

# Defending the church's truth claims

## 1. The challenge

### Why does the Archbishop of Canterbury offer 'space' to his people?

Dr Rowan Williams threw down a challenge in his Dibleby Lecture in December 2002.

"The challenge for religious communities is how we are to offer our visions....as a way of opening up some of the depth of human choices; offering resources for the construction of growing and critical human identities. And this also means, incidentally, but not insignificantly, that religions have work to do - intellectually and imaginatively - to defend their basic credibility, their truth claims." (19/12/02 at [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/news/archbishops/lecture](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/news/archbishops/lecture))

How can we defend the basic credibility of the church's truth claims in terms which people outside the church who take the notion of history for granted and set great store on reason can understand?

To get some idea of what Dr Williams has in mind when he speaks of 'defending' the creeds it is helpful to consider a passage in his address "Born of the Virgin Mary" collected in his book *\*Open to Judgement\** (Darton Longman & Todd, 1994). Dr Williams concludes (at p. 27), "We should be cautious about making this story - however appropriate, however vivid and haunting - a necessary condition for believing in or speaking of God in our midst in Jesus. If we can have some freedom of interpreting the vividly mythological language of 'he came down from heaven', we can claim equal flexibility in our understanding of 'incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary'. Such flexibility may even give us more space to reflect on the heart of the wonderful event these words encapsulate for us."

It seems to me that there is in that passage more than a hint of an admission that two of the church's 'truth claims' are not 'defensible' as things now stand. They are not defensible because the two statements are on their face statements of fact; but the 'facts' stated make no sense to modern man. They are strictly non-sense in terms of the universe in which people now live, as they understand that universe. In the passage quoted Dr Williams is, I think, trying to give his church people some 'space' in order to help them to say the creed without experiencing a twinge of disbelief even as they say it. He is signalling that he is aware that with regard to these two statements in the creed the church's truth claims need 'defending' on two fronts. They are not only difficult to sell in the marketplace to thoughtful

atheists and philosophical humanists, the church has reached a point at which it is having difficulty in getting its own people to accept them.

The purpose and outline of these pieces. In these pieces I want to explore Dr Williams's notion of 'space'. I want to enquire more generally how far we can defend the creeds today to those outside the church in language which they can understand. I want to examine if there may be another way of opening up the subject of 'God in our midst in Jesus'. It is a theme running through what I have to say that 'history' can help. By 'history' I mean history as the general public understands the concept, that is, a view of church history not founded on, or shot through with, specifically 'Christian' presuppositions. Such a 'neutral' (so far as possible) view of church history will, I believe, give us all a great deal more 'space' than Dr Williams can allow and, possibly, indicate a useful way of opening up some of the depth of human choices. Parts 2 to 7 look at the developments in Christian belief from the crucifixion to the eve of the Council of Nicaea. In Part 8 I set out the understanding of the Council of Nicaea and subsequent insights down to 1964. In Parts 9 to 12 I enquire whether all the statements in the creeds are in fact capable of being 'defended' to people who set great store on reason. In Parts 13 to 16 I try to identify the particular faith problem for our generation by way of contrasting it with the faith problems posed to earlier generations, and to enquire what help we can reasonably expect to get from clerical persons in solving it. Part 17 is a bit of DIY such as many of us have had to resort to for some time now. If the Archbishop had not given us such a clear lead, another possible title for the pieces as a whole might have been \*Christians Awake, an essay in unorthodox dissent\*.

Mythological language? It is, I believe, brave of Dr Williams to suggest that 'he came down from heaven' is, and to hint that 'incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary' may be, vividly mythological language. We can be sure that that is not how the bishops who attended the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325 CE would have characterised the words. Flexibility? Paul of Samosata was declared a heretic by the Council of Antioch in 268 CE for refusing to confess that 'the Son of God came down from heaven' and insisting that he was 'koinos anthropos' (just an ordinary man) 'derived from below'. I rather think it is still a heresy to say so. Mythological? That is not how, to this day, Pope John Paul II understands the words, as he makes clear in writing of 'the doctrinal value of the Text' in \*Catechism of the Catholic Church\* (11 October 1992, English translation, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994, at p.5).

What lies behind Dr Williams's apparently innocuous suggestion that we (the teaching, ecclesiastical, pastoral 'we') should be 'cautious' about insisting on one of the most familiar and treasured items in the Christian picture of salvation? At least a hundred years of devoted biblical scholarship lie behind it. What Dr Williams has not made explicit is that it is as certain as anything which happened so long ago can be that neither the Apostle Peter nor the Apostle Paul believed in the 'virgin birth', nor is there evidence that it was even invented in their lifetime (see RE Brown, \*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke\* (New York: Doubleday, 1977). Dr Williams says the church should be 'cautious' about the matter because a religion originally based on a

struggle to understand experience has become for many people today a religion struggling to escape from a verbal straitjacket. That is, I believe, one aspect of the particular 'faith problem' faced by our generation. Paul and the apostolic fathers, as we shall see, each faced quite different 'faith problems'.

Dr Williams recognises that the doctrine of the virgin birth, more accurately the virgin conception, no longer does what he has memorably said doctrine is designed to do. It no longer "holds us still before Jesus". Quite the reverse; it makes us feel uncomfortable when talking about Jesus to agnostic friends.

Can it be right to claim that Peter did not believe in the virgin birth? Well, very large numbers of ordinands know that deep down, but are too worldly-wise to mention it in a public address. If you peel back the skins of the artichoke and look for the heart of the matter, the Christian faith did not start with people gazing in wonder at a child in a manger. It started with a puzzlement about Jesus' death. At first this death looked convincingly final; but disconcerting things started to happen. The Christian faith started with what UFO aficionados would, I believe, call 'sightings'.

More about these sightings in Part 2.