




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Shades of faith: the phenomenon of doubt in early Christianity

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Abstract

‘Faith’ (*pistis*) is a key term in early Christianity. It not only describes the self-understanding of an individual Christ-follower, but also operates as the social marker of the Christ-groups. Rather than adding to the renaissance of studies on faith in recent years, this article seeks to illuminate what faith is by focusing on the phenomenon of doubt, broadly understood. After some linguistic reflections, the article identifies six basic types of doubt in early Christian writings and then compiles eighteen coping strategies and patterns of resilience reflected in the most prominent texts. The article is not an attempt at systematizing early Christian reflections on doubt but is rather a cornucopia of insights into how the first Christian theologians talked about doubt, dealt with it, and tried to overcome it.

Keywords: trust; faith; belief; doubt; double-mindedness; resilience; early Christianity; new testament theology

Introduction

‘Faith’ (*pistis*) is a key term in early Christianity. No Jewish or Greco-Roman text uses the *pistis*-lexicon as intensively as the New Testament and other early Christian writings. ‘Faith’ not only describes the self-understanding of an individual Christ-follower, but also operates as the social marker of the Christ-groups.¹ The explosive increase in *pistis*-language corresponds to the centrality of Jesus: faith relates both to the person of Jesus, to his words and deeds, but also to what God has done in Christ, specifically to the resurrection. In short, for early Christians ‘faith in God’ is reshaped and transformed into ‘faith in Christ’. Rather than adding to the welcome and important renaissance of studies on faith in recent years,² this article seeks to illuminate what faith is by focusing on doubt – fellow combatant and companion of faith, or necessary evil and arch enemy? After some linguistic reflections, I identify six basic types of doubt in early Christian writings and then compile eighteen coping strategies and patterns of resilience reflected in the most prominent texts.³ This article is not, first and foremost, an attempt at systematizing early Christian reflections on doubt but is rather a cornucopia of insights into how the first Christian theologians talked about doubt, dealt with it, and tried to overcome it.

What is doubt? Everyday language and the New Testament lexicon of doubt

What is doubt? When we turn to standard dictionaries, we find Merriam-Webster explaining doubt as ‘a feeling or attitude that one does not know the truth, truthfulness, or trustworthiness of someone or something’.⁴ The notion of ‘knowing the truth’ sets the bar high. The *Oxford English Dictionary* places a slightly different emphasis and defines doubt as ‘the (subjective) state of uncertainty with regard to the truth or reality of anything; undecidedness of belief or opinion’, with the addition that the plural ‘doubts’ expresses ‘a feeling of uncertainty as to something’.⁵ Notably, both definitions include the concept of truth as the referent of doubt. I find Dan Howard-Snyder’s more intricate approach helpful, for he proposes to distinguish ‘having doubts about something’ from ‘being in doubt about it’, and to distinguish both of them from ‘doubting that something is the case’.

As for doubt, we must distinguish *having doubts* about whether p from *being in doubt* about whether p, and both of them from *doubting* that p. For one to *have doubts* about whether p – note the ‘s’ – is for one to have what appear to one to be grounds to believe not-p and, as a result, for one to be at least somewhat inclined to disbelieve p. For one to be *in doubt* about whether p is for one neither to believe nor disbelieve p as a result of one’s grounds for p seeming to be roughly on a par with one’s grounds for not-p. One can have doubts without being in doubt, and one can be in doubt without having doubts. Having doubts and being in doubt are not to be identified with doubting that. If one *doubts* that something is so, one is at least strongly inclined to disbelieve it; having doubts and being in doubt lack that implication.⁶

(Howard-Snyder (2013), 359)

All three modes share the idea that doubt is a feeling, disposition or state of uncertainty, an intrapersonal conflict between two positions, both of which might possibly be true.⁷

It will not come as a surprise that early Christians expressed and experienced their doubt(s) differently than we do today. The presuppositions and styles of thought, the strategies and lines of argumentation, the assessments and taxonomies of doubt are not the same in the early years of the Jesus movement and nowadays. When the first Christian generations reflected on faith and doubt, they did so in an experimental manner. Their discovery of religious faith (*pistis*) as their key identity marker also yielded epiphenomena such as uncertainty, wavering, hesitation, double-mindedness, doubt, etc. Furthermore, their exploration of a novel cosmos of meaning also created and shaped language.⁸

In the New Testament writings, the expressions for ‘doubt’ common in classical/Hellenistic Greek are almost completely absent, with the sole exception of the Matthean *distazein* (Matt. 14:31; 28:17). This is remarkable, for there was no lack of Greek terms.⁹ Apparently, they did not find any of these other terms that were available to them adequate to express quite the concern(s) that they had in mind. The most intriguing entries in the early Christian doubt lexicon are the three terms *dipsychos/dipsychia* (= ‘double-minded[ness]’), *oligopistos/oligopistia* (= ‘[of] little faith’), and *diakrinesthai*.¹⁰

1. The word group *dipsych-* contains numerous enigmas. It is not attested in any source prior to the New Testament, neither in pagan Greco-Roman literature nor in Hellenistic Jewish writings. The adjective *dipsychos* first appears in the Letter of James (Jas. 1:8; 4:8). In the Apostolic Fathers, there is one instance of the *dipsych-*family in the Didache (Did. 4:4), one in the Epistle of Barnabas (Barn. 19.5), and six in the two Clementine Letters (1 Clem. 11.2; 23.2; 23.3; 2 Clem. 11.2; 11.5; 19.2);

the *Shepherd of Hermas* wins the palm with a total of fifty-five references. Some have suggested that *dipsychos* is a 'Christian term', possibly invented by James. However, it is more likely that it entered early Christian texts via two independent sources: the lost apocryphal writing *Eldad and Modad* (Jas.; Herm.; 1 Clem.; 2 Clem.) (Bauckham (2012)) and a lost version of the Two Ways teaching (Did.; Barn.).¹¹

2. The origin of the lexemes *oligopistos/oligopistia* lies in the dark as well. In classical/Hellenistic Greek, they are not attested. Chronologically, the noun first appears in the Q source (Luke 12:28//Matt. 6:30) and became a favourite word of Matthew (Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). Matthew consistently assigns 'little faith' to the disciples, whereas outsiders are characterized by *apistia* ('lack of faith', 'distrust', 'unbelief') (cf. Matt. 13:58).¹² Most probably, the words are early Christian neologisms,¹³ rooted in a Palestinian-Jewish linguistic milieu where comparable phrases denote an inadequate confidence in God's goodness and miraculous power.
3. Almost all exegetes and translators consider the verb *diakrīnesthai* to be '[t]he most frequent term for doubt in the NT' (Atkins (2019), 63 n. 125). The word occurs in key New Testament passages, and the most common translations render it with 'doubt' or the like: 'Abraham *did not doubt* concerning the promise of God' (Rom. 4:20). 'But *those who have doubts* are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' (Rom. 14:23) etc.¹⁴ But these translations are doubtful indeed! There is *no* evidence in contemporaneous texts that *diakrīnesthai* takes on the meaning 'doubt'. Rather, lexica list other meanings, most importantly 'to be divided' or 'divisive', 'to contend', and 'to dispute' (Spitaler (2007), 1f.). 'To doubt' is not part of this spectrum, as doubt is an intrapersonal conflict, while *diakrīnesthai* denotes an interpersonal conflict. As a linguistic principle, we should try to make sense of the texts *without* presupposing a special New Testament meaning. As will become clear in the following I suggest alternative understandings of these passages according to this principle: when using *diakrīnesthai*, the New Testament authors do not have in mind a doubting, diffident, scrupulous inner attitude but rather a divisive, contentious, discordant act towards other persons or God.

So, overall, the early Christian writings document linguistic creativity and fluidity when it comes to (reflecting on) faith and concomitant phenomena such as doubt and double-mindedness. Doubt-language is no less complex and multifaceted than faith-language, only that doubt has not received as much attention.

A typology of doubt in early Christianity

A typology of doubt in early Christianity will choose other categories than contemporary philosophical and theological approaches. Methodological doubt in the style of Descartes, for example, plays no role in the New Testament, while doubt as an existential challenge is essential. I am aware that the following typology pushes the boundaries of our everyday language as well as the philosophical use of the term 'doubt'. With double-mindedness (*dipsychia*), which is a close neighbour in early Christian texts, a markedly ethical category enters the scene that in fact plays no role in the current discourse about doubt. 'Doubt' in the comprehensive sense is located in processes of individual and collective identity construction in the early Jesus movement and expresses itself in cognitive, emotional, evaluative, and ethical dissonances. The Christ groups had to grapple with competing plausibilities within the Greco-Roman majority society and stand their ground as a new religious movement, setting up and upholding a fresh arrangement of values and beliefs and practices.¹⁵

Six basic types of doubt can be distinguished: (1) doubt as an impossible possibility, (2) doubt as an intellectual challenge, (3) doubt as a theoretical problem, (4) doubt as an ethical problem, (5) doubt as an *Existenzial*, (6) doubt as an ecclesiological marker of identity.

Paul: doubt as an 'impossible possibility'

For the apostle Paul, doubt as a mental state oscillating between *pistis* and *apistia* has no place. Paul urges theological and ethical unambiguity; the 'either-or' dominates: either a person participates in the spheres of flesh, sin, and law¹⁶ or in the salvific spheres of spirit, righteousness, and faith. A person is either in Adam or in Christ.¹⁷ A third sphere might be theoretically conceivable but practically it is not an option. Paul does not participate in a discourse on the psychology of doubt; he does not follow in the footsteps of Philo of Alexandria, his great contemporary.¹⁸ Applying the linguistic principle mentioned in regard to the verb *diakrinesthai*, we should be reluctant to introduce the notion of doubt into the passages of Romans. Contrary to popular opinion, he is not interested in confirming that Abraham 'did not doubt' the promise (Rom. 4:20), nor in announcing judgment to 'the doubter' who eats meat (14:23). A thorough exegesis of the two passages shows that Paul does not have in mind intrapersonal duality ('doubt'), but interpersonal division. This conforms to the common meaning of the verb *diakrinesthai* in classical/Hellenistic Greek: Abraham, did not act divisively or contentiously towards God's promise, falling back into the realm of *apistia* ('faithlessness', 'distrust', 'unbelief'). And the meat-eater is warned not to divide the community by his behaviour, falling prey to the power of sin (Schliesser (2012, 2021)). Importantly, even after his vocational experience the apostle remains a zealot, who wants to eradicate mixtures and impurities and intolerantly confronts the ambiguities of faith. In terms of religious psychology, Paul exemplifies the convert for whom doubt and dissonance are not an option.¹⁹ Existence 'in Christ' and 'in faith' is not a gradual growth, but the result of a comprehensive transformation, in Paul's words: 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17).

Hebrews: doubt as a lack of understanding

In striking contrast to Paul, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews does not conceive of faith as the essence of a new understanding of reality but emphasizes the cognitive function of *pistis*.²⁰ The rationality of faith eliminates doubt. Granted, faith gives stability and identity to the addressees, but even more importantly, faith must regain plausibility in a community riddled with doubt. The author presses his readers to realize that faith is without alternative and, consequently, doubt is an 'impossible possibility' – though not, as in Paul, in existential-ontological but in cognitive terms: if you attend carefully to the rationality of faith, you will be convinced. Doubt and disbelief are impossible, for the reasons for faith are too good. The author acknowledges that the community is fatigued and receptive to objections, but they have not given up their attentiveness to the reasons for faith. After all, others before them including Jesus himself (Heb. 5:7–8; 12:1–3) withstood the challenges and remained resilient.

The main challenge of the author is to negotiate the tension between the rational and irrational aspects of faith. He seeks to make faith intellectually attractive for educated believers in a city like Rome. In doing so, he combines theological innovation with the depth of tradition, linguistic creativity with intellectual boldness. The Letter to the Hebrews radiates 'intellectual charm' and distinguishes itself within early Christian writings by imagining faith as a 'drama of thinking' (Backhaus (2009), 14, 17). Its rationality of faith is epitomized by the Platonizing idea that faith means 'being convinced by things unseen' (Heb. 11:1b). Among early Christian writings, Hebrews' strategy of overcoming doubt by aiming at the intellect is unique.

John: doubt as an empirical problem

With the figure of Thomas, the author of John's Gospel creates a multi-layered personality whose path of faith runs through errors and misunderstandings toward the highest confession of Christ (John 20:28: 'My Lord and my God!'). Somewhat bluntly, one could argue that the archetype of theoretical doubt from the Christian point of view is Thomas (Hübner (2004), 10).

His epithet Didymos ('twin') subtly reflects his double-entendre character: in his three appearances in the Gospel of John, he is portrayed as ambivalent and ignorant, making blatantly inappropriate statements. First, in his fatalistic request 'Let us also go to die with him (sc. Lazarus)' (John 11:16), he doubts the perspective of a good end which Jesus had presented shortly before. Second, his rhetorical question, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?' (14:5) reflects doubts about the eschatological image which Jesus had just painted before the disciples' eyes, and Thomas is the first to step forward and admit the nakedness of his uncertainty. Finally, the 'sudden, drastic violence of his reply' (Most (2005), 45) in the face of the disciples' Easter testimony strikes an inappropriate tone and reveals fundamental doubt: 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe' (20:25).

Thomas tarries between faith and unbelief until – finally and abruptly – faith gains the upper hand when Jesus fulfils the conditions defined by Thomas himself and when Thomas not only sees but also touches (Schliesser (2017b)). Now he responds to Jesus' challenge, 'Do not be unbelieving, but believing' (20:27), and his ambivalence, his twin attitude, turns into an unambiguous expression of faith. The 'revelatory dynamic' of the Gospel, expressed in dualistic forms of thought, reaches its goal: Thomas breaks through to the light and believes.²¹

James and Hermas: doubt as an ethical problem

Doubt figures as an ethical problem in the Epistle of James, where the expressions, 'doubt' and 'ethical' are to be understood in a broad sense. James warns against a split in a believer's ethos, against a dual orientation of one's values, convictions, attitudes, and practices. He incriminates this type of person, who lacks the desired and required perfection, calling them 'divided one' (*diakrinomenos*) and 'double-minded one' (*dipsychos*) (Jas. 1:6, 8; 4:8). According to the author's conviction, they are inconsistent, both in a horizontal and in a vertical direction, toward their fellow believers and toward God. They resemble a wave of the sea that is tossed back and forth as if whipped up by a bellows (1:6). Agitators and troublemakers are 'desire' (1:14–15) and 'cravings' (4:1). In contrast, wholeness and perfection are the goal of Christian existence, in correspondence to the whole and perfect nature of God. Ultimately, the 'double-minded person' (1:8) and the 'perfect person' (3:2) oppose each other.

The *Shepherd of Hermas*, which is probably dependent on the Epistle of James, reads in parts like a free improvisation on 'double-mindedness'. In an apocalyptically stylized scene, it mutates into a monster, threatens the believer, and wants to devour him (Herm. vis. 4). Of course, double-mindedness is a 'cosmic' problem only at first glance, for the overall parenetic orientation completely overrides the apocalyptic-cosmic dimension. The apocalyptic is little more than a dramatic means to a parenetic end. In sum, double-mindedness symbolizes the altogether calamitous condition of a person. It is defined as

a spirit from the devil that assails the baptized, creating an internal condition of debilitating discord and doubt, from which a variety of vices and spiritual maladies arise. *διψυχία* [*dipsychia*] leaves a person spiritually unfit: familiar with failure,

frustrated in prayer, preoccupied with the affairs of this age, and anxious about the future. To be doubleminded is to lack faith. (Robinson (2010), 306)

Double-mindedness is the opposite of simplicity. The double-minded person constantly vacillates between two attitudes; in the end, they doubt and despair of God himself (Herm. mand. 9.5).

Mark: *doubt as an Existenzial*

The healing narrative about the epileptic boy in Mark 9:14–29 is actually a narrative of faith and doubt. The dialogue between the father of the epileptic child and Jesus, the dazzling statement of Jesus about the omnipotence of faith (9:23: ‘All things are possible for the one who believes’) and the father’s paradoxical confession (9:24: ‘I believe! Help my lack of faith [*apistia*]!’) catch the readers’ attention and display a high degree of reflection, a realistic view of the challenge of faith, but also theological boldness. The exclamation ‘I believe!’ (9:24) is exceptional also due to the fact that a believer confesses his/her faith in the first person. There is only one linguistic equivalent in the entire New Testament.²² The fact that the father’s confession is immediately followed by that of his *apistia* (‘lack of faith’, ‘distrust’, ‘unbelief’) creates a unique tension. Theologically speaking, this inner conflict, this ‘doubt’, appears as an existential feature of believing existence, an *Existenzial* in the Heideggerian sense, like care and anxiety. Notably, however, doubt does not prevent healing and is not criticized by the healer. ‘The father of the epileptic boy is therefore, in this double-mindedness, a perfect symbol for the Christian disciple. Whereas logically faith and unbelief are opposites, in Christian experience they are simultaneous realities; the one who believes is always concurrently involved in a battle against disbelief’ (Marcus (2009), 663).²³ At the same time, the conflict represents in the Markan narrative the cosmic conflict between divine and earthly spheres, between the dawning kingdom of God and the fading aeon.

Even Jesus, whom Mark presents as a ‘witness of faith’ (Ebeling (1959), 88), is caught up in the battle between his confession and lack of faith, even if the terminology is different. His exclamation on the cross, like the father’s outcry of doubt and despair, is marked by both the affirmation of his relationship to God and his utter distance from God. The phrase ‘I believe! Help my lack of faith!’ (9:24) has the same affirmation and distance as the sentence ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!’ (15:34).

Matthew: *doubt as a characteristic feature of the church*

In Matthew’s Gospel, it is not an anonymous representative of the ‘unbelieving generation’ (Mark 9:19) who is seeking help, but the mouthpiece of the disciples, Peter, who stands for a type of faith that coalesces courage and failure, obedience and ‘little faith’, trust and doubt. The intriguing case of Peter also proves this concoction to be ‘a fundamental characteristic of Christian existence’ (Matt. 14:28–31).²⁴ Even a person who is as close to Jesus as Peter is confronted with doubt. Doubt presupposes faith, not the other way around; only those who join Jesus and follow him experience ‘the tension between promise and worldly reality’ (Barth (1975), 291).

The final scene of the Gospel, which takes up the term for ‘doubt’ (*distazein*) from the episode of the ‘sinking Peter’, also emphasizes the fundamental juxtaposition of faith and doubt: the disciples fall down before the Risen One – and they doubt (28:17). Here the collective of the disciples becomes the subject of doubt, while doubt – in continuation of Peter’s doubt – becomes an ecclesiological matter. According to Matthew, doubt and little faith are neither the problem of an individual believer nor a general human problem, but a communal problem

of discipleship. Even the post-Easter reality of the Jesus followers remains ambivalent after Easter and oscillates between worship and doubt. In his 'existentialist theology' Matthew places 'little faith', a recurring theme in his gospel, next to other inner conflicts such as sorrow (6:31) and fear (8:26; 14:30). They all belong to the fundamental conditions of Christian existence, in which not even a faith the size of a mustard seed can take root (17:20).

Coping strategies and patterns of resilience

The topography of doubt in early Christian texts and traditions is variegated and complex, and it proves worthwhile to attend to the specific profile of the individual authors. It is to be expected that the ways of dealing with doubt – in all its shapes and types – is many-faceted as well. Not all of the texts pursue the same goal of eradicating doubt. At no point in the New Testament is doubt praised or ennobled; however, its presence is generally reckoned with. What coping strategies and patterns of resilience can we identify? How can doubt be avoided, endured, dealt with or overcome? With different emphases, the authors aim at the individual and social identity of the Christ-groups, on elements which social psychology has labelled 'cognitive', 'emotional', and 'evaluative'.²⁵ Early Christian handling of doubt serves fundamentally to give the addressees stability in both their symbolic and real-life world, to strengthen their ability to communicate, to immunize them against competing plausibilities, to make them alert to their own cognitive and ethical dissonances. The ways and means are manifold. I will present a selection in the following.

Exclusion: doubt is not, because it must not be

For Paul, having faith means being 'in Christ'. There are two ways to relate to this sphere of salvation: to participate in it or to turn one's back on it, with all the respective spiritual, ethical, and soteriological consequences. There is no being in-between, no being torn back and forth, no doubt in the sense of a subjective state of uncertainty between the two fundamental attitudes of affirmation or negation. Therefore, it does not become a problem for Paul. In his world of thought, the best antidote against burgeoning doubt is the constant actualization of one's participation in salvation.

Relationality: doubt is reframed through personal encounter

In the Gospels, doubt and little faith are invariably found in stories that narrate an encounter with Jesus. Those who doubt already have a prior relationship of trust with him. Whether it is the vacillating father of the epileptic child, the 'prime disciple' Peter with his little faith, the doubting disciples on the mountain in Galilee, or Thomas, the sceptic: their doubt is not a methodical doubt, à la René Descartes who chooses for his doubting 'in free decision the ideal moment of leisure, unchallenged by all worries and passions' (Ebeling (1969), 153). Rather, in the account of the Synoptics, doubt overpowers the protagonists like a flood and drives them towards Jesus. Jesus reacts individually by entering into dialogue with the distressed father (Matt. 9:21–24), reaching out to the sinking Peter (Matt. 14:31), comforting the agitated disciples (Matt. 28:18–20), and meeting the provocateur Thomas (John 20:24–29). Their encounter with Jesus does not always overcome their doubt, but it is contextualized in a fresh way. The Christological orientation of doubt in the Gospels is conspicuous.²⁶

Dependence: doubt calling on divine agency

The Christological qualification of doubt is accompanied by the fact that the doubter remains dependent on divine intervention. Thus, for example, the father of the epileptic

child who finds himself in the deep gulf between faith and lack of faith confesses his dependence on the divine miracle worker. In John's Gospel, the Paraclete witnesses and interprets the story of Jesus Christ, actualizing the identity and mission of Jesus. What Thomas was able to verify palpably with his hands now requires the hermeneutical activity of the Paraclete.²⁷ Doubt, then, does not lead to spiritual isolation, but keeps alive the awareness of being dependent on divine assistance. In a different way, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews directs the doubter to the otherworldly: Within his symbolic world, true being, solid and unshakable reality, lies beyond human perception. Only what is otherworldly and non-visible has persuasive power. James, on the other hand, makes clear in the first train of thought that the way out of a split and double-minded disposition requires wisdom 'from above' (Jas. 1:5; 3:17), but also vigorous dedication.

Proof: doubt can be eliminated through irrefutable evidence

The Gospel of Luke intends to prove to his dedicatee Theophilus the 'certainty concerning the things you have been taught' (Luke 1:4). An ambiguous finale, a sealed 'mind to understand the scriptures' (24:45), an ambivalent attitude of the disciples (as in the Gospel of Matthew) – they are not an option at the end of Luke's story. With a compelling series of evidence, he leads the disciples – and, consequently, also his addressees – to the correct, indubitable interpretation and appropriation of the Easter events: Jesus allows himself to be touched, eats fried fish, explains the meaning of the Scriptures, and finally goes to heaven. At the end, there is joy and worship (24:52–53). Luke, too, does include doubt and lack of faith in his account – doubt with regard to the resurrection witnesses (24:11), the scriptural testimony (24:25), and even the bodily risen Lord (24:38, 41). They are, however, a temporary problem only: when the disciples encounter the risen Jesus for the first time, they disbelieve 'for joy' (24:41); after the ascension, sheer joy has taken over (24:52). The abundant demonstrations (Acts 1:3) are ultimately overwhelming. In the reception of the Lukan account in Ignatius' letter to Smyrna, faith follows tactile verification straightforwardly: 'And immediately they touched him and believed' (Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 3,2, trans. Bart Ehrman). In an almost grotesque manner, the *Gospel of Peter* makes short work of the resurrection doubt by calling up a speaking cross of cosmic dimensions (Gos. Pet. 39–42), which convinces even the last ones, the grave guards and Pilate, of the fact of the resurrection.

Cognitive effort: doubt is conquered by the rationality of faith

According to the author of Hebrews, those who fall into doubt will not be convinced anew by a mere repetition of the elementary doctrine. He relies on other means. He appeals to the judgment of his addressees and tries to convince them (again) of the truth of the message of salvation by profound theological reasoning and rhetorical artistry. What he wants to offer is 'better theology' (Grässer (1997), 27). Those who doubt ought to be convinced of the 'things unseen' precisely by means of the intellect (Heb. 11:1b), in order then to stand firm again with regard to the 'things hoped for' (11:1a; cf. 6:18–19). Those who doubt are invited to follow the path of the 'pioneer and perfecter of faith' (12:3), not only in their way of life but also in their way of thinking. The author leaves no doubt that only through a 'rationality of faith' (*ratio fidei*) and not through a neutral, external logic can faith be a 'conviction of things unseen'. On the other hand, he draws on argumentative principles common in Greco-Roman rhetoric when he invokes the 'appropriate' (cf. 2:10, 17; 7:26), the 'necessary' (7:12, 27; 8:3; 9:16, 23), and the '(im)possible' (6:4–6, 18; 10:4; 11:6).

Ethical determination: doubt is overcome by perseverance

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is convinced that if a person's faith is certain and evident, action will arise in accordance with faith. Those who are convinced of 'things unseen' (Heb. 11:1b) are motivated to persevere (11:1a); this is the inherent logic of his famous 'definition' of faith offered at the beginning of his chapter on the cloud of witnesses of faith. Because of the reciprocity between intellectual and ethical efforts, perseverance also has a role in coping with and overcoming doubt.

Similarly, in the Epistle of James, 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxy' correspond to one another. Steadfastness is required (Jas. 1:3, 12), effective, wilful self-control (1:26; 3:4, 7), pro-social behaviour. Works are 'the empirically tangible signs of a person's inner coherence and wholeness' (Frankemölle (1985), 165). They are, however, not only a consequence of a coherent faith, but conversely a remedy for the schizophrenia of a half-hearted faith.

Pastoral sensitivity: doubt is met with empathy

The final words of the Matthean Jesus (Matt. 28:17) do not express rebuke, but empathy: Jesus neither leaves the disciples in their doubt nor does he remove it by an act of authority and power, but he places it in a surprisingly new horizon of meaning: despite their fragile trust and understanding, he expands the missionary mandate and at the same time assures them of his continuous presence.²⁸ Likewise, the Johannine Jesus does not meet the doubt of Thomas in a confrontational way, but rather with empathy and 'philanthropy',²⁹ even though Thomas has expressed his doubt in quite an aggressive fashion. In a surprising move, Jesus takes the initiative and accepts Thomas' request.

Mystagogy: doubt is receptive to spiritual expertise

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews presents himself not only as an educated theologian, but also as a skilful mystagogue (Söding (1991), 220) who assigns himself the task of disclosing to his addressees the mystery of things unseen. As alarming as their inner doubting and their debilitated state of mind may be, they are still receptive to the preacher's exhortations and insights. With pastoral pathos, he expresses solidarity with his addressees. In one of the most climactic statements of the entire letter, he writes: 'But we are not among those who shrink back and thus are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved' (Heb. 10:39). The high priest Jesus himself epitomizes the mystagogue, who as a 'forerunner' went ahead 'for us' (pro-existence) behind the curtain into the Holy of Holies (6:19–20).

Imitatio: doubt is overcome with the help of heavenly models

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is not only a 'witness of faith' but also a witness of doubt, and Mark's readers will expect some guidance from Jesus as to how to deal with their own doubt. For Jesus, his testimony included 'finishing his journey, holding out the witness of faith in the face of the accusation of blasphemy and sedition, holding out his affirmation of God's presence in the God-forsakenness of the cross' (Ebeling (1959), 88). Even the trembling, hesitating (Mark 14:33), doubting, and despairing (15:34) Jesus remains in the realm of the almighty God, his Father. The readers of the Gospel can also hope that even in their doubt they will not fall outside the divine sphere.

When the author of Hebrews describes Jesus as 'pioneer and perfecter' of faith (Heb. 12:2; cf. 2:10; 6:20), he has in mind that Jesus successfully accepted the arduous pilgrimage

of faith and arrived at the goal. His example proves that the effort is worthwhile. Of course, Jesus is superior to all other witnesses of faith mentioned in the letter's 'Hall of Faith' (Heb 11), since he has already reached the goal, but it is precisely this advantage that inspires the addressees to a specific way of life and thinking. The deterrent contrast, on the other hand, is the 'genealogy of unbelieving disobedience' (3:7–4:13) (Käsemann (1939), 25), namely the failing exodus generation.

In the Letter of James, the motif of *imitatio dei* is not elaborated, but it is clearly perceptible between the lines: 'God is one and single minded, which is contrasted to the person who is double-minded' (Hartin (1999), 100). James inculcates his readers with the idea that they can only combat double-mindedness effectively when they take the wholeness and perfection of God as the standard.

Example: doubt is oriented to models of faith

In remarkable contrast to the Letter to the Hebrews (and contrary to a host of contemporary exegetes of Paul), Paul does not talk about the faith or the faithfulness of Christ as an attitude that gave him perseverance on the way to the cross and which might be an example for believers.³⁰ For Paul, the forefather Abraham is the archetype and model of faith, not Jesus. Even if Paul does not specifically address Abraham's doubt, Paul does portray him as an example of faith to be imitated, for he showed a sober sense of reality, recognizing the unpromising state of his *physis* (Rom. 4:19) and yet remaining convinced against all odds that God 'is able to do what he has promised' (4:21). Doubts are thus nipped in the bud.

While in the Epistle of James Job serves as a model of a consistent way of life (Jas. 5:10–11),³¹ Hermas presents himself as the model of the one who overcomes doubts and double-mindedness. Such a self-confident role assignment is unique in early Christian literature (Rüpke (2005), 292). He exemplifies to his readers how an initially fragile believer in the greatest danger also grows the greatest strength and escapes the voracious monster of double-mindedness. His exclamation 'Trust in the Lord, you who are of two minds, because he can do all things' (Herm. vis. 4, 2, 6, trans. Bart Ehrman) is rooted in his own faith experience and therefore receives authority.³²

Typicality: doubt corresponds to the experiences of the first Jesus followers

Matthew designed Peter's character in terms of an interplay of the 'unique' and the 'typical' (Luz (2005), 367). On the one hand, his relationship to Jesus, his role within the circle of disciples, his actions, even his failures are unique. On the other hand, he is typical and transparent for the readers of the Gospel with regard to the ambivalence of Christian existence, especially because little faith and doubt jeopardize his confession and discipleship.

John portrays the disciple Thomas and his notorious lagging-behind with tongue in cheek, but still quite seriously and emphatically. Thomas' character is particularly accessible to sceptical believers who are attached to an inner-worldly rationality (John 11:16), do not fully comprehend the mission of Jesus (14:5), try to get to the bottom of things (20:25), but who will finally arrive at a proper assessment of who Jesus is (20:28).

Easing the burden: doubt is an expectable element of faith

As doubt is an individual as well as an ecclesiological *Existenzial*, it remains present and formative in the lives of believers. The absence of doubt would be exceptional. Also, the upheavals of life that motivate or foster doubt are part of Christian existence.

Peter's doubt shows that the threat of doubt does not even disappear in the presence of Jesus. Even when the Risen One is physically present, doubt can arise – how much more so in a post-Easter situation in which he is withdrawn from all sense perceptions and remains absent (cf. John 20:29)? Despite their confession (Matt. 14:31), the disciples, including Peter, are addressed as those of little faith (16:8; 17:20); they remain doubtful (28:17). The goal, then, is not necessarily to eliminate doubt, but to accept it as an element of faith and to integrate it into individual and collective identity management.

Threats: doubt that leads to ruin

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews creates impressive horror scenarios in memory of the desert generation. They doubted that God *wants* to help and that he *can* help (Heb. 3:9), they drifted into unbelief and, to their doom, broke off their pilgrimage. No one – according to the author's calculation – will run into the 'fury of fire' (10:27) with open eyes and an alert mind after considering the fate of the desert generation. Those who doubt and do not believe will 'drift away' from the goal (2:1). It is rather consistent and consequential, in his mind, to refocus attention to the goal 'today' (3:7, 15; 4:7).

In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the threat of double-mindedness is greatly intensified with the help of apocalyptic motifs. Hermas' faith is put to the test by a locust-spitting, people-devouring beast. The magnitude of the threat, however, now releases a corresponding amount of faith and determination with which Hermas confronts the monster (Herm. vis. 4, 1, 8).

Reminder: doubt is thwarted by confessional tradition

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds his addressees that the reality of things unseen has already once made sense to them – and still does, though its persuasive power became weaker for them (cf. Heb. 2:3–4; 6:4–5; 10:26, 29). He reminds them of the heroes of faith from the past who were convinced of things unseen, and he refreshes their memory regarding the Christ-event. His strategy of overcoming doubts involves the task of 'interpreting and updating the confessional tradition in correspondence to the situation of the addressees' (Weiss (1991), 55). Hermas remembers the great deeds about which the Lord had instructed him, in order to take courage thereupon and go towards the beast of double-mindedness (Herm. vis. 4, 1, 8).

Peter's cry for help (Matt. 14:30) borrows from the prayer language of the Psalms, evoking in the hearers the memory of familiar motifs and at the same time incorporating the addressees into the community of those who pray, who expect and receive help from God.

Authoritative testimony: doubt is confronted with Scriptures and Revelations

The author of the Gospel of John explains in the metatextual final verses that he sought to instil faith with his 'book' (John 20:30–31). His thoughtful characterization of Thomas is thus part of his overall strategy of faith. Whoever picks up his book and joins his 'ambiguous characters' (Hysten (2009)) and above all Thomas, will finally arrive at the most vehement doubt and then at the highest confession.

Even if the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* was inspired by the Letter of James and, as it were, 'ruminated' on it (Zahn (1868), 396)³³ he is principally not dependent on an authoritative tradition or a visionary, because he can come up with revelations himself. According to his legitimation strategy, he stresses that his parenthesis and its apocalyptic authentications 'from above' are not to be doubted. It is the divine authority that equips his appeal 'Do not be of two minds!' (Herm. vis. 4.1, 4.7) with performative power and reduces the monstrous threat of double-mindedness to a harmless nonentity.

Rebuke: doubt and little faith are to be disapproved of

The idea of ‘little faith’ appears without exception in dialogues of Jesus with his disciples or with a single disciple (Luke 12:28; Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). All passages carry an undertone of reproach and rebuke that is of course intended reach the ears of the addressees, as well. Their ‘little faith’ – which, however, is not (yet) faithlessness and unbelief – in precarious situations is criticized in order to encourage them to trust again. Explicit disapproval is merely *one* way of dealing with fragile faith in the Gospels. Contrary to a popular trajectory in the history of interpretation, other episodes of doubt in the Gospels do *not* voice criticism, such as Mark in the context of the healing of the epileptic boy vis-à-vis the father, Matthew in the Gospel’s final scene vis-à-vis the disciples,³⁴ and John in the climactic encounter narrative vis-à-vis Thomas.

Polemics: doubt and double-mindedness are attacked

Later writings in particular offer sharp polemics against doubts and double-mindedness in order to maintain group cohesion and keep the doctrine pure. Those who doubt divine influence on future events or even the Parousia and the eschatological judgment (1 Clem. 23:3–4; 2 Clem. 11:2; 2 Petr. 3:3–4) are told in the strongest terms – though not always by way of a logical argument – that they are on the wrong track. It may well be true that behind the polemic, ‘doubt itself wheezes’ (Klein (1970), 111). Here, the phenomenological observation holds true that ‘the firmer the endorsement of ideas, the weaker the basis of these notions may be’ (Pelkmans (2013), 1).

The imaginative idea of older interpreters that James polemically aims at Paul when he refers to the ‘double-minded man’ (Jas. 1:8) belongs in the cabinet of curiosities in the history of interpretation. The kernel of truth of this idea, however, consists in the fact that James quite belligerently takes aim at the danger of an ambivalent ethos, which in his estimation is virulent among his addressees due to the potentially destructive effects of Paul’s theology (Hengel (2002), 525).

Constructing alterity: the doubters are the others

According to a dated and certainly mistaken interpretation of Matt 28:17, it is a group *beyond* the disciples that is doubting at the end of the Gospel story. This interpretation obviously follows the theologically motivated intention to keep the disciples pure from doubt, since discipleship and doubt supposedly cannot coexist. Other early Christian writings actually follow this logic, such as the two Clementine ‘letters’: they engage in ideological boundary maintenance by attributing doubt, double-mindedness, misfortune, and end-time misery to the ‘others’, the group of *dipsychoi*, with the intention of strengthening the identity of their own group. Those who are loyal will be rewarded (2 Clem. 11:5), those who drop out run to their doom. Implicitly, James also applies this strategy: who would want to belong to the enemies of God, who are sinful, unstable, divided, two-spirited? With an analogous intention, the Letter to the Hebrews points its finger at the desert generation, which doubted that God wants to help and is able to do so (Heb. 3:9).

Conclusion

When the first generations of Christians discovered and established ‘faith’ (*pistis*) as their central identity marker – faith in all kinds of shades and shapes (Morgan (2015)) – they were inevitably confronted with experiences that challenged faith. ‘Doubt’ is one such experience. However, the story is more complex than the barren, conventional opposition

'faith vs doubt' might suggest. Notably, early Christian narrators and thinkers were not content with the doubt-terminology at hand. They crafted novel words like 'little faith' (*oligopistia*) and 'double-mindedness' (*dipsychia*), they puzzled out fresh arguments to face experiences of doubt, and they narrated vivid stories, such as Doubting Thomas and the healing of the epileptic child with the father's outcry 'I believe! Help my lack of faith'. Their linguistic, argumentative, and narrative creativity is an intriguing and often under-estimated feature of the early Christian discourse about faith and doubt.

In this article, I did not attempt to systematize and streamline the evidence but to listen instead to the distinct voices and to appreciate their diversity, leaving it to other occasions to find unity in this diversity. As a result, I identified six basic types of doubt which can be attributed to individual authors and which range from programmatic exclusion of doubt to the recognition that doubt is part of basic human and ecclesial experience. Furthermore, the analysis yielded no fewer than eighteen coping strategies and patterns of resilience which could be arranged according to three basic goals: the pastoral approaches acknowledge doubt as a companion of everyone's – even Jesus'! – faith, reassure the doubter, and call for ethical determination. Others take pains to remove doubt through theological propositions, rational arguments, and ethical correction. A few show less grace and seek to cast the doubter out of the community and even of salvation.

Two sets of questions impose themselves for further reflection. First, questions on the systematics of doubt (in early Christianity): which type of doubt correlates with which coping strategy, and are such relationships intuitive or unexpected? What are specific objects of doubt? How and why does doubt arise? Is it possible to distinguish in our texts 'having doubts about something', 'being in doubt about it', and 'doubting that something is the case'? Second, questions on the pragmatics of doubt (in today's discourse and practice): why did doubt as an ethical category (*dipsychia*) disappear in contemporary reflection? Which of the eighteen points on coping and resilience are more appropriate than others? Which should be discarded, which need to be added? Which situation of doubt calls for which reaction? Which personalities and mentalities respond to which coping strategy? How should doubt be evaluated?

For centuries, theologians have pigeonholed doubt in the realm of hamartiology ('doubt is sin'³⁵), while in the past decades there has been a tendency to welcome, praise, and enoble doubt ('in praise of doubt', Berger & Zijdeveld (2009)). Neither position is rooted in the texts which we have discussed, but rather in the respective spirit of the times; no early Christian author declares doubt to be a sin, and no text assigns a positive role to doubt. It is true that in our secular age 'we cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty' (Taylor (2007), 11). Yet it could also be wise to look backwards over our shoulder to the first generations of faith and their experiences and expressions of doubt.

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Notes

1. Note that *pistis* has a wide semantic spectrum. It can denote the subjective attitude of 'faith', 'trust', 'confidence', or 'belief', but also that which can stimulate this subjective attitude, such as 'honesty', 'trustworthiness', 'faithfulness' or 'responsibility' (with reference to persons or interpersonal relations) and 'assurance', 'pledge', 'guarantee', 'argument', or 'proof' (with reference to things).

2. After a long period of drought, research on faith is flourishing, with Teresa Morgan's monograph (2015) setting the new standard. See also my overview Schliesser (2017a).
3. For a more in-depth discussion, see my forthcoming monograph Schliesser (2022).
4. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/doubt> (accessed 23 December 2021).
5. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57076> (accessed 23 December 2021).
6. Cf. McKaughan (2018), 200.
7. In both Romanic and Germanic languages, the element of 'two-ness'/'duality' is decisive: *dubitatio* (Latin), *le doute* (French), *la duda* (Spanish), *il dubbio* (Italian), *Zweifel* (German), and *doubt* are all words that include the numeral 'two'.
8. Schleiermacher (1998, 44) cast this principle in famous words: 'Every spiritual revolution forms language because thoughts and real states of affairs arise which, precisely because they are new, cannot be designated by language as it was.' Contrary to the translator, I render 'Verhältnisse' as 'states of affairs', not as 'relationships'.
9. The ancient lexica of Iulius Pollux and Hesychius. list, for example, *amphiballein*, *amphisbêtein*, *endoiazein*, *amphignoëin*, *dichonoëin*, *dichognōmonein*, and *aporein*.
10. Occasionally and in some contexts, *apistia/apistein/apistos* refer to 'doubt', as do *dialogismos* and *dialogizesthai*.
11. Recently, List (2021) opted for 'a turn away from intertextual methodology towards the study of etymology' (103f.), though both approaches could be mutually illuminating.
12. Small faith presupposes faith, i.e., it has its place in situations of challenge to faith. It manifests itself as fear in a threatening situation (Matt. 8:26; 14:31), as concern for food (6:30; 16:8), or as failure to heal a sick person (17:20).
13. Some have argued that Jesus himself coined the Hebrew equivalent of *oligopistia*: *qētannê 'āmānâ*.
14. Matt. 21:21; Mark 11:22–23; Rom. 4:20; 14:23; Jas. 1:6; Jude 20–22; cf. in addition – without the correlate *pistis* – Acts 10:20. Apart from these passages, *diakrīnesthai* occurs in Jas. 2:4; Jude 9; Acts 11:2, where the meaning 'dispute' or the like is assumed; see in addition Acts 11:12 (v.l.: Byzantine text) and Luke 11:38 (v.l.: Codex Bezae).
15. At this point, certain parallels with contemporary Western societies, which are characterized by a fragmentation and segmentation of religious (as well as non-religious) positions and social entities, can be seen. Cf. Taylor (2007), 595:

The salient feature of Western societies is not so much a decline of religious faith and practice, though there has been lots of that, more in some societies than in others, but rather a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief.

16. Cf. Deissmann (1912), 155f. "The "old man" had lived in other spheres: "in" the flesh, "in" sins, "in" Adam, with his death-appointed destiny, "in" the Law, "in" the world, "in" sufferings. The "new man" in Christ stands within the sacred precinct, into which all those gloomy things of the past cannot penetrate . . ."
17. Cf. Hooker (1990), 185:

[M]an's redemption is seen primarily in terms of moving from the sphere of Adam to the sphere of Christ. The belief that it is possible for the believer to do this is dependent upon the fact that the Son of God came in the likeness of Adam's sinful flesh, and so enabled those in Adam to become children of God.

18. Cf. Bousset (1970), 204: 'Of course one cannot call the apostle a psychologist of faith to the extent that this is true of Philo.'
19. Cf. Pelkmans (2013), 1; Nicklas (2020), 169.
20. Cf. Attridge (1989), 22: 'Faith has an intellectual or cognitive aspect whereby the believer assents to the reality of God, God's involvement with the world, and God's justice.'
21. On the concept of a 'revelatory dynamic' in John's Gospel, see Frey (2018), 125–162. Cf. Most (2005), 54:

Thomas's doubt is the most radically aggressive of all three [i.e., Thomas, Mary, and Nathanael], just as his acknowledgment of Jesus as God is the most hyperbolically pious. And Jesus' recognition of Thomas is not limited to a name, as with Mary, or a characterization, as with Nathanael: instead, Jesus recognizes Thomas by recognizing what it is that Thomas most deeply wants to do, by quoting to Thomas's face the same words that Thomas had spoken some days earlier to the other disciples.

22. John 9:38: 'He [i.e., the man born blind] said, "Lord, I believe."' See, with a different meaning, Acts 27:25; 1 Cor. 11:18.

23. See, however, Dan Howard-Snyder's above-mentioned terminological clarification.
24. Luz (2005), 321: 'Once again [as in 6:30; 8:26; 16:8; 17:19–20] faith is "little faith," that is, that mixture of courage and fear, of listening to the Lord and looking at the wind, of trust and doubt that according to Matthew remains a fundamental characteristic of Christian existence.'
25. Cf. the identity theory analysis in Tajfel (1978), 28: 'cognitive – the sense of the knowledge that one belongs to a group; evaluative – the sense that the notion of the group [. . .] may have a positive or negative value; emotional – the sense that the cognitive and evaluative aspects [. . .] may be accompanied by emotions'.
26. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary*, Mary takes the role of Jesus and reassures the sorrowful disciples: 'Do not weep or be sad, nor doubt!'
27. In John's symbolic world, Thomas' touching the side wound could imply that he actually came into direct contact with the place of pneumatic presence (cf. John 19:34), while the spirit is bestowed on the other disciples in the Easter scene (20:22) and on the post-Easter believers in the person of the Spirit-Paraclete (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:14–15).
28. Cf. Bauer (1992), 363: 'The consideration that Jesus refuses to abandon the disciples to their failure [. . .] gives hope to readers that the exalted Christ will likewise assist them in their own struggles.'
29. Cf. already Chrysostom, *Homilies in John* 87 (PG 59,473), who speaks of Jesus' philanthropy.
30. But so, representative of many, Cosgrove (1988), 57: 'Jesus' own faithfulness unto death is the prototype of believing faith.'
31. In the New Testament, only the Epistle of James mentions Job by name.
32. With analogous pedagogical intent, authors also mention individual antitypes, including Esau (Heb. 12:16–17) or Lot's wife (1 Clem. 11:1).
33. Contrary to much of current scholarship I am convinced that Hermas is dependent on James.
34. The Longer Ending of Mark, however, explicitly denounces the disciples' unbelief and hardness of heart toward the Easter witnesses (Mark 16:14).
35. Noticed very perceptively already by Nietzsche (1997), 89: 'Doubt as sin. – Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin.'

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