

Defending the church's truth claims

13. Three different faith problems, three different solutions

In this piece I use the expression 'faith problem' in a restricted sense to mean the problem followers of Jesus have in understanding their experience and articulating it, so that they can share it with others in the world in which they find themselves.

First, Paul's faith problem. Unlike the bishops at Nicaea, Paul did not have to make sense of all the books of the New Testament; he did not have to try to render mutually coherent the religious insights of 'Mark', 'Matthew', 'Luke', 'John', the author of 'Hebrews' and the other John on Patmos. His was a different problem altogether: he had only to make sense of his experience of having seen the Lord in a way consistent with the evidence of those who had known the Lord in his lifetime and his own upbringing and experience as a devout and learned Jew.

Secondly, the church fathers' faith problem. By way of contrast, the church fathers had not only to wrestle with their own experience, but to work out their stance in relation to the manuscripts which by their time had come to be written by numerous people on the subject of Jesus. As the original witnesses to the life and death of Jesus died out, his followers had to rely more and more on hearsay evidence and ultimately on writings which had been preserved.

What were they to make of these writings? In approaching this question it is instructive to see what Paul (assuming without deciding that he is the author of the second letter to Timothy) had to say about the Old Testament. He writes of 'the sacred writings' (hiera grammata) 'that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ' (2 Tim.3 15); and 'Every scripture inspired by God (pasa graphe theopneustos) (NEB text; NRSV alternative reading) is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.' (2 Tim. 3 16, 17) If the letter is indeed by Paul, it was written, perhaps, as early as 58 CE: see John AT Robinson *Redating the New Testament*, SCM Press 1976. But who wrote the letter and exactly when are not crucial for my argument. It seems that at an early date there was a tradition amongst the followers of Jesus that some at least of the writings of the Old Testament which were known to Jesus' followers were inspired by God.

When the status of the writings of the canon of the New Testament came to be considered by the church fathers, it was in the context of the witness of a letter claiming to have been written by Paul that some at least of the 'scriptures' of the Old Testament were already thought of as inspired by God. It was perhaps a small step from revering writings which had been preserved because they were believed

to have come down from the apostles to believing that the writings had been preserved because God had willed that to happen. If God had had a hand in getting the books preserved, it was perhaps natural for the early fathers to come to think of the writings of the New Testament also as 'sacred writings' and inspired by God. But this is mere speculation and the precise train of thought is not important for the present argument.

Was God saying one thing, or several? Having come to the conclusion that the particular manuscripts of the canon, which seemed on their face to say different things about underlying reality, had been inspired by God, the church fathers had then to consider whether God was telling them several different things, or only one thing. This is one aspect of a more general problem about how God can properly be understood by human beings to operate. We can, I believe, see Paul in his day wrestling with another such problem. In his letters he can, I believe, be seen trying to work out how one should think correctly about God's dealing with the Jews; he believed that God's plan of salvation was to save people who believed in Jesus; not all Jews believed in Jesus; what was he to make of God's long-standing special relationship with the Jews? could it be that God had made a mistake, or changed his mind? Augustine wrote, "You recall that one and the same Word of God extends throughout Scripture, that it is one and the same Utterance that resounds in the mouths of all the sacred writers....." No doubt he was recalling an understanding long since established in his day.

Monotheism. Monotheism is defined as the doctrine that there is only one god, as opposed to several gods, or many gods. As Muslims say, "There is no God, but God". Christian people today are conditioned to take it for granted that the best sort of monotheism has always accommodated three persons. But this is by no means self-evident; nor were the early fathers in a position to take it for granted. The early fathers had to defend a religion which based itself in part on the Old Testament, believed in the God of the Jews and claimed to have inherited his promises. A religion with these premises had to be a monotheism; nothing less rigorous would do. It was vital for them to mount an intellectual defence which proved that a vision of underlying reality, which involved a father, a son, a word and a spirit, and looked at first sight uncomfortably like a polytheistic religion, was in fact a monotheistic one. Given the nature of the faith problem, it was virtually inevitable that the solution should consist of propositions. It is worth emphasising that, at the time at which they were arrived at, the propositions had to be both intellectually defensible and vigorously defended in terms of the post-classical Greek philosophy, which was the thought system that then prevailed.

Thirdly, our faith problem - introduction. Put shortly, yesterday's solution has become part of today's problem. Our problem will not be solved by mouthing

more of the same. Today the explanation of how what we have is a proper monotheism lies buried in the impenetrable subtleties of post-classical Greek philosophy. The church has not, as far as I know, attempted an explanation in terms of modern philosophy and biology. The reason for this may be that the church knows that its position is indefensible in terms of the universe in which we all now live; but it may only be that the church is no longer interested in defending its existing position. If the church were interested, it might perhaps be expected that it would make sure that there was a priest in every parish who understood the subtleties and could explain them to any one who troubled to enquire. But this is mere moonshine. In practice, Christianity is now sold in the market place very much like water. If you buy water, you buy hydrogen and oxygen whether you like it or not, and neither buyer, nor seller troubles to enquire into the precise relationship between the two elements. It seems to me that an agnostic could, in principle, reasonably require us to explain as far as possible where the edges are of what he or she is being invited to believe. But I draw attention to the curious position in which we find ourselves for another purpose. The church insists on propositions which it makes no attempt to defend in terms which modern man can understand. We are required to make little leaps of faith all over the place to patch them up - that the books left out of the canon were probably not worth keeping any way; that the original manuscript of the gospel of 'Luke' contained the same words as the early manuscript now generally believed to be the oldest text of 'Luke' that now remains to us; that the intervention of the Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea was inspired by the Spirit; that any apparent gap in the Apostolic Tradition is not really significant because everyone who made the decisions was doing his best under the guidance of the spirit, and Mother Church says so, and so on, and on. The church has been able to get away with this for many years now because it is the person of Jesus which attracts people into church, not the subtleties of the propositions put together as a solution to an earlier faith problem. In principle, the churches' present attitude should make it comparatively easy to put the old faith propositions quietly on one side. But, sadly, that is not how things work in religion.

The straitjacket. We inside churches are now effectively precluded from trying to express in terms which our contemporaries might be able to comprehend our understanding of our experience, (our vision of where we are), by the omnipresence of the propositional solution to the faith problem of the generations before us. It is as though we were confined in a mental institution established on health care principles of a bygone age, in a straitjacket. We are not merely aware of the solution arrived at by previous generations of Christians to the faith problem which they faced, but have always been taught by word, action and body-language that we are bound by that solution. Our leaders are committed to the position that the propositions about underlying reality arrived at as a solution to a particular faith problem have eternal validity. We are assured that these propositions have eternal validity because they have been revealed by God. The church believes that they have been revealed by God because they have been constructed out of building blocks of material which people long ago believed was

authored by God. So it is that we get little help from the church in trying to find ways in which to articulate our experience to those we meet in daily life.

Our problem is that we live in a different intellectual world from that in which the current faith propositions were agreed upon, and that our world uses intellectual tools for all purposes on a daily basis which the church is, perhaps understandably, afraid to use when it comes to self-criticism. Until recently previous generations of Christians have found nothing to disturb them in the words of the old creeds. Now some of us feel that we would not want to put the matter quite like that. When we start to look at the matter to see how we would put it, if we were free to do so, what do we find? We can agree with the early fathers of the church that, 'Does this come down to us from Jesus through the apostles?' is a perfectly sensible test; but we have tools to test what came down from Jesus through the apostles, which were not available to the early fathers. It is when we use our new tools that we start to discover uncomfortable facts. Most seriously, we find that the church's statement of the nature of underlying reality changed significantly after 70 CE, notwithstanding that the church stoutly maintains that it is now insisting on the same faith as that of the first followers. We find that the apostolic tradition on which the church relies is so far from supportable as a matter of history as to amount to a myth. We find that church history has been manipulated to conform to the supposed apostolic tradition, which is based on Peter, by the excision of James the brother of Jesus. We find that statements in the Scriptures about Jesus' brothers and sisters are routinely interpreted as statements about step relations, or cousins, to conform with the unique status of Jesus as set out in the current faith propositions. Many of us find the basic belief uncomfortable. Indeed, many of us who have glanced at some of the less 'satisfactory' passages in the Bible and turned away find the idea that God is the author of every word of every book in the Bible, and that he authored those particular words (and no others) because they were the very ones needed for our salvation, extravagantly fanciful. We find it difficult to imagine that a God with all the attributes which we are assured He has really treats human beings like us like that. In short, we find that the church is insisting on maintaining positions which any one outside the church, using the intellectual tools which he or she normally uses, is likely to conclude are indefensible. Previous generations of persons in churches confronted persons outside who by and large believed in the existence of the genus 'god'. Now for the first time the church's mission field in England is largely populated by persons who do not believe either in the genus 'god', or in the existence of any underlying reality, and think that the whole religion business is so much hocus pocus. This is no time to be going out and about in a straitjacket trying to convince sceptics of the validity of indefensible propositions. They are going to ask us what makes us think that there is any underlying reality at all.

A preliminary problem. We have a preliminary problem of how best to cope with this situation inside the churches so as to get started on the work of mission

outside them. From this point onwards, these pieces are concerned with examining further the problem of how to move forward in relation to Dr Williams's 'critical human identities' outside the church when the church has (in accordance with our present understandings) got a number of not unimportant matters wrong in the past.

There would be a less onerous problem if the church as a whole felt able to say that our forebears saw things differently, shrug its shoulders and move on; but it can not, because it is bound hand, foot and tongue with ancient doctrine and a belief in the eternal validity of old tradition. This utter reliance on the past sometimes makes it look as though we have a worry deep down, almost amounting to a conviction, that God has given up work.

Recognising our problem. We even have a pre-preliminary problem. The institutional churches find it impossible to recognise that our problem today is that, according to our way of thinking on other matters in this age, the churches have got a number of not unimportant things wrong in the past. Many Christians believe that the Spirit can not now reveal anything contradictory to the tradition of the church embodied in the great creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. It is not always easy to know exactly what the Church of England, or the United Reformed Church believe; but, as usual, the Roman Catholic Church is admirably clear on this. That there can be no 'contradiction' still lies at the root of the thinking of the Roman Catholic Church (see Cardinal Kasper, speaking at the ecumenical conference at St Albans in May 2003 and quoted in part 6 of my piece on *Christian disunity - the Archbishop's new approach* on this website). That church clearly can not acknowledge that in the fourth and fifth centuries new 'creeds' were adopted which were broadly contradictory to the belief and understanding of the first links in any historical chain of an apostolic tradition, Peter and James and Paul.

It is no one's job to tackle our faith problem.

Biblical scholars recognise an obligation to tell the truth as they perceive it to be; but they do not regard it as their job to question the faith propositions of the church, or even to invite others to draw conclusions from their work which might cause any one else to question the faith propositions of the church. It is not the priest's job to sow doubt among the faithful, much less to question the particular propositions which he has vowed to defend. The ancient order of 'Presbyters' was suppressed more than sixteen hundred years ago and we have no 'lay' ministry of teaching. The Protestant churches intent on visible organic unity seem rather to deplore the Reformation as the cause of our divisions. Few clerical persons seem ready to start their thinking from where whole-hearted believers in evolution stand outside the church. How can it be otherwise in institutions with an aged force in the field, facing oblivion for lack of members and money? All are hell-bent on

institutional unity and wait on Rome; they will wait in vain for a lead from that ancient diocese in tackling the faith problem of our generation.

Inerrancy of scripture and the creeds. Every time anyone says one of the great creeds, or uses a Trinitarian doctrine as a yardstick for any new statement of the Christian vision, he or she is implicitly affirming that God is the author of all the books in the Bible and that Peter, Paul and James, sadly, got things wrong. So it is that no church institution is sufficiently free to take a lead in dealing with the faith problem of our generation. It may be that it will take a Peasants' Revolt.

Christian choice. Our problem is, I suggest, a faith problem involving choices; choices to be made not 'one day, perhaps', but now.

Different perspectives. There are practical reasons, reasons of realpolitik and the like, but there is no reason written into the structure of the universe, why anyone today should be constrained by conflicting statements believed by others many years ago to have been authored by God, any more than Peter and Paul were. To this assertion, different people will naturally have different reactions. Institutions have many reasons for trying to continue to constrain their members; for them the imperatives are partly about faith, partly about church structures, power and wealth and partly about the relationship of sheep and shepherds. There is a huge investment in the old leap of faith about manuscripts. I believe that at bottom there lies another of those problems about deciding how God can properly be understood to operate in relation to us humans. Can He be understood to operate through the work of biblical scholars and historians? or not? or only up to a point?

As for the outsider, we come back to the modern critical person whom Dr Williams was encouraging the church to address in his Dibleby Lecture (see Part 1). We can see that such a person is in a position to make a choice. That person has the opportunity to make a leap of faith about the nature of both the Old and New Testaments and to regard them as the speech of God and without error; but he or she may choose not to make that leap of faith about their status, but rather to treat the old books as any other old books preserved in manuscripts and papyri of different age and quality, containing valuable material no doubt, but littered with human error, confusion, misconception and inconsistency and susceptible to human critique.

As far as I can see, there is no good reason why someone outside the church should wish to make a second-century-CE-type of leap of faith about old religious manuscripts. Particularly is this so when he or she sees a hole, accompanied by a massive dislocation, in the apostolic tradition on which the church relies in making its leap of faith about those documents. There is, looking from outside, no good reason to treat those manuscripts differently in any way from other documents of similar age. On the contrary, for someone in the process of making up his or her mind about the nature of the universe there is, according to the intellectual

training all now receive, every reason to look at them with the beady eye of scholarship.

Which corner of the mission field? I recognise that, such is the psychological need for a profound certainty in an uncertain world, a great many people appear to have no problem at all about making the ancient leap of faith about the nature of old manuscripts; but I believe that there is a whole swathe of our society which can not make the jump. That is the swathe of society with which I am assuming you come into contact, if you have read so far.

Have clerical persons the answer to our problem? No. We have this seemingly hopeless situation that very few lay people know or care much about doctrine, but, for reasons buried in history and seldom fully examined, the clergy of every church are bound by their vows taken in one institution or another to faith propositions contradictory of the faith of the first apostles, Peter and Paul, (whom they revere). At the same time critical people outside church seem reluctant to buy the ancient packages being offered. The way forward is apparently blocked not only by the ancient faith propositions agreed upon long ago in another thought system, but also by the vows and pastoral responsibilities of the clergy.

In Part 14, can we get through to the outside world along the road of vividly mythological language?