

Encountering the Truth in Doubt

In his essay on Pyrotheology and psychoanalysis, Tad DeLay carefully draws out how psychoanalytic theory in general and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular have influenced my work. Along the way, he offers the reader a way of understanding Lacan's claim that 'God is unconscious' (1981, p. 59), explicitly connecting it with Pyrotheology and Transformance Art. He begins by mentioning how my work was an early influence on him, and I feel it is only right to return the compliment and say that his work is now proving to be an influence on me. But DeLay also asks a question concerning the way I think about anxiety and doubt. He goes on to note three possible paths I might take, and correctly anticipates my response by suggesting I will want to drive a wedge between the idea of *choosing* doubt and the idea of *embracing* it.

The concept of anxiety is a rather complicated one in psychoanalysis, but it is broadly connected to the idea of loss. In contrast to fear, which is directed at some *thing* in the world, anxiety articulates a feeling experienced in the confrontation with the loss of something, a loss that is weaponised against us. For Tillich, anxiety can be seen concretely in people's experience of guilt (falling short of some ideal), meaninglessness (the lack of meaning) and death (the loss of life) (2000, pp. 42-53). Inasmuch as doubt represents a lack of certainty, it would seem to fit with Tillich's category of meaninglessness. Doubt threatens us with a sense that our present worldview doesn't give us answers and it might even cause us to wonder if any system of belief could do any better. Here, we experience what Albert Camus (1955) called the absurd; namely, the experience we have when our desire for meaning confronts a sense that there is no meaning to be had. Properly speaking, this concrete manifestation of lack isn't something one *chooses*; it is better to say that it is often what we try desperately to protect ourselves from. The desire to protect oneself from anxiety can be glimpsed, for instance, in the religious believer obsessed with apologetics, rehearsing every argument for a young earth, collecting all the evidence they can for a physical resurrection, and memorising all the arguments for the existence of God. While there could be any number of reasons for this behaviour, the obsessive nature of the pursuit could signal a desire to erase or obscure doubts that are socially unacceptable and profoundly destabilising. The hatred of doubt is the very guise behind which a very real doubt exists.

In my response to Osinski, I wrote that the truth of Christianity is located in the experience of original sin understood as a felt loss of an absolute dependence. My early work was premised on the idea that the main way this anxiety was manifested in the contemporary church was in the form of doubt, and that the church responded to this anxiety by shoring up the defenses against it through apologetics. The doubt was there, but it was not embraced. By contrast, ikon encouraged people to face and embrace this doubt rather than develop elaborate strategies to protect themselves from it. Doubt was a potential vehicle or tool for those wishing to tarry with what DeLay calls ‘the personal, religious, political and epistemic anxieties common to all’. For the religious believer today, the issue at stake is not to *choose* to doubt but to choose to *embrace* the doubt that is already at work.