

Lesslie Newbigin : Proper confidence

Faith, doubt & certainty in Christian discipleship

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Notes by Alison Morgan, Dec 2006

Stunning argument, but loads of repetition...

1. Faith as the way to knowledge

His question: 'What kind of confidence is proper for those who witness to the truth of the gospel?', p2. IN particular, are those we label 'fundamentalists' or those we label 'liberals' right? His conclusion – neither, because both operate within a modernist plausibility structure which is increasingly being shown to have fatal limitations.

I am writing this book as a missionary who is concerned to commend the truth of the gospel in a culture that has sought for absolute certainty as the ideal of true knowledge but now despairs of the possibility of knowing truth at all, a culture that therefore responds to the Christian story by asking, "But how can we know that it is true?" There is a long tradition of Christian theology that goes under the name "apologetics" and that seeks to respond to this question and to demonstrate the "reasonableness of Christianity." The assumption often underlying titles of this kind is that the gospel can be made acceptable by showing that it does not contravene the requirements of reason as we understand them within the contemporary plausibility structure. The heart of my argument is that this is a mistaken policy.pP93.

- because the affirmation that God through whom all things exist is to be identified with a man who was crucified and raised cannot be accommodated within any plausibility structure except one of which it is the cornerstone.

Europe has in its intellectual history both the thinking of classical Greece, and that of the Hebrew Bible. The Greek stream of thought is philosophical; the Hebrew historical. For the Greeks, the Jewish religion may have been admirable, but their religion was outside the main currents of philosophical investigation – truth is not to be found in stories. If the message of the gospel was to capture the cultural leadership of the classical world, there would have to be a diligent intellectual effort to relate the biblical story to the world of classical thought - but without being absorbed into that world.

At the heart of the Christian message was a new fact: God had acted (nb 'fact' means *factum*, 'something done'). God had acted in a way that if believed must determine all our future thinking. It couldn't form part of any world view except one of which it was the basis. Athanasius said it formed a new arche, a new starting point for all human understanding of the world. John tries to bridge the gap with *logos*; but immediately says the word became flesh – and turns aside from philosophical concept to Jesus, a man whose story he was about to tell. So *logos* has to be rebuilt on a new foundation. Immediately 2 key dualisms fundamental to classical thought had to be discarded:

- Dualism between the material and the spiritual
- Dualism between being and becoming

Both are incompatible with a God who walks incarnate into history.

The result, centuries later, of the ensuing debate, was the formulation of a new way of understanding God as Father, Son and Spirit.

And so a new beginning began to shape Europe. Ultimate reality was no longer unknowable; it was available to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Consequences, formulated by the 4th Cappadocian theologians:

1. Because the cosmos is the creation of a rational God, it's comprehensible by us, made in his image; and it is coherent
2. Because he created it freely as a thing independent from himself, it has relative autonomy – not everything which happens is the direct will of God. And we investigate it not mystically but empirically.
3. The heavenly bodies are made of the same stuff as the earth (Aristotle said not, the church adopted his teaching and condemned Galileo who decided they were)
4. Because Christ was incarnate, we may use material things in our quest for salvation – eg Gk medicine.

These principles formed the basis of western science.

For the next thousand years, the biblical story had the greater role in shaping the thought of Europe. Augustine took the biblical story as his starting point, and wrote, *credo ut intelligam*. The new starting point for knowledge is not ideas (Plato) but Jesus.

According to Plato and Aristotle (and modern science), knowledge begins by the asking of questions. For Christians, it comes from answering them – we cannot relate to a person only by asking questions, we come to know them only through dialogue. Knowledge is in this sense a gift. If we have been talking about a person and they then come into the room, we have to stop, and talk a different way. So with the Christian way of understanding the world. If God has actually entered the room, we can't just ask questions, we have to answer them too. *There is a fundamental difference between a worldview which sees reality as in some sense personal, therefore to be known only in the way that we can have knowledge of another person, and the worldview which sees ultimate reality as impersonal.* P14

These 2 ways of understanding diverge as follows:

1. If we look for ultimate truth in a story, which we are still in the middle of, it follows we walk by faith not sight. If ultimate truth is in an idea, formula, set of laws, then nothing unexpected will happen, and we can predict the future. The unfinished story carries no such certainty.
2. The two worldviews give different roles to seeing and hearing. The classical approach sees, and acts. The biblical approach hears, and responds.

2. Doubt as the way to certainty

All this carried on until the works of Aristotle became available through Averroes and Avicenna, and were synthesised by Aquinas in the C13th (despite a ban on Aristotle by Pope in 1263) – result shapes the thinking of W Christendom to this day. Averroism made distinction between faith and reason. Thomas distinguished between things knowable by reason alone and things knowable only by faith through revelation, but added that theology took precedence over philosophy. In later centuries it became common to regard philosophy as the prelude to theology. Consequences:

- the resplitting of knowledge from faith
- confusion between the conceptual God of philosophy and the incarnate God of the Bible
- if science is the foundation of theology, what happens when science overturns what had seemed obvious – eg the sun visibly going round the earth? Where can certainty be found??

By the C17th the result was widespread scepticism. Descartes was asked to refute it. He set out to build the structure of knowledge by processes of reasoning which had the clarity and indubitability of mathematics. He found the foundation in his own existence as a thinking/doubting subject. His new philosophy was built on a foundation not of faith but of doubt – the prevailing one of the time, the one he had been asked to refute. Consequences:

- this reinforced the dualism of mind and matter which had been characteristic of the classical world
- it divorced objectivity and subjectivity in human knowing – which led to the popular image of science as a realm of objective facts quite sanitised from any elements of subjectivity.
- It reinforced the dichotomy between theory and practice. He could have started, 'I love/act, therefore I am'. but he chose the mind, and isolated it from the world of acting and loving.

Doubt can be expressed in 3 ways:

1. I doubt P because I believe Q,R,T – my doubt rests on a prior faith commitment
2. I doubt P because you have not proved it
3. Total scepticism; it is not possible to make truth claims at all. This is ours; and it's a pose, because we act daily on the assumption that some things are true and others not.

So doubt depends on faith. Faith, however, does not depend on doubt.

Kant, C18th, demonstrated the limits of reason – we can't reach beyond the appearance of things to the reality behind them. He also demonstrated that our moral and aesthetic experience can lead us beyond the boundary that defines the limits of reason. But it was the first that stuck; modern people believe that ultimate reality is unknowable. But how do you know it's unknowable??

[Nietzsche, C19th, drew the necessary conclusion of the method of Descartes – you can't know anything, because the beliefs on which you found your rational criticism are themselves liable to critical questioning. So the words true/false, right/wrong, have no objective reference, and instead we can speak only of values.](#)

We have now begun to turn our back on modernity with its claim to build on reason and reach truth. We suspect all claims to universal truth. All are metanarratives told by societies to validate their claims to global power. There is no truth, only reigns of truth (Michel Foucault).

The greatest product of the modern age is the work of science; but it's recognised as an avenue to power, not wisdom. It's given us the power to do things previously unimaginable; but taught us nothing about which ends are in accordance with the truth.

Descartes bequeathed to Europe a confidence that certain knowledge could be achieved without ref to God. Astronomer Laplace said to Napoleon, 'I have no need of that hypothesis' – God.

3. Certainty as the way to nihilism

Newton's discoveries suggested Descartes had been right, and that the universe could after all be understood with the clarity of mathematics. It came at the same time as the religious wars – religion wasn't so attractive after all. Scepticism might not have been banished, but the new science opened up anyway. The counter reaction was the German romantic movement – there are things which can not be mapped on the grid of mathematics: art, music, architecture, myth, wisdom. The word 'kultur' acquired a new use; culture now came to mean not agriculture but those things which a society holds in common as precious for its life as a community (from 1867 in English). Throughout the C19th there was just one culture, with the versions of it encountered on other continents just seen as lower on the ladder. C19th mission took not just the gospel but also the Enlightenment. The backlash still drives the call for a multifaith ideology.

Ever since Weber, it's been believed that the progressive adoption of modern science, technology, bureaucracy must lead to the marginalisation of religion. Secularisation was seen as a one way process. But wherever people have tried to create an enlightened secular society, there have been strong counter movements of fundamentalism. *It would seem that the human spirit cannot survive indefinitely without some kind of religion, p36.*

Descartes' choice of the thinking self as the starting point opened up 3 dualisms:

1. Between the thinking mind and everything else. The mental and material worlds are separate. This means God, who belongs to the mental/spiritual world, cannot influence the material world. So long as this dualism remains part of popular thought (it still does) it's impossible for the gospel to be accepted as public truth; it can only be private opinion.
2. Between objective and subjective. The C19th claimed that science was the only avenue to objective truth, and must therefore replace religion as the locus of public truth. Religion (as claims to recognise beauty or goodness) could only be a matter of personal experience.
3. Between theory and practice. We have this as a 2 step process; the Bible doesn't recognise it – only a single action composed of hearing, believing, obeying. The human person is not a mind attached to a body but a psychosomatic unit. The implication is that the gospel does not become public truth for a society by being propagated as a theory / worldview / religion. It can become public truth only insofar as it is embodied in a society (the church) which is both abiding in Christ and engaged in the life of the world.

Michael Polanyi

The debate about Christian certainty is often polarised between those who wish to affirm the objective truth of the Christian claim to knowledge of God, and those who deny it. But this is a false dualism, so the whole debate is misguided...

Polanyi has argued that all knowing of reality involves the personal commitment of the knower as a whole person. He asked, how are discoveries made?

- Through prior apprenticeship to a tradition of knowledge
- From within this tradition; wearing it like spectacles, speaking it like a language.
- By recognising a problem and seeking a solution, using intuition, imagination, risk, investigation.
- Resting on a large area of tacit knowledge, not formal and explicit – eg we ride a bike without doing maths.
- *By seeing that the idea that science will eventually explain everything through discovering laws which govern the behaviour of the smallest units of matter is an illusion. Reductionism offers no explanation for purpose.*
- Christians insist that their faith refers to objective realities, but is founded on experience. Polanyi says there is no dichotomy between knowing and believing – scientists too work this way, committing themselves to hypotheses in order to test their validity in the next stage of a journey. This doesn't make our understanding subjective. It's personal knowledge.

4. Knowing God

Polanyi concluded we had been misled by the illusion of a totally objective knowledge. If objectivity means aiming for the greatest possible truthfulness, fine; but if it means that all subjective elements are excluded, it's absurd – if there is no subject who knows, there is no knowing! He strived to show that the idea of a certainty which relieves us of the need for personal commitment is an illusion. But this illusion is an accepted part of the worldview of modern societies... It damages our capacity to articulate the Christian faith. At popular level, it is assumed that Christianity is just one of a class of opinions called religious. At academic level, we distinguish between the confessional and scientific study of theology, assuming the existence of the scientific mind as an empty page with nothing written on it/ But both approaches presuppose a long tradition of thought and practice that determines which beliefs are plausible and which not.

BUT postmodernity is deconstructing the assumptions we have inherited from the Enlightenment. We no longer accept the assumptions of the modern scientific world view as secure foundations. We know science works; but it leaves us in a world characterised by 'technological optimism and literary despair' (Carver Yu) – just look at modern art. Science delivers an abundance of things to have and do; but no guidance on questions of worth – which things are worth doing, having? Cp Job 28, which gives a glowing description of the marvels of human technology, followed by the haunting question, 'where shall wisdom be found?' We ask the same question: how can it become possible to affirm confidently as public truth the reality of those things which are not amenable to the tests Descartes laid down for certain truth?

Polanyi points out that knowing is always part of a tradition. The period following Descartes was the most brilliant in human history; but 'its incandescence has fed on the combustion of the Christian heritage in the oxygen of Gk rationalism, and when the fuel was exhausted the critical framework burned away'. P describes his work therefore as a post critical philosophy. The critical period achieved much; but it was a mistake to suppose we can begin with an empty page. The self evident truths of the Enlightenment are not self-evident to the peoples of India, Africa; different stuff is written on their pages. So instead of clearing away superstition, it's created a vacant site into which new superstitions are crowding. *Could the leaders of the Age of Reason have ever imagined that, two centuries after their work, the forces of astrology, witchcraft, and black magic would once again capture hearts and minds in a Europe that enjoyed, at the same time, just that universal public education which was one of their dreams?*, 48.

Augustine said he believed in order to know. In renouncing the first, we have left ourselves bereft of the possibility of knowing anything. P seeks to restore to us 'the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs'.

All efforts to know must begin with something given.. This includes.. the data, the facts that form part of the foundation from which our reason works.. It also includes.. the tradition of knowing which has developed in a human community and which includes the language and all the conceptual tools used in that tradition. None of it is self evident truth.

Christian thinking stands in the tradition of discipleship stemming from the acts of God, these acts being the substance of the good news communicated by the church. In a society that has accepted another creed.. and that – moreover – does not recognize it as a creed but thinks that it is a religiously neutral account of the facts, confident affirmation of the Christian faith as public truth is regarded as sectarian and dogmatic. And this charge comes precisely from those who have accepted the reigning dogma of their society without question. [building on rock vs sand?] [Colson, 2 ways to live?]

Cp Roy Clouser, *The myth of religious neutrality*, shows how major theories in maths, physics, psychology involve a prior decision as to what is fundamental in the area studied. If we define theos as that on which everything depends but which itself depends on nothing else, none of these scientific theories is religiously neutral. We have to believe in order to know. The certainty that Descartes claimed is thus available only within a mental world that is not in contact with a reality beyond itself. That the only objective, reliable knowledge is that furnished by science and expressed mathematically is a popular idea that inhibits us from making confident statements of religious faith, because they can't be expressed in this way.

But we are moving into postmodernity. Students don't want to study science at university; is it really only because it doesn't pay enough?? Or maybe there is a growing scepticism about science and its capacity to give meaning to life? Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality...

The gospel is always in narrative form; unique in seeing the human person as a responsible actor in human history. But a story can't provide Descartes with his certainty. It offers only belief or unbelief. It's about facts – what God has done.

It makes no sense to eliminate purpose from our efforts to understand the world. Take a watch. It's not lost 10 seconds in 5 years. Does that make it a good watch? (MacIntyre). It depends what you think its purpose is. And that you have to be told. Purpose is not available for inspection. *The modern antithesis of observation and reason .. vs revelation and faith.. is only tenable on the basis of a prior decision that the whole cosmic and human story has no purpose and therefore no meaning.* And we can't keep an open mind on whether or not there is any purpose to human life. We have to decide, based on whether we think the universe itself embodies a purpose other than our own, or not. Postmoderns assume not; but we may not agree! *If we are prepared to entertain.. the possibility that the entire cosmos exists for some purpose and is not a chaos of purely random events, it follows that we have to recognize an upper level of explanation, namely, the theological level.*

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, expounded the difference between 2 kinds of knowing:

1. I am the masterful actor handling inert material which I am free to interrogate, manipulate, organize
2. I am seeking to know another person who can resist my efforts to know and can interrogate me and make me the object of enquiry.

[take away purpose, and all that's left is alcohol, the descent into animal gratification]

Polanyi – all our knowing is personal, not only in the sense that it involves the commitment of the knower but also in the sense that our knowledge will not be complete unless it presses beyond impersonal realities of science to that personal reality which alone can carry a purpose for the whole.

5. By grace alone

It is unreasonable to set up an opposition between observation and reason on the one hand, and revelation and faith on the other. *To shut out the possibility of revelation is to exclude at the outset the possibility that the cosmos might embody a purpose distinct from the various human purposes we bring to our encounter with it.* But [revelation isn't just giving information we wouldn't be able to find out for ourselves. It's the giving of an invitation – not just the unfolding of a purpose, but an invitation to be part of it.](#) The response called for is not just intellectual, but active. Christian discipleship isn't a 2 stage affair in which we formulate a concept of truth and then translate it into a program for action; it's a single action of faith and obedience to a living person; the response to a personal calling.

The locus of confidence .. is not in the competence of our own knowing, but in the faithfulness and reliability of the one who is known. It's not a claim to possess truth, but a confidence on the one in whom I have placed my trust. The central conviction of the Enlightenment was that human reason was capable of coming to the knowledge of the truth. Jesus said not; *In 8.31 continue in my teaching, and you will know the truth, and it will make you free – truth is not a fruit of freedom but a precondition for freedom.* So Christianity cannot be made acceptable to the modern world, commended as a tenable belief within the liberal assumptions of modern society – hence the fury of liberal denunciations of what is called fundamentalism. But fundamentalists also adopt a style of certainty more in the tradition of Descartes than in a truly evangelical spirit:

- Anxiety about new scientific discoveries
- Refusal to reconsider long held beliefs in the light of fresh study of scripture
- Claiming objective truth for the Christian message, as if it were a matter of demonstrable fact, as Enlightenment thinking demands.

Herbert Butterfield: 'hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted', p71.

At the beginning of the modern era there was a shift in the perception of reliable truth from a story (told in the Bible) to a model of reality in terms of timeless laws of nature. We will thus be able to formulate laws of nature that will enable us to predict with certainty the outcome of the actions we take. But in the absence of any reliable information about the purpose (if any) for which the cosmos exists, the purposes we impose upon it will be as diverse as the persons whose purposes they are.

[If we look for reliable truth in a story, the position will be quite different. A story contains choice; unpredictability; room for surprises. In the Bible story we find one whose character becomes clear; we become aware that our lives are part of this universal story. Our lives are shaped, therefore, not by the confidence that we know enough of the laws of nature to chart our course with certainty, but by a faith in the one whose story it is.](#)

The truths of reason are the product of particular histories. The self-evident truths of the Enlightenment are self-evident only to a society shaped by a particular story. There are no timeless truths; only metanarratives which falsely claim to explain the human story as a whole but which are in fact themselves simply products of particular human histories. Facts are not entities that simply implant themselves in a vacant mind; they are grasped by a mind trained in a particular culture to grasp them.

[Polanyi recognised that scientific work involved the passionate personal commitment of the scientist to a truth which is, in the beginning, only intuitively sensed but which can only be reached if there is a willingness to affirm belief in statements that can be doubted.](#)

The church shares the postmodern replacement of eternal truths with a story – but not just any story, and not in the absence of any overarching truth by which they can be assessed. The church's affirmation is that the story it tells, embodies, enacts, is the true story, and that others are to be evaluated by reference to it.

6. Holy Scripture

The Enlightenment was a shift in the location of reliable truth from a story to a set of eternal laws capable, in principle, of mathematical statement and independent of history. The scriptures could no longer be regarded as the locus of truth. The scholarly world had therefore to distinguish a scientific approach to the Bible from the confessional approach of the

churches. So ordinands had to be gently but firmly moved from the confessional position with regard to their faith, to the scientific one – the historical-critical method of approaching scripture. It's really not about the unveiling of truth, but an effort to assert the authority of academics over ecclesiastics... Biblical scholars are a small minority, in a culture that appears to be collapsing – asserting an authority that fits oddly with their real situation.

Fundamentalism is, like liberalism, a child of the Enlightenment, seeking to reassert the authority of the Bible in the new situation created by modernity. It produces a false concept of biblical authority. It's less important to ask a Christian what s/he believes about the Bible than to inquire what s/he does with it.

There is no way by which we come to know a person except by dwelling in his/her story, and becoming part of it. That is the only way to know God. *Jesus didn't write a book which would have served forever as the unquestionable and irrefutable statement of the truth about God. he formed a community of friends and shared his life with them.* 89

7. Through faith alone

one of best known writings of the Enlightenment was *Religion within the limits of reason*. American philosopher Wolterstorff has written *Reason within the limits of religion*.

The proper form of apologetics is the preaching of the gospel itself and the demonstration .. that it does provide the best foundation for a way of grasping and dealing with the mystery of our existence in this universe. 94

If the ultimate reality.. is the being of the triune God, then the response of personal faith to a personal calling is the only way of knowing that reality. To rule this out .. is to make an a priori decision against the possibility that ultimate reality is personal.

The setting of reason against faith is absurd. Reason is not an independent means for finding out what is the case. It is not a substitute for information. In order to be informed, we have to make acts of trust in the traditions we have inherited and in the evidence of our senses.

Fundamentalism

- Falls into the trap set by Descartes in seeking certainty that does not acknowledge the certainty of faith as the only kind available
- Leads to a hard kind of rationalism remote from grace.

Liberalism

- Accepts the critical principle of Descartes et al as an integral part of its method, working with presuppositions which are a part of the reigning plausibility structure, unaware that there are no rational grounds on which it can be shown that they have a superior epistemological status than the presuppositions brought by a Christian/Jewish reader
- The principle that every dogma must be open to question is false – action is required before questions can be asked/answered. We act all the time on beliefs not demonstrably certain, and commit our lives to propositions that can be doubted. Falling climber – to trust, or not, the tree growing in the cliff face? (William James)
- Liberals speak of the Bible as a record of human experience. But we still have to either believe or disbelieve its story.
- Open-mindedness can be the cloak for error – the supposition that we are the explorers, questioners; and not God. The gospel itself undermines our questions with its own question.

The confidence proper to a Christian is not the confidence of one who claims possession of demonstrable and indubitable knowledge. It is the confidence of one who had heard and answered the call that comes from the God through whom and for whom all things were made : "Follow me." p105