

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[22] Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will.*

[23] Simpson, *Burning to Read.*

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arises out of doubt, it is not really faith. Faith needs to have looked doubt in the eyes and seen its own reflection. Faith can no longer be held up as an antidote to doubt. Faith is always in an irreducible relationship to doubt. As Francis Spufford writes of both the experience of life and the experience of the presence of God, "The whole thing is—has to be—uncertain right down to the root."[24] Recognizing the uncertainty of life does not need to lead to projecting certainty onto religious faith. By contrast, where doubt is banished, certainty intrudes, and faith runs the risk of no longer being an attitude that affirms what we know to be unknowable.

Uncertainty is not just a social reality. It is also a reality that lies at the heart of religion. And while religion has been distorted into an endeavor to find security, true religion has less to do with finding security than embracing the flux of insecurity. God has been portrayed as the stabilizer of society and religion. But God has also been detected in earthquake, wind, and fire. Just as religion has historically been at fault where it tried to control people, religion has also made the mistake of trying to control God. Certainty allows for a more perfect control on both fronts. By contrast, uncertainty makes it less easy to exercise domination.

The central religious question of our own age is how much uncertainty are we willing to admit in respect of religion? The less uncertainty, the closer we come to fundamentalism in either its religious or atheist forms. By contrast, where uncertainty is welcomed as a natural feature of faith a much larger sea of faith emerges. Part of the purpose of religion is to offer release from false certainties. Faith requires a movement away from the firmness of the shore, into the shallows and eventually into the deeps. To do this requires a willingness to embrace the insecurity at the heart of faith. Far from being enemies of faith, doubt and uncertainty enable faith to be something other than a religious rejection of the complexity of life. Descartes and Bacon founded systems of certainty that sought to exclude doubt from science and philosophy. The fact that their foundations of certainty have proven unable to coexist with a concept of God should alert us to the necessary connection between doubting and believing. The injunction of John Donne, another metaphysical luminary of the seventeenth century, to "doubt wisely" is worth recollecting once again.[25] Doubt need not compete with belief. Doubt is instead the horizon upon which faith emerges.

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[24] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, 72.

[25] Donne, "Satyre III," in *Poetical Works*, 139.