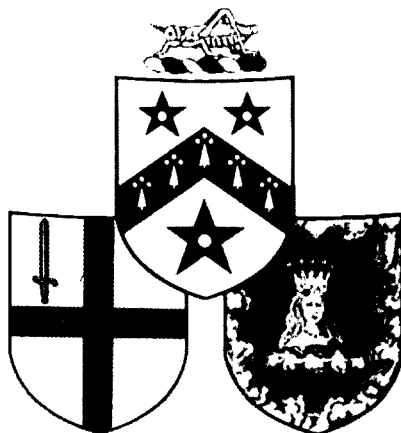


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# **LIVING THEOLOGY**

Lecture 4

## **LIVING WITH DOUBT**

by

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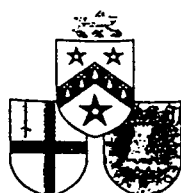
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IV

*'Living with Doubt'*

One year at midnight mass on Christmas eve I began my sermon by reporting that an ancient manuscript had recently been discovered, dated by scholars to about 70AD. I pointed out that, while they disagreed about its authenticity, all agreed that it was a remarkable and interesting document. It appeared to be an autobiographical meditation, written as an old man, by Jonathan the son of Simon, innkeeper at Bethlehem at the beginning of the first century. An American scholar, Professor Capote, I went on, had made a translation of the document and, instead of a sermon, I intended to read his version of the document. It started like this: 'I, Jonathan son of Simon, of Bethlehem in Judaea, wish to set down my memory of events that are now being spoken of and written about, most recently in a strange text called, *The Good News according to Luke*, which has recently come to my attention'. The sermon I preached that night was published in a newspaper a few days later, and I was soon getting letters from people, asking how they could acquire copies of this ancient document. There was, of course, no ancient document. I was following an old religious tradition, by making up a story in order to put over a message. I had even planted a clue about what I was doing in the text of my sermon. I gave the name *Capote* to the scholar who had translated the document, because Truman Capote, author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, had pioneered modern versions of this ancient technique in his book, *In Cold Blood*, about a multiple murder in a Kansan farmhouse. That book was neither fiction nor pure documentary, so the critics dubbed it *faction*. Capote used the form of fictional narrative, including imaginative reconstructions of lengthy, unrecorded conversations, to get inside the complexity of a hideous event. In a modest way, my Christmas sermon had been a similar exercise.

The Hebrew word for this technique is *midrash*, from a verb meaning to search out, to seek, to enquire. All religious traditions develop a literature of imaginative responses to their sacred canon. C.S.Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* is a good example. This book, one of the most famous Lewis wrote, purports to be letters from a junior demon to his supervisor, about his work of tempting a hapless human. A person who was unaware of such literary conventions might believe that the letters were authentic; and it is possible that C.S.Lewis got letters from some of his readers, asking for copies of the originals. There is a lot of *midrash*, or imaginative construction of this sort, in the New Testament. If we want to understand the Bible, we have to read it within its own literary conventions. For example, many scholars believe that the whole of John's Gospel is *midrash*, an imaginative theological construction that is the fruit of years of meditating on the meaning of Jesus. The long discourses in the fourth gospel are to be understood not as verbatim recordings of monologues by Jesus, but complex theological interpretations of his meaning for the young Christian movement, just as the opening seventeen verses of the book are a meditation on the mystery of God's presence in the creation 'from the beginning'. Even the most casual and untutored reader would be able to detect considerable development in the understanding of Jesus between Mark, almost certainly the first gospel to be written, and John, almost certainly the last; and there is a clear development traceable even in the synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, who all take a similar, or synoptic, view of Jesus. We encounter difficulties in our use of the New Testament only if we bring to its study a forensic approach, in which its historic authenticity becomes the moral test of its spiritual usefulness. This means that we waste ourselves in fruitless debates about whether the accounts of the birth of Jesus are or could be historically accurate, about whether there was an actual massacre of the innocents and a flight of the holy family into Egypt, instead of trying to derive usable meaning for ourselves from these highly symbolic narratives found only in Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel was almost certainly written some years after the

destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70CE. The Christian movement began its life as a group or tendency within Judaism, which tolerated a fair amount of diversity. The destruction of the Temple and its ancient tradition of sacrifice and ritual was a devastating blow to traditional Judaism, which adapted to the change by substituting a rabbinical form of its tradition, based on the synagogue, to replace the priestly or sacrificial cult that had been based on the Temple. During this period of traumatic adjustment the status of the Jewish Christian sect must have been a topic of intense and painful disagreement, and there are ugly echoes of the controversy in John's gospel, with its frequent and scornful reference to 'the Jews', because of their rejection of the messianic claims made on behalf of Jesus by his followers in the synagogue communities. Matthew was probably writing for elements of the beleaguered Jewish Christian community who were tempted to abandon their commitment to Jesus as Messiah, so he sets out to show them that he was the messianic fulfilment of Judaism. One of the ways he does this is by loading his infancy narratives with highly symbolic events that portray Jesus as a new Moses or Israel. The mysterious gentiles from the east, bearing their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh establish Jesus as the successor to the three great symbolic figures of Jewish history, king, priest and prophet, gold representing kingship, incense priesthood and myrrh prophecy. By this powerfully symbolic narrative Matthew sets Jesus at the centre of Jewish history as its fulfilment or culmination. Just as the people of Israel were the victims of a wicked king who massacred Jewish babies, so was Jesus the target of a similar purge by Herod; and just as the Israelites went down into Egypt and were led out of slavery by Moses, so Jesus flees into Egypt, returning after Herod's death to fulfil his destiny.

*[2:1] In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, [2] asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." [3] When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; [4] and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. [5] They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*[6] 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "*

*[7] Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. [8] Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." [9] When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. [10] When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. [11] On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. [12] And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

*[13] Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." [14] Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, [15] and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."*

[16] When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. [17] Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

[18] "A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

[19] When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, [20] "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." [21] Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. [22] But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. [23] There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

This potent use of symbolic parallels to the history of Israel is continued throughout the gospel, which includes a sojourn in the wilderness of forty days, paralleling the forty years in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt; and the giving of a new law, in which the Sermon on the Mount replaces, for Christians, the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Matthew is making a bid to prevent his audience from settling for the new rabbinic Judaism by persuading them that the present crisis points to Jesus as the fulfilment of traditional Judaism. This kind of polemical advocacy of Jesus as the successor of the old Judaism is promoted throughout the New Testament; it is the theme, for instance, of the highly symbolic Letter to the Hebrews. Dogmatic Christianity is the result of centuries of interpretation of the meaning of Jesus, and we see the process in its early stages in this epistle. Judaism has always engaged in heated debate within itself about the nature of its symbolic systems, those human constructs that are created to connect the human with the divine. Its most potent symbol at the time of Jesus was the Temple at Jerusalem, where the round of sacrifices and offerings connected its adherents with the mystery of God's demanding holiness. The Temple system of sacrifice was constantly challenged from within Judaism as an inappropriate way to express the human encounter with God. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures had condemned the sacrificial system that lay at the centre of the Temple cult, because it had become an easy substitute for what God really wanted from the children of Israel, the sacrifices of mercy and justice for the poor. This ancient debate must have intensified after the physical destruction of the Temple. The author of the letter to the Hebrews entered the debate, and offered his interpretation of Jesus as a better way of mediation between God and humanity than the temple cult. Jesus replaced the Temple for Christians; just as Rabbinic or synagogue based Judaism would later replace it for Jews.

It is really impossible to understand the New Testament if we do not interpret it against this polemical, not to say defensive background of dispute with Judaism. For instance, one way of interpreting the story of the first Christian Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles is to see it as belonging to this same kind of literature of advocacy. Acts chapter 2 is an extended exercise in theological code, and we only get the message if we know the background, just as my Christmas sermon only made sense to people who were already familiar with the Gospel of Luke. We have already seen that one of the favourite *midrash* techniques used by the New Testament writers is to take great events from the Old Testament and repeat or echo them in a different context, in order to show that Jesus had assumed the role that was previously filled by

the great figures of the Hebrew scriptures, such as Moses. The second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles provides us with another example of the way the New Testament is composed in order to echo and develop themes from the Old Testament.

*[2:1] When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. [2] And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3] Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

The foundational event in the life of Israel was the exodus from bondage in Egypt. Borrowing the language of this pivotal event, the early Christians described the resurrection of Jesus as his exodus from the bondage of death. Fifty days after the exodus from Egypt the children of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai, where, in the midst of thunder and lightning, God made a contract with Israel, establishing them as his own people. According to one ancient Jewish writer, angels took the news of the bargain struck between Moses and God on Mount Sinai and carried it on tongues to the people of Israel camped out on the plain below.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, fifty days after Easter, the Christian exodus, something like the same process is repeated at the feast of Pentecost, the Christian equivalent of the covenant on Mount Sinai, when the followers of Jesus are established as the nucleus of a new people of God, commissioned to take the good news of Jesus to the whole world. Another way of reading the Pentecost narrative is to see it as a Christian answer to the story in the Old Testament of the Tower at Babel, where God divided the human race into different languages in order to prevent it from building a scaffold up to heaven. At Pentecost the division and confusion of humanity is reversed into a new unity in the spirit. The important thing to understand about this complex narrative is that it is making a simple claim: since that first Christian Pentecost, it has been through the Church that the meaning and message of Jesus has been shared with the world.

Whatever side we take on the dispute that finally resulted in the separation of Christianity from its roots in Judaism and led it to proclaim itself as the fulfilment or replacement of Judaism, we have to ask ourselves whether it has any point for us today, whether there is anything that we can use here in our search for a workable religious tradition. We probably ought to begin by admitting that there has always been an extraordinary effrontery in the claim that Judaism has been superseded by the Church, so it is no surprise that it has poisoned relations between Jews and Christians for centuries. We ought to go on and admit that one of the most virulent strains of anti-semitism clearly has its roots here, culminating in the Holocaust in our own era. And we probably ought to accept that the dispute had its origins in a religious world view that is of little use to us today, unless it is heavily re-interpreted.

We have already spent some time examining that aspect of religion called *apocalyptic* and its particular focus on messianic expectation, on the arrival in history of God's anointed agent to inaugurate a reign of righteousness on earth. It is clear that the dispute between the followers of Jesus and traditional Jews in the first century focused on the claim that Jesus was the expected one, the messiah, the Christ. The early followers of Jesus clearly expected their faith in Jesus as messiah to be vindicated soon by his actual return in glory. Indeed, one of the major sources of strain and incoherence in Christianity has its origin in the contradiction between its pragmatic adaptation to the fact that Jesus did not return, so that Christianity had to settle down for the long haul of history, and its failure to jettison the strand in the Christian scriptures that confidently predicted his imminent return. The apocalyptic strand in Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday, New York, 1997, p.283

has been a hunting ground for cranks in every generation, and its constant power to distort human judgement was clearly demonstrated at the end of the Twentieth Century by outbreaks of millenarian fantasy. The most elaborate apocalyptic in the New Testament is found in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. It is no accident that many of the people who become afflicted with religious psychoses betray a fatal knowledge of this strange and unpleasant document. It is from Revelation that movie directors and pulp novelists have picked up the famous symbol of the Triple Six, 666, the Mark of the Beast. And it is in Revelation that we read of the Battle of Armageddon, the final conflict between Good and Evil that was to take place at Megiddo, not far from Jerusalem. But the most fateful of the contributions of the Book of Revelation to religious psychosis of the sort that we saw at the end of the last century is the notion of the millennium itself: *'And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years. And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season'.*

The real battle for Christians today is not Armageddon, it is the battle for a sensible approach to that ancient library of books we call the Bible. The Bible was written by human beings, with all the longings, prejudices and illusions that characterise us as a species. It is not an apocalyptic almanac, a mystical code book, an inerrant textbook for living. It is a compendium of a particular people's struggle with meaning; so it should encourage us to do the same in our day. Jesus will not return on the clouds to inaugurate a reign of righteousness on earth. The messianic hope, whether Jewish or Christian, understood as historic prediction or expectation, has clearly and repeatedly been falsified. We know, of course, that religious illusions are capable of absorbing all facts, even facts that falsify their claims, but those of us who want a religious tradition that has been purged of disabling fantasies ought to admit that the apocalyptic strand in Christianity can only now be used as a metaphor or symbol for the unquenchable human longing for a better society. In the same way, we ought to admit that the specific issue at dispute between Judaism and Christianity no longer makes much sense. Since we no longer expect the supernatural intrusion of a divine figure into human history to mend its hurt, whether it be the Jewish or the Christian messiah, we ought to close the books on a dispute that is based on a world view that no longer makes sense to us. I would go further and suggest that liberal Jews and liberal Christians have more in common with each other than either group has with their own ultra orthodox colleagues, who continue to hold the old tradition in the strictly traditional way.

This quarrel over the messianic status of Jesus within first century Judaism had profound effects on Christianity and prompted it towards a fateful turning point which switched the emphasis from following the way of Jesus to believing things *about* Jesus. Gradually a Christian came to be thought of not as one who lives and acts in a certain way, but as one who held certain convictions or theories in her head. The trouble with religious convictions or beliefs is that, since we can rarely prove or disprove them, we get anxious about them and start quarrelling with people whose convictions or theories differ from our own. That is why Christianity has been riven with disputes from its earliest years, and it is probably one of the reasons why people in Europe are leaving it in droves today. One of the battlegrounds in Christian theology in our time is over *Orthodoxy*, from the Greek term for Right Opinion, Right Belief. The refinements that are offered by the different groups of disputing believers are endless, as the following example will illustrate. One of the Christian doctrines or theories is called *the Atonement*, which claims that the death of Jesus benefited the whole human race. There are many helpful ways of interpreting that claim, but let me tell you about one theoretical refinement. To be what is called a Conservative Evangelical you have to believe in the *Substitutionary Atonement*, which holds

that God was so angry with humanity over our sinfulness that he demanded our punishment; Jesus substituted himself for us, took our punishment, literally died in our place, and thereby appeased the anger of God. To be a sound Evangelical you have to hold that conviction in your head, that precise refinement of an already rather complex set of ideas. And people can get quite fierce in defending these theories. Because I do not hold to the substitutionary theory of the atonement, I will never be invited to address the largest Christian student organisation at Edinburgh University, which requires it of all its speakers. The trouble with theological disputes of this sort is that they have a self-fortifying effect on the protagonists who take pride in the particular characteristics of their belief system. The desire to belong to a gang, an exclusive community, particularly one that is blessed with knowledge that is hidden from others, is potentially attractive to many, particularly when they are young. Christian theological history is filled with stories of groups who have developed theories of the election of themselves to salvation and the damnation of others; theories that demonstrate that their particular group has been exclusively endowed with divine truth, so that they possess a unique mission to the world and have a unique authority within it. Claims of this sort have been held and are still held by Christians.

It is the sheer unlikeliness of the truth of the claims that prompts people to scepticism and bewilderment as they contemplate them. We have already seen that centuries of falsification of the claims made about the precise date of the end of the world have had little effect on the protagonists of apocalypse, who simply go off and adjust their watches to the next time-table. As a doubter's response to this tendency to theological inflation, I would like to suggest that we ought to switch the emphasis in Christianity from belief to practice, from *Orthodoxy* to *Orthopraxis*, from believing things *about* Jesus to the imitation of Jesus. The interesting thing is that this seems to have been the emphasis Jesus wanted. One of his most famous parables makes the point quite clearly. In Matthew 25 Jesus paints a picture of the Day of Judgement when humanity will be separated into goats and sheep, into those who believe the right things and those who do the right things. And there is a legend that makes the same point. It claims that there were four wise men who travelled to Bethlehem, but only three of them made it. The fourth stopped to help a poor widow who was being evicted; then, just as he was catching up with the others, someone else asked for his help. And on it went. He wandered through history searching for the Christ child, but never finding him, because he was constantly caught up in the tragedies of the poor, the horrors of the dispossessed, the pains of the suffering. Only at the end did he discover that, in spite of all his wanderings, he had spent his life in Bethlehem, serving the Christ child in the poor of the world. A good way to get round some of the disputes in Christianity and learn to live with our disagreements would be to imitate the fourth wise man, and try to follow the way of Jesus rather than get too worked up about believing the right things about him. There would be three challenging elements in such a determination, none of them easy to follow. The first would be a resolution to love rather than condemn sinners; to seek to understand others rather than rush to judgement. The second element would be an active pity for the wretched of the earth that worked to change their lot. Finally, there would be a mistrust of power and violence, both personal and institutional, and an active opposition to them. That was the programme that got Jesus crucified. Following it today won't make us popular, but it might just change the world.

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