

Introduction

*“We also know there
are known unknowns”*

—DONALD RUMSFELD

Known Unknowns

IN A MUCH-REPORTED RESPONSE TO A QUESTION AT A US DEPARTMENT of Defense News Briefing in 2002 concerning the lack of evidence linking Iraq with weapons of mass destruction, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld said in cryptic fashion: “Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” Some greeted his words with derision, though others remarked on his impeccable logic and “brilliant distillation of quite a complex matter”.¹ I cite this because Rumsfeld’s category of “known unknowns” resonates very much with what I am trying to convey in this book.² To speak paradoxically of an uncertain certainty is to acknowledge that whilst there are some things of which we can be certain—or as certain as our own worldview permits—there are also many things connected to that certainty of which we cannot be certain.

1. Steyn, “Rummy speaks the truth,” para. 10.

2. I owe this insight to my daughter Rachel, who first pointed out the connection to me.

The notion of mystery—explored more fully in the first chapter—is apposite here. I use the word in this book as that which is “sensed to be unknowable, and incomprehensible, and inexplicable, or even inaccessible *in its fullness* to the human mind.”³ It is, in the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, “the mysterious quality of the Known,”⁴ which connects notionally with Rumsfeld’s realm of “known unknowns.” An example or two from science may help. As we expand our knowledge of the universe through space exploration, we become more aware of what we do not know: our sense of the wonder and glory of creation is heightened as we probe ever more deeply into what Einstein called the “mystery” of the universe. There is an elegant beauty embedded in the created order that defies analysis, evoking wonder and awe. At the other extreme, many scientists whose interests have taken them into the micro world of the basic building blocks of life—the biochemistry of molecular structures, the DNA helix, and self-replicating mechanisms—have expressed a similar sense of wonder. How did it all start? In Ps 139 we read that we were “made in the secret place, woven together in the depths of the earth.” There is mystery even here in the biblical account.

Quest for Certainty

In *Cosmopolis*, his ambitious account of the evolution of modernity, the philosopher Stephen Toulmin confronts the rationalist agenda with its “quest for certainty” which had its starting point in the philosophical thinking of René Descartes. He concludes that “we need to balance the hope for certainty and clarity in theory with the impossibility of avoiding uncertainty and ambiguity in practice.”⁵ In his application of this philosophical insight to Christian theology, Toulmin laments the turn from the “free-wheeling *Summas*” of the medieval and pre-Reformation tradition to the “diet of centrally-authorized *Manuals*” imposed by seventeenth-century ecclesiastical authority. In acknowledging our inability to “prove invincibly our most fundamental belief,”⁶ I argue throughout this book that we need to take a leaf out of the books of those who would encourage

3. Schilling, *New Consciousness*, 30.

4. Pelikan, *Christian Intellectual*, 70.

5. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 175.

6. The declared goal of the Counter-Reformation, cited by Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 77.

us to be more relaxed and generous in our faith-understanding. This is akin to what psychologists call the "tolerance of ambiguity" (TA), which "refers to the way an individual (or group) perceives and processes information about ambiguous situations or stimuli when confronted by an array of unfamiliar, complex, or incongruent clues."⁷ However, TA, it must be stressed, should not be interpreted in such a way as to acquiesce to the "subtle shift of emphasis away from the object of faith (i.e., what it is that is believed) toward our choice to believe."⁸ Dogmatic theology cannot simply be thrown out of the window in favor of "the grammar of preference with respect to religion in general and Christian orthodoxy in particular."⁹ When dogmatism in the theological arena is equated with narrow-minded bigotry, allowing orthopraxy to trump orthodoxy and leaving no room for revealed truth or indeed traditional wisdom, then we have truly lost our bearings.

However, it is precisely because we live in a world which is far removed from the modernist version of reality, with its rational, clinical, and superficial presentation of life, that we need the courage and wisdom to embrace the presence of uncertainties in the midst of certainty. As James Olthuis writes, "the world is too complex, too contradictory, too enigmatic, pock-marked with guilt, flawed with folly and pride, scarred by ignorance and arrogance."¹⁰ In the context of Christian ministry in such a world, many pastors are tired of simplistic certainties: what they need is permission to live with uncertainty, with mystery, ambiguity, and paradox. In fact, I have made a habit in recent years of asking church leaders if they would be interested in a book addressing these themes, and—not to my surprise—I have received an overwhelmingly positive response. In the chapters that follow, I therefore offer snapshots of a number of central Christian topics—God, the gospel, the church, salvation, ministry—inviting us to treat them as features of a landscape to explore rather than a set of propositional statements to sign up to.¹¹ My hope is that each chapter—short enough to provoke interest and curiosity—will be a catalyst for deeper reflection and enquiry in the heart and mind of each reader. If we are willing to see ourselves as theological explorers,

7. Furnham and Ribchester, "Tolerance of Ambiguity," 179–99.

8. Gay, "Plurality, Ambiguity," 209–27.

9. *Ibid.*, 209.

10. Olthuis, "Dancing Together," 140–52.

11. Adapted from a phrase in Williams, "To What End Are We Made?" 11.

learner-disciples who engage in *theologia viatorum* in our Christian ministry, we will be open to wrestle with our faith, eager to discover truths yet unknown to us. We will not be too quick to “grasp a revelation so blinding in its depth and simplicity that creatures such as we could not ‘attain unto it.’”¹² We will discover a new freedom in ministry as we embrace a more generous “both-and” perspective in place of a more narrow “either-or” interpretation of the Christian faith. In the process, we may find ourselves rediscovering “the Life we have lost in living” as we imaginatively participate in the life, ministry—and *mystery*—of the triune God of grace in our midst.

SAMPLE

12. Hall, *What Christianity Is Not*, 164.