

## Defending the church's truth claims

### 14. Can the creeds be defended as vividly mythological language?

It is time to remind ourselves of the context in which this whole business of defending the church's truth claims arises. Dr Williams is challenging the churches to offer our visions....as a way of opening up some of the depth of human choices; defending the truth claims is incidental to giving voice to a vision. The choice we are offering is a religious way of understanding the universe in which we all live, and we are offering it to many people who have already long since rejected religion. The critical human identities which Dr Williams speaks of as under 'construction' can hardly be expected never to have heard of Jesus; it is to be anticipated that they have heard of him often enough, but have decided that there is nothing in him for them. We shall be offering our choice to urbane humanists and convinced atheists, many of whom who have made up their minds and will require convincing that re-opening the matter is worth the trouble it may cause. The question is, in what terms are we supposed to offer that choice? There is a subsidiary question as to what stance we should adopt in presuming to offer it.

The first problem is that the church has long since reduced its 'vision' to a set of propositions. It is difficult to escape from the propositional strait jacket because the church has painted itself into a corner, for understandable reasons, by claiming that its propositions about the underlying reality have been revealed to it by God. It is difficult for a devout church person to suppose that God has ever got anything wrong, much more so to admit it. It has occurred to me that an examination of how the creeds came to be adopted might help us to admit something less damaging. It might help us to see that some of the past choices made in the church were made by fallible human beings like ourselves. If one is going to admit anything at all, it would be easier to admit that.

Leaving the warmth of the library. Another reason for looking from an earthly and mechanical viewpoint at how the church's truth claims came to be substituted for a vision is that those outside hold precisely that mechanical viewpoint. Many discussions between church persons appear to me to take place in a world of their own, sometimes in a library of their own, in which the church's truth claims never have to be defended because everyone assumes that they are true. It is cold outside, and it is, it seems to me, important to bear in the forefront of one's mind that in the mission field our detailed truth claims are widely regarded as non-sense. If non-sense can not be defended, the possibility has to be faced that, if we are ever to get through to the obstinate unbelievers out there, it may have to be placed reverently on one side. At present many of us find it easier simply not to address unbelievers at all.

Conflict with 'reality' as we think we know it. One of the reasons we find it easier not to try to sell the church's truth claims is that one or two of them appear to conflict with 'reality' (as we know it in other non-religious contexts) so sharply that

the conflict simply can not be ignored. It is in the context of defending the church's truth claims to his own people that Dr Williams offered his 'vivid mythological language' suggestion. The very existence of that suggestion is not going to escape the notice of a convinced atheist; he or she will simply think, "I told you so; even they don't believe it". Although Dr Williams's 'vivid mythological language' suggestion was not originally made for external consumption, Dr Williams has, by publishing it in a volume of addresses, deliberately brought it out into the world of the religious marketplace. I can not defend it in the marketplace which I know. I shall have to go back a bit to explain why.

Relying on the church's own documents and understandings, I have understood the creeds to be constructions made by humans out of building blocks in scripture believed to have been supplied by God. If we go back to Part 7 and reconsider the tools used in the construction of the creeds, we can see that those tools would no longer be recognised as suitable for putting together any intellectual construction whatever.

The defects in the ancient intellectual tools. No one today accepts as legitimate the methods of argument by which the doctrines were constructed. Many of those arguments would be simply laughed out of court if put forward today anywhere in the Western world in relation to any subject but 'religion'. A modern person, having had the mechanics of Paul's terminological way of arguing explained to him or her, is embarrassed to find that the church still insists on theological conclusions which he has drawn from such arguments. A person living in the modern world can only dismiss with a smile the typological way of arguing about matters - he or she can not be convinced by it, or suppose that any rational conclusion about Jesus can be drawn from it. The man or woman in the pew does not consider that *ousia*, *prosopon* and *hupostasis* have any greater purchase on the universe in which he or she lives than trolls, goblins, or elves. They are all constructs of a mind which thinks in different categories from those prevalent in the world in which we live

The characteristics of the building blocks. The prime characteristic of the building blocks of the faith propositions is that they have for centuries been understood by the church to be statements of fact made by God about reality. They are in a special category of statement all their own, known as 'divine revelation'. A statement made in vividly mythological language is in a different category altogether; the use of the word 'mythological' shows that we are not dealing with fact at all. There has never been any suggestion in the past that the statements in the creeds did not all belong to the one category of divine revelation of fact. Up till now 'He came down from heaven' (and all the rest) had the same status as 'crucified' - all were revealed facts about reality which, if you were a believer, you were required to accept and affirm. The historical correctness, or incorrectness of the statements in the creeds, their consonance, or absence of consonance, with the laws of thermodynamics, was simply not relevant. It is precisely the ancient and well-known characteristic of the building blocks as revelations of fact which is now causing us trouble.

Can the creeds be saved as 'vividly mythological language'? In Part 1 we heard Dr Williams admitting in effect that 'he came down from heaven' and 'incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary' were indefensible truth claims: "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." Dr Williams believes that the birth of Jesus was 'a wonderful event'. We can agree that the birth was an event; but how to express the 'wonderfulness' of it - the significance of it, what it means - in a different and more intelligible way? Dr Williams wants to find a way; but he finds himself in a very tight corner.

Having taken over both creeds and the doctrine of the Trinity wholesale from Rome at the time of the Reformation, Canterbury is in no position to distance itself from Rome's account of the basis on which they were arrived at. When it comes to interpretation of scripture, Canterbury refuses to accept the belief of the Roman Catholic church that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the first Bishop of Rome. But, unfortunately, the vividly mythological language road takes one far beyond mere interpretation. Interpreting is one thing; deciding that historical factuality, or a change in any one's understanding of the universe, is relevant to any statement in the creed and that the matter is not concluded because God has authored certain manuscripts which reveal the 'fact' is quite another. From where he stands Dr Williams could not overtly question the received mechanics of divine revelation, even supposing that, even for a moment, he wanted to.

The constraints within the church. Quite apart from that intellectual hurdle, severe constraints from Dr Williams's own people would still crowd round him. Many in the church will find it simply untrue to say that the truth claims in the creeds can not be defended. Many in the church will find it unnerving to read that the statements in the creeds can not be defended; I hope that they will take courage from the fact that Peter and Paul seem to have got on perfectly well without them. Many in the church will find it unsettling to be told that two of the truth claims in the creeds are only vividly mythological language.

As a matter of mission. For myself, I do not think that for the purposes of proclaiming a message in the Western world Dr Williams's suggestion goes anything like far enough. He is trying to patch material selected on the basis of a myth with new mythic material made of a different fabric. Here I must, I am afraid, turn and bite the hand that has fed me. It is, I suggest, simply not credible to change one's stance after proclaiming for more than 1600 years that the creeds contain statements of fact about reality validated by God, and say, "well, no; some of them (but not others) are not actually statements of fact at all; they are really vividly mythological passages of language about the strictly unknowable". It is particularly unconvincing to do this about the statements in the creeds one by one

as you are driven by external circumstances to do so. It seems to me that this really will not do in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It may be true that, as we now understand matters, certain of the statements in the creeds are vividly mythological; but saying so will cut no ice with the outside world until we come clean about the whole lot and admit that, if you are prepared to grit your teeth and draw conclusions from the work of biblical scholars, all the truth claims look rather less defensible than church people have long supposed. Dr Williams's challenge is to defend the church's truth claims in terms which the newspaper-reading public of today can understand. In the previous sentence 'today' means 'today'. The stock character of the legal profession, 'the man on the Clapham omnibus', would, if he were still alive, now be about a hundred and forty-five years old. If we had to try to defend the truth claims to him, we would go about it quite differently. And differently again to a tribesman from Papua New Guinea, or a visitor from Mars.

Having it both ways. I admire the courage of Dr Williams in trying to give his people 'space'; everyone inside the church will have some idea of the constraints under which he has to operate; but to assert that one or two statements in the creeds are, after all, no more than vividly mythological language without coming clean about the rest is, as it seems to me, bound to appear to any one outside the church as, put crudely, an attempt to change one's story about 'the facts' in order to preserve one's accustomed position of having it both ways about the Bible (as to which see Part 16). To a plain man it seems reasonably obvious that, either God is the author of the Old and New Testaments, or He is not. There is no half-way house visible to the secular evolutionary eye on the leap of faith that God is the author of certain old manuscripts. What then is the role of 'Scholarship' in church circles? The matter can perhaps be clarified by asking a series of questions. Can we identify the oldest and, possibly, the best manuscripts of the books of the Bible with the assistance of the work of scholars? Yes. Can we go further and use the work of scholars to determine the most accurate, or useful, modern translation of the Bible? Yes. Can we write learned commentaries about the biblical texts with the assistance of the work of scholars? Yes. Can we admit that the work of scholars throws doubt on a number of propositions of the received Faith? Heavens, no; God is the author of the books after all (see further Part 16 under 'no-fly zone'). Is that really a self-consistent use of the work of scholars?

The 'liberals' dilemma. It seems to me, as I mentioned in Part 12 under the heading Christian confidence, that there are two alternative ways of looking at Scripture, that they are true alternatives, and that, as a matter of common sense, they are mutually exclusive. On the one hand there is the belief that God is the author. Inevitably, you have to tread gingerly round anything of which you believe God to be the author; you may interpret it, but you can not question it. On the other is the belief that Scripture contains (amongst much other matter of doubtful relevance to our purposes) common-or-garden human witness statements, many of them about an extraordinary series of events, the meaning of which we trust that God is still busy trying to make clear to us. As it seems to me, it is an almost universal foible of clerical persons who would not dream of approaching individual texts otherwise than in a scholarly way to shift to Inerrancy Mode as though on autopilot when faced with a matter of doctrine. This is done without any apparent sense of a

possible intellectual inconsistency. Inerrancy Mode is, perhaps, built into their deepest unexamined myth of reality? I hope that that is not an unfair suggestion.

I want to ask on what basis we in the field are supposed to try to defend any longer to people outside the church a churchly attempt to have it both ways about the same words in the Bible.

In Part 15, another not wholly unconnected difficulty we in the field face in dealing with the outside world - telling the truth about our faith.