

Doubting Thomas

Management Guru or Pub Bore?

■ by Eve Poole



In this sermon at Great St. Mary's in Cambridge, Eve severely questions our modern desire to measure things and to be certain. She points out that obsession with the mathematical measurement of risk was a factor behind the banking crisis. The measurement of belief in God by the use of statistical surveys is futile. In religion, as in science and banking, the desire for certainty holds us back from new insights and from a proper respect for the divine unknown.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Maybe it's not done to open a University Sermon with a reference to *Viz* magazine. But had you noticed that it has become a place of great theological insight? I think the God cartoons began shortly after the furore over the Muhammed cartoons. One that particularly stands out for me concerns the Super-heroes, Super God and the Son of Man Wonder. In the cartoon, they arrive at the scene of a variety of disasters, where they have to sit idly by, to avoid interfering with free will.

The cartoon I want to reference, however, is an argument between St Francis and St Nicholas. St Francis, of course, has taken a vow of poverty, and spurns possessions. St Nicholas, on the other hand, delivers presents to children at Christmas, that great festival of materialism. In the cartoon, St Nicholas devises ever more devious ways to give St Francis presents, while St Francis delights in giving them all away. Finally, St Francis dies, happy that in spite of St Nicholas he has fulfilled his vocation to poverty. Death will at last rid him of the attentions of this persistent present-giver. But what does he find waiting for him at the Pearly Gates? An enormous stack of presents.

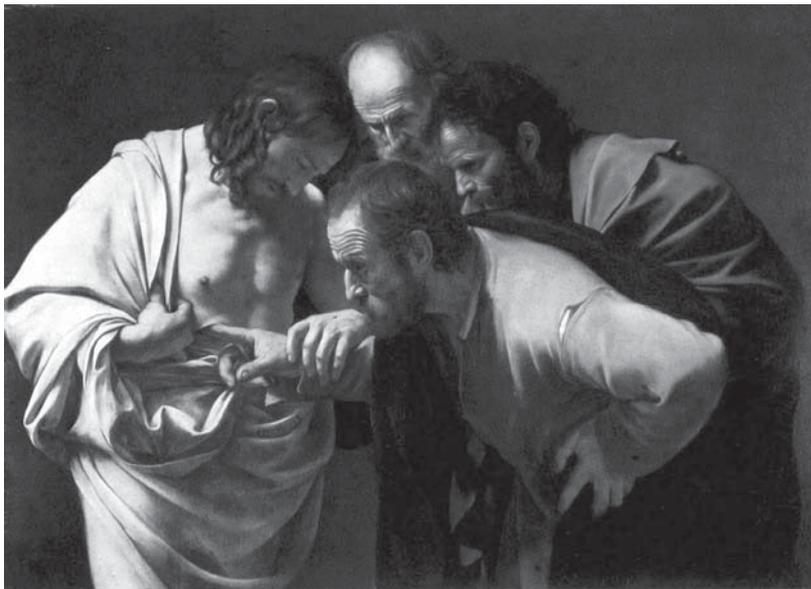
Materialism is perhaps the defining narrative of our time. We most often encounter it as the St Francis complaint, that we all have too much stuff. And Materialism is fuelled by Consumerism, which is designed to render us eternally restless, in an unending quest for fulfilment through possessions. Well, the Bible of course has quite a lot to say about that. But I think that Materialism defines our time in a much more general sense. This is because it is about matter, and what matters.

In one sense, this preoccupation with the material represents the crowning of Enlightenment rationality. David Hume was its most famous champion, arguing for a scepticism that would prevent us from being deceived by 'sophistry and illusion'. He would well have understood the queues of people outside Northern Rock a few years ago, demanding 'show me the money'.

And who is Hume's natural successor today? Enter the man Rowan Williams has described as just the latest 'pub bore' on atheism. Richard Dawkins' insistence on scientific standards of proof for any type of belief would gladden Hume's heart. And the prevalence of this highly sceptical narrative makes my job as a public theologian rather difficult.

Because I think we are all public theologians now, I want to invite you to wrestle with me ►►

▶▶ about it today, to see if we can find some new ways to pull it off. But why Doubting Thomas? Well, I have asked him here to help us today, because he epitomises this need for evidence. As we have heard in our reading, Thomas was so keen on proof that he wanted not only to see the wounds of Christ but also to feel them around his fingers.



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, c. 1601–1602
 Caravaggio
 Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam, Germany

I work in a Business School, and the arena for most of my theology is the marketplace. There, whatever is measured has become the thing that matters most. This means that what matters is often whatever can be most easily measured, like revenue or share price. Of course, this isn't just a City thing. We've all seen the headlines about NHS manipulation of waiting lists and hospital beds, and no doubt many of you have felt the Research Assessment Exercise breathing down your neck as you contemplate your publication choices. Even the Church has joined the bandwagon, issuing regular press releases to show that every other person you meet in the street is a Christian, as if that somehow attests to the health of the C of E. Doubting Thomas, the Management Guru? At the very least he deserves to be made Patron Saint of performance management regimes.

But is measurement always so bad? Sometimes it can bring about great good. Witness the amazing strides being achieved in the reduction of child mortality rates in Africa. A focus on this metric has led to the widespread introduction of insecticide-treated mosquito nets, with the result that child mortality is now falling twice as fast as it did during the previous two decades.

But the risks of measurement are high. We have seen at first hand the damage that can be wrought by incentivising business executives with shares. This has led to the widespread manipulation of share price by fair means or foul. And the bonus culture has fuelled risk-taking in banking, leading to extraordinarily fierce and elaborate trading, and the invention of ever more complex ways to increase profits.

Do you remember the way we all chatted authoritatively about CDOs, or Collateralized Debt Obligations, at the height of the financial crisis? These fruits of the measurement culture in banking led to the downfall of the financial system in 2008. Recent blips have also been created by high-frequency trading, where computer algorithms make automatic trades, to take advantage of infinitesimal changes in asset prices over fractions of a second.

Perhaps this is just an argument for better and more elegant measures, which is certainly the Government's current approach in its attempts to cure the ills of the City through regulation. The bad news is that this obsession with measuring the world by reducing it to the sum total of the available evidence is endemic. More than just the gradual creep of managerial norms into all walks of life, it resides in the heart of our dominant ethical narrative, too. This is no accident, because the traditional capitalist emphasis on the transactional has grown up hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment's favourite ethic, Utilitarianism. This ethic, of course, holds that a moral act can be measured, actually in retrospect or theoretically in prospect, by the amount of 'good' it produces. ▶▶

▶▶ In economics this has become the ‘utility function’, whereby it is assumed that consumers are driven by a need to maximise the good for them personally in any given transaction. And because the modern State relies increasingly on public transparency for its legitimacy, economic and legal systems that are evidence-based are hugely compelling and politically popular.

Theologically, this evidence-based approach is more than just the triumph of Doubting Thomas. It echoes the Reformation’s famous fault-line between faith and works. Works are proof. Works can be measured. Works are convincing. They persuade other people, and – perhaps more crucially – the believer themselves, that their faith is real. Cathedral attendance up? Increasing numbers of church weddings? Legendary waiting lists for Church schools? These pieces of evidence get fired out in response to the doubters with monotonous regularity.

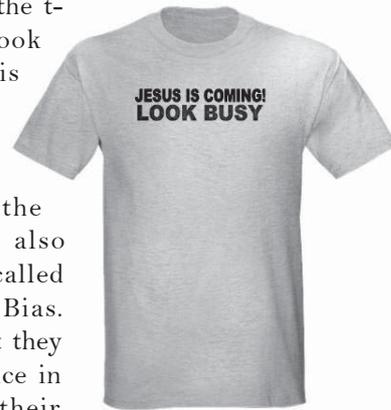


*Cathedral attendance up
Lichfield Cathedral with a full house*

But being this sort of Jew to the Jews and Greek to the Greeks massively misses the point. Indeed, it is the very things that flee measurement that have been found publicly lacking in recent years, as people lose their faith in the banks, in the politicians, in the newspapers, and in each other. Instead of competing for space in the public debate by going native, I think it is the scandalous nebulousness of religion that the world really needs the most. Because the discipline of faith

is, to coin a management phrase, the core competence of religion.

Let me say a little more about this. When someone is trying hard to believe something that they’re not very sure about, they do things to reassure themselves. For example, they do lots of behaving ‘as if’ so that nobody finds out about their doubts, least of all themselves. As the t-shirt has it, ‘look busy, Jesus is coming.’ If the belief is about a person or situation, the believer will also indulge in so-called Confirmatory Bias. This means that they seek out evidence in support of their meagre belief, largely ignoring contrary evidence, unless and until it achieves critical mass.



Religions know this pattern well. How do they school us in faith? First, they make belief a good thing, in and of itself (see Luther’s emphasis on *sola fides*). Next, they use liturgy to feed confirmatory bias, rehearsing faith narratives week by week and year by year, as a perpetual reminder. Additionally, they encourage believers to enact their faith in their everyday lives, the classic ‘fake it til you feel it’ strategy. To help, they use role models to show us the way. These may appear in the stories of holy scripture – whose re-telling is always a vital part of the liturgy – but are also retrieved from the centuries since, through the prophets and saints and other famous followers, many of whom enjoy dedicated memorials and feast days.

Inherently, the trump card in most religions is a reward or punishment strategy (heaven or hell) that kicks in after death. Because the afterlife is itself an article of faith, the concept serves to reinforce a religion’s entire mindset. Hence Pascal’s famous wager, or, as Parry so beautifully sets to music in today’s anthem, ‘eternal be the sleep if not to waken so.’ ▶▶

▶▶ The religion of Christianity is also helpfully hot on ambiguity, with a central figure who is somehow both God and man, dead and alive, historical and eternal. And don't get me started on the Trinity. This tendency towards ambiguity is compounded by the famous woolliness of Anglicanism.

Viz, again, provides a surprisingly good example of this tradition, in pillorying the Archbishop of Canterbury: "People have accused me of sitting on the fence about gayness, but now I'm firmly off the fence and able to sidestep the issue square on," he said, through his beard... "I can now categorically state that I am 100% unsure about the matter...In a sense, it seems to me that I can neither condone nor condemn it."

In the trade we would call ambiguity Anglicanism's meta-competence. Do you remember Lewis Carroll's White Queen? To paraphrase her, Anglicans are brilliant at believing as many as six impossible things before breakfast. And this is a very helpful strategy in the business of faith more generally.



The White Queen, who at the age of 7 ½ sometimes believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast

In the secular world, developing an ease with ambiguity is now considered a core life skill. If you canvass my business school colleagues, you will encounter a high degree of certainty about the need for modern leaders to embrace uncertainty! Loving shades of grey is not about the sort of book that has restored the fortunes of WH Smith. Rather, it is about the courage to entertain the unknown, and to hang back from the premature and presumptive leap to conclude.

Why? Because the future is less predictable than we suppose, and in an increasingly diverse and complex world we need to hold our hypotheses lightly. It helps, too, if we recognise this urge to resolve uncertainty for what it really is – the urge to control and to dominate.

This need to subdue the world around us by measuring it is recognised as a common trait in personality psychology. This holds that we demonstrate our competence and potency, indeed our very agency, by taming our surroundings. 'And Adam gave names to all the animals.' Not for nothing is there a tradition that possessing someone's name – Rumpelstiltskin? – gives you power over them.



Adam naming the creatures/Adam Llamo los Animales Currier & Ives, hand coloured lithograph print, 1847

And all you hippies out there may remember that this was a point famously made in that 70s publishing phenomenon *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, about our ego-driven need to carve things up into categories. Because certainty, along with its companions, evidence and measurement, is really arrogance. What happened when Job insisted on an explanation? 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?' roars God in response.

Anglican Liberalism has been very good at avoiding this sort of arrogance. For the theologian Christopher Insole, humility and a generosity towards others is what defines the liberal project. He calls this 'principled reticence', in which 'political liberals make room in their hearts and in the heart of society so as to allow for a diverse range of incompatible but humanely possible identifications of the good.'

Indeed, in any religion where omniscience is reserved to the divine, it could be argued that a faithful agnosticism is the theologically correct stance. As the father of the child in Mark 9:24 says, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Even Richard Dawkins is agnostic now. In his ▶▶

▶▶ Oxford debate with the Archbishop earlier this year, Dawkins admitted that he was only 6.9 out of 7 sure of his beliefs.

And in my view, the peculiar vocation of the Public Theologian is to be agnostic. To sit on the fence, and to stay there, until it becomes a communicating door. But in the marketplace, where I spend most of my time, the fence between the sacred and the secular has become a spiky, uncomfortable one, with anti-climb paint between the world of God and the world of Mammon. It has been said that it is easier in the workplace to admit that you're gay than to admit that you're a Christian. My secular friends tell me that if someone at work says they believe in God, people think that their judgement is generally more suspect, which can prove pretty career-limiting.

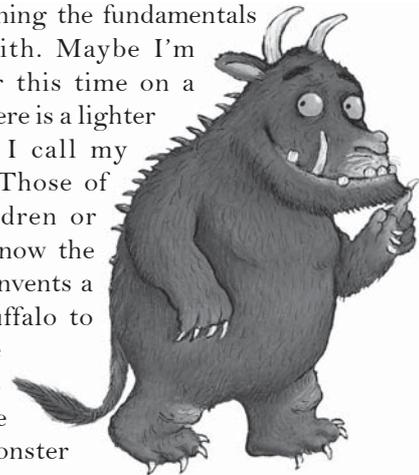
If being a public Christian might be costly in terms of career, sitting on the fence for a living can be existentially costly. The Jewish philosopher-mystic Simone Weil describes this as the 'dangerous and very painful' vocation to anonymity, being 'ever ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity'. For her, this anonymity extended to a refusal to be baptised when she converted to Christianity. She said that her grounds were that 'I cannot help still wondering whether, in these days when so large a proportion of humanity is submerged in materialism, God does not want there to be some men and women who have given themselves to him and to Christ, and who yet remain outside the church.'

Perhaps we do not need to go quite this far, but her emphasis on solidarity with those outside the faith is to me the essence of St Paul's approach 'to the Jews as a Jew'. It is not about duplicity, to go 'disguised' to the Jews or the Greeks, rather it is about respect and humility, and the archetypal 'walking a mile in their shoes.'

Agnosticism is above all else an orientation. When as part of my PhD here I spent some time analysing types of theology, I noticed that most theology is conducted either in the Indicative or the Imperative mood: 'I believe' or 'Thou shalt'. Where might the gaps be?

Very little theology, particularly in the public sphere, is conducted in either the interrogative or the subjunctive. Few questions, and little doubt. This may well be because it feels heretical or at least faithless to question or to doubt, like the hapless Thomas.

But the beauty of mood is that orientation does not necessarily bear any relation to reality. I can still believe in God most profoundly while carrying on my job as a theologian in questioning the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Maybe I'm getting too deep for this time on a Sunday morning, so here is a lighter example. It's what I call my 'Gruffalo Defence'. Those of you with small children or grandchildren may know the story. In it, a mouse invents a beast called the Gruffalo to frighten off would-be predators. Imagine his horror when he discovers that the monster



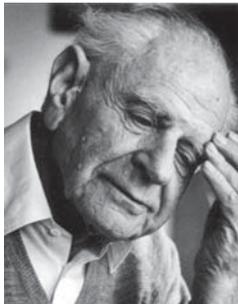
Gruffalo

really exists. The point is that whether or not God exists is not affected by our certainty. God does not get somehow bigger or more powerful just because more people believe more certainly in him. Let me ram this point home. Are there any Terry Pratchett fans out there? He wrote a book called *Small Gods* as an elaboration of this idea. In his Discworld, the size of each God is directly proportional to the number of believers they have. Those whose believers have dwindled have become, like TithMōnos in Greek Myth, just a disembodied voice in the desert.

This seems to be what we fear might happen to our God if we do not defend him loudly enough. But, as we have seen, there is something rather arrogant about certainty. This compulsion to prove God's existence is supremely well-intentioned, but it certainly seems to be more about us than about God. Modernity's Thomas-tendencies are not a call to the faithful. Rather, they are a snare for the unwary. They are a distraction and, if we could better see them ▶▶

▶▶ as such, perhaps we could turn back to more productive ways of being Christian.

Have you heard of the famous poker incident? It took place in 1946 just over the road, in H3 in the Gibbs building at King's. Wittgenstein and Popper were arguing about problems and puzzles. Wittgenstein felt so strongly about it that he reportedly threatened Popper with a poker. Popper's essential point was this. There are solvable things, like mathematical problems, and

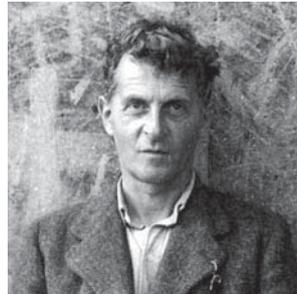


Karl Popper

there are un-solvable things, which are the proper concern of philosophy. To muddle them is to commit a category error.

It is also not a very practical way to spend one's time. While as a theologian, speaking in Cambridge, I would defend to the death the importance of pondering the imponderable, for the everyday Christian this distinction is salutary. One could spend a lot of one's day wondering whether or not one actually existed, there being no proof for realism. But that wouldn't get the laundry done or the tea on the table. So most of us just Keep Calm and Carry On.

The same applies, in my view, to the debate on the existence of God. Back to Wittgenstein, famous for his notion of 'language games'. He argued that languages, and conventions within languages, are like different games. You wouldn't use a snooker cue to hole a golf-ball, as this would be to confuse two different sets of rules. In the same way, you wouldn't normally construct a sentence half in French and half in German. Language is intended to correspond to reality, but the way it does so necessarily depends on the context (the country or 'game') in which it is being used, and the rules this implies. And everything is a language game, really, driven by a fairly haphazard combination of location and convention. I think this is a very releasing concept for public theology, because theology is a particular sort of 'game', in this sense. It would certainly stop the likes of Dawkins in



Ludwig Wittgenstein

their tracks, if we were to deny them the oxygen of outrage. Instead we could respond with a rather Gallic shrug. 'You say tomâdo and I say tomato.' We're just playing by different sets of rules. And the rules of the language game that is religion are perfectly designed to inculcate faithfulness.

Wouldn't it be better for the faithful to use their skill at it, on the solvable, rather than the un-solvable? I think we would have some really useful things to say about the collapse in public trust, and about how best to rebuild our broken society.

So, back to my title. Do you reckon Thomas was a guru or a bore? Perhaps both, or either, or neither. He certainly wasn't your typical Anglican. And amidst this modern clamour for certainty I would argue that a studied diffidence towards evidence is the most heroic and useful mode for us Christians to adopt.

Of course, the supreme irony of recent times has to be the Higgs boson. Like Macavity, it's not there. It can only be proved by its absence, an infinitesimally small 'decay signature', that suggests that it might once have been. In defiance of *habeas corpus*, this proof, *in absentia*, is likely to be the most exciting scientific event of the age.

And if even the scientists are convinced by absence these days, I think it's time for us Anglicans to sidle absent-mindedly into the limelight. It's time we started a better conversation. Perhaps we might start by making more use of the subjunctive. And could we ask the world better questions about how to be more faithful?

Like Thomas, we could obsess about whether or not we could put our fingers through Christ's wounds. Or, we could instead wonder about what Christ's wounds actually meant. And we can do so with confidence, with John's words ringing in our ears: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' Amen. ■

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