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The below text is as Newbigin presented it orally (with the title *A Decent Debate on Doctrine*, not *about doctrine*), and not the lightly revised version published by *Gear*. *"A Decent Debate about Doctrine"*: *Faith, Doubt and Certainty*. Plymouth (U.K.): GEAR Publications, 1993.

"A Decent Debate on Doctrine"

A talk given at the meeting of the URC Bromley District Council
on Tuesday 13th July 1993, by Lesslie Newbigin

The title is, of course, taken from Norman Hart's leader in the June issue of *Reform*. The background is the publication of the GEAR statement of faith, and the rather odd letter from a group of Manchester ministers, who said - in effect - "Please, please don't let us discuss what we believe; it will split the URC". This led to a spate of letters which in effect, asked: "What are these Manchester ministers frightened of? Let us have a decent debate about doctrine."

Since then, during last week's Assembly in Portsmouth, the Moderator has vigorously weighed in to the debate with an eloquent affirmation of his commitment to the tradition of theological liberalism - the tradition in which I, and most of us, were shaped. So the debate has begun, and we must continue the debate. If we are not willing to discuss what we believe, we shall find ourselves simply echoing the ideas of contemporary society, the ideas which are taken for granted in the media. Then our preaching will be (as some complain that it is) mere platitudes. So let us have a decent debate on doctrine.

At the heart of the Moderator's address is the affirmation that "after every statement of belief ... the preacher should add 'But I may have got it wrong'". I waited to see whether the Moderator would conclude his passionate affirmation of belief in the liberal tradition with the words "But I may have got it wrong". He did not, but he did propose as the symbol for his vision for the URC a question mark. Graham Cook had chosen the rainbow as symbol, Malcolm Hanson the wind driving the ship, and Ruth Clarke the open door. Donald Hilton proposes, for his year of office, the mark of interrogation.

In other words, he is asking us to keep an open mind. And what can be wrong with that? This is the very heart of the venerable tradition of theological liberalism. But it is very hard for those who stand in that tradition to recognize that the question mark has to be put against the whole tradition. It is hard to recognize that "Every dogma must be open to question" is itself a dogma which must be open to question. The strength of the liberal tradition is its openness to new truth and its willingness to question old beliefs. But does our human situation permit us to make this the fundamental principle of our theology?

During my faltering journey from agnosticism to faith, in my student days, I came across in an essay of William James a little parable which had a profound effect on my thinking. James pictured a man climbing a cliff. Suddenly his holds begin to slip. He is in danger of falling. Close by, there is a tree growing out of a cleft in the rock. If he leaves his holds and grabs the tree, will it bear his weight? There are only two possibilities - stay where he is, or trust the tree. There is no third possibility. There is no way of keeping an open mind. It is what James calls a closed option. Whatever his decision he may "get it wrong". But one, thing is certain: he has to decide one way or the other, and in doing so, he commits his life to the decision.

This little parable uncovers the vast unproved and unprovable assumption of liberalism, namely that the cosmos is so constituted that we can keep an open mind on the ultimate question, which is: "What is the ultimate reality with which I have to do?" The liberal presupposition cannot be proved. It is at least possible that life is a more serious business, with more serious issues.

The debate we have to have is about certainty, faith and doubt and their respective roles in the total enterprise of understanding the world. Liberalism is the quintessential product of that movement of thought variously known as "The Age of Reason" and "The Enlightenment", and at the dawn of that movement stands the seminal figure of Descartes. Descartes lived in an age of doubt. The ideas introduced by Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler and others had shaken what seemed to be absolute certainties. Things which no one had ever doubted were now in doubt. Where can we find certainty, a solid foothold? It was a cardinal of the church who spotted a bright young philosopher in Paris and gave him a commission to produce an indubitable proof of the existence of God; and Descartes fulfilled the commission to the satisfaction of the theologians of the Sorbonne. As we all know, his method had three steps:

1. Begin with something which cannot be doubted. I cannot doubt my own existence as a thinking being. "I think, therefore I am".
2. Proceed from this by logical arguments which have the clarity and certainty of mathematics.
3. Whatever can be proved as indubitably certain by these methods is certain truth. Whatever cannot be so proved may be a matter of belief but it is not knowledge. It follows that the way to certain knowledge is to apply these methods to every truth-claim, and by critical questioning eliminate everything which is merely belief so that we can build on certain truth.

The method of Descartes was to shape the intellectual life of Europe for at least three centuries. It had many side effects which, if there were time, we might look at. It created three dualisms which have become integral parts of the thinking of the "modern" world: the dualism of mind and matter ("spiritual and material"), of subjective and objective, of theory and practice. All these dualisms are wholly foreign to the Bible but they shape our thinking so powerfully that it is only through a very long soaking of the mind in the world of the Bible that one begins to see that they all falsify our understanding of reality.

But I do not want to discuss these side-effects now. The most important element in Descartes' method from the point of view of this debate is his famous "critical principle" - the principle that the way to arrive at truth is to doubt every truth-claim which cannot be certainly proved beyond the possibility of doubt. This has created the dichotomy which is characteristic of "modernity", namely the division between a world of "objective facts" which everyone is expected to know, and a world of beliefs and values, which are matters of personal opinion but not part of public truth. In matters of "faith" one always has to say "But I may have got it wrong". In matters of "fact", you do not. School textbooks in

science do not end with the formula "But we may have got it wrong". The children are expected to believe that it is true.

But Descartes' programme for knowledge has, paradoxically, led western culture deeper and deeper into the shadow of scepticism. The "critical principle" eats like an acid into any firm convictions about ultimate reality. Walter Lippman 50 years ago was writing about "the acids of modernity". Immanuel Kant, the greatest thinker of the Enlightenment, concluded that ultimate reality must be unknowable and that we can never know more than the appearance, the phenomena. This has become one of the unquestioned assumptions of modern society. Any claim to speak confidently about God is dismissed as improper. Ultimate reality is unknowable. That is simply obvious and unarguable.

But, exactly here, we have to apply the liberal principle and ask some questions. "How do you know that ultimate reality is unknowable? Tell me your sources of information. For you can only say that ultimate reality is unknowable if you know what ultimate reality is! Your statement is self-contradictory. God, (the ultimate reality) might have chosen to make himself known. There are no grounds (except prejudice) on which you can question this. This self-contradiction is inherent in the critical principle itself, for you can only offer rational criticism of a proposition on the basis of other propositions which you believe to be true and which, at that moment, you do not criticize. Thus the critical principle has to be turned on the critical principle itself.

The person who saw where this must lead was that strange prophet Nietzsche towards the end of the 19th century (the great century of liberalism). He saw that the relentless application of the critical principle must destroy the possibility of making any truth-claims at all. "True" and "false" would become unusable words. The only reality is the will - the will to power. And so we come to the 20th century with the post-modernists, the deconstructionists, the New Agers, who have rejected the great Enlightenment vision of universal reason, emancipation and justice as self-evident truths. Now the talk is of "regimes of truth". At different times different groups acquire power to impose their "truth" on society. That is all. There is no truth which can judge these regimes. Here is the paradox: Descartes' search for absolute certainty has led us to total scepticism.

Our debate is about certainty, faith and doubt. Descartes sought certainty by the method of doubt, and distinguished certain knowledge from matters of faith. Let me go back 12 centuries behind Descartes to another man who stands at the beginning of a new age. Augustine of Hippo lived amid the crumbling of the great classical tradition (of which he was a master) and opened the way for a new tradition which was to shape Europe for nearly 1,000 years. Augustine had been trained a professor in the imperial University in the methods of classical rationality. But, as a converted servant of Jesus, he defined the relation between faith and knowledge in a radically different way. "I believe in order to know" (*Credo ut intelligam*). Faith is not what you fall back on when you don't know. On the contrary, faith is the only way of knowing. If you reflect you will see that this is so. We do not come to know anything except by believing in something. We have to believe the evidence of our touch and sight and hearing. We learn to speak by trusting our parents. We begin to learn any subject by believing what the authorized teachers and textbooks tell us. Without this initial act of faith, we could never learn to know anything. Later we may come to question some of what we believed, but we can only come to do that because of other things that we have come to know by the same route. Faith is the way we come to know it; it the only way. We only come to know through an apprenticeship to a tradition of knowing.

The tradition to which Augustine became an apprentice was the tradition embodied in the biblical story of God's dealing with the world and the human race. Within that tradition he ranged over human

experience in order to understand it. And this way of relating faith to knowledge shaped Europe into a coherent society.

Eight hundred years after Augustine, Europe was shaken to its depths by a different concept of knowledge. The world of Islam, a much more developed society than Western Europe, had taken classical thought into its theological system. When, in the 10th and 11th centuries, the great Muslim commentaries on Aristotle were translated into Latin, this created a great ferment. "The Philosopher" as Aristotle was usually called, was offering a different approach to knowledge, based on reasoning and observation and not depending upon revelation. How was this approach to knowledge to be related to the biblical Augustinian tradition? Would it simply displace it, or could they be held together?

The great work of Thomas Aquinas was to effect a synthesis which would shape European thought for centuries. From our present point of view, the main point is that Aquinas distinguished two different kinds of knowledge: there were things that could be known by reason alone, such as the existence of God and the soul. There were other things which could only be known through revelation accepted in faith - such as the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Trinity. This putting apart of faith and reason has shaped our thinking ever since. The split went through the heart of theology, since the "God" whose existence is proved by reason is not the God who meets us in the Bible and certainly not the Blessed Trinity. So which is the real God? This question haunts our Christian thought to this day.

But the fundamental problem is created by the putting apart of what Augustus had held together. It is easy to see how it set the conditions for the work of Descartes. Yet the work of modern philosophers of science has shown how the work of science, the greatest achievement of Europe since Descartes, is dependent on faith commitments which cannot be proved in advance and which were developed by Christian theologians of the 4th century often in direct contradiction of Aristotle. (It is one of the little ironies of history that when Galileo affirmed that the moon was made of the same material as the earth and was condemned by the Church, he was saying what the early Church fathers had said and the Church was following Aristotle). But, to speak more generally, we have to affirm that all rational discourse of any kind depends on things which are accepted as given ("the data") and on assumptions which we all accept. Without this, rational discourse is impossible. But these data and these assumptions are always open to question. But if our thinking is to start, and if it is to get anywhere, it has to accept something as a starting point. Christian theology is that form of rational discourse which takes as given, as its starting point, the story which the Bible tells of God's acts in creation, redemption and consummation.

It follows that, if we accept the liberal invitation to question all statements of faith, we must always ask: "On the basis of what assumptions are these questions asked?" May I take one example? The Moderator tells us that we must be open to the questions raised by people like the Bishop of Durham, John Hick and Don Cupitt. Each of these represents a very different standpoint, but let us take John Hick. Readers of "The Myth of God Incarnate" will remember that this book suggests that the Christian tradition cannot be accepted as truth since it is simply impossible to think of God as a babe in a cradle or a man on a cross. As I read the book I was asking myself "But where does Hick get his idea of God? What grounds are there for believing that this "God" exists?" The answer, of course, is that the "God" of whom Hick speaks is the "God" of natural theology. Personally I do not believe in the existence of this "God". It is a product of human reasoning but not a reality. Hick is often spoken of as a radical theologian because he questions the Christian tradition. From my point of view Hick is a conservative because it never seems to occur to him to question the reigning popular idea of God. It is typical of these so-called "radical theologians" that they are popular with the media precisely because they do not

question the dominant intellectual establishments. But Christians are called to be nonconformists, dissenters, radicals who do challenge the most "obvious" assumptions that govern society.

But this name-calling is unhelpful. The point I am making is that when questions are asked, one must always ask "What are the assumptions behind the question?" We must agree with the liberal in rejecting the kind of certainty which claims to possess the whole truth, which has a mind closed against new truth, or against questions about old truth. But in demanding an open mind, we must be careful that we are not producing a mind that is open at both ends. The closed mind admits nothing new. The mind open at both ends admits everything but finally holds nothing. It has no firm beliefs at all. That is the danger in the liberal tradition. I think it explains why churches in the liberal tradition all over the world are in steep decline, leaving the field to those who have strong (sometimes narrow) convictions.

We are talking about certainty, faith and doubt. What are the roles of faith and doubt in trying to reach certainty? Both have a role, but faith is primary and doubt is secondary and derivative. We do not begin to know anything except by believing something. But we cannot believe everything. We have to use our critical faculty, the capacity to doubt. But this doubting (if it is not wholly irrational) has to be based on things which we believe to be true. What, then, shall we say about certainty?

I think we must distinguish between two kinds of certainty. We have to reject the kind of certainty which leads to a closing of the mind against new truth, a kind of certainty which claims to possess indubitable and irreformable truth. Such certainty is not on offer for fallible human beings, and there is surely something absurd about the stance of a Descartes who can claim to have indubitable knowledge of God without the grace of God.

But there is another kind of certainty which is expressed in the apostolic words "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep what he has entrusted to me against that day." Note three things about this statement. (1) The confidence is not in the competence of my own knowing but in the faithfulness of the one whom I know. The centre of confidence is out there, not here. (2) The knowledge that I have is his gift. He has entrusted it to me. It is a matter of grace. (3) I am looking to the future. I am still a pilgrim on the way. I do not know everything. But I look for a day when I shall know as I am known.

The heart of the matter is that knowledge cannot be severed from grace. The temptation of liberalism is to think that we are by nature free minds, and that free minds, unfettered by tradition or external authority, can find the truth. But we are not naturally free. We are in bondage to sin and alienated from the truth. That is the terrible reality which is placarded before our eyes in the crucifixion of the living Word of God. And so Jesus says: "If you continue in my teaching you will truly be my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free". We do not come to the truth by free enquiry; we have to be set free by the truth. It is significant that this is the point at which Jesus' hearers took up stones to kill him. The claim that we are not free to find the truth for ourselves creates the deepest possible resentment. The truth of the claim was demonstrated on Calvary.

So with our Moderator, I end with the words of Jesus: "I am the way, the true and living way". (The liberal will always hesitate to complete the quotation: "No one comes to the Father but by me"). We do not claim to possess certain truth, but are committed to follow him who *is* the truth in the confidence that in following him we shall be led into the fullness of the truth. This is not an indubitable certainty which closes my mind to further truth. But it is an absolute commitment to which I do not add the words: "But I may have got it wrong".