

## Defending the church's truth claims

### 16. Who will lead the defence? the no-fly zone; the church 'owes it' to those outside

Understandably enough, Dr Williams did not in his Dimbleby lecture directly raise the questions, Who is to lead the defence of the church's truth claims? and What are isolated pockets of troops in the field to do about the Christian vision, if the Maginot Line proves to be indefensible? But these questions are of immediate concern to us, and I consider them in this piece.

Will clerical persons lead the defence of the church's truth claims? They would at first sight appear to be the obvious leaders of the defence; but I do not think we can count on them to give us an effective lead.

We should not, I think, underestimate the novelty for many clerical persons of being asked to undertake a detailed defence of the church's truth claims. The climate of 'religion' these last many years has not accustomed them to it. As between different church institutions the emphasis has all been on accentuating the similarities rather than on defending particular insights. It appeared in Part 8 that even the doctrine of salvation may no longer be a burning issue among them. As to the outside world, Christians have for years been able to assume that everyone in England accepts as a law of nature that the best sort of monotheism has always accommodated three persons, and, as a consequence, the Greek of many clerical persons is a bit rusty to explain the subtleties. It is unlikely that anyone will have to deal at one go with all the tiresome secular points that I have been looking at in these pieces; but many clerical persons will have had very little recent practice at all, and may feel that they already have many other persons on their plate beyond the 'critical human identities' with whom these pieces have been particularly concerned. It is unlikely that many clerical persons will feel that this defence is one of their priorities in view of other commitments. We need to be realistic in our expectations.

Many clerical persons believe in the inerrancy of the scriptures and do not accept that there is any need to 'defend' any credal claim. Their 'defence' is, "as it is no more than a restatement of what God has revealed in scripture, I can not admit

that this truth claim needs defending; take it or leave it, and you would be wise to take it, for experience shows that, if you do so, you will come to Jesus." That way of defending things is powerfully effective for some (but not for everyone) outside the church.

It looks as though it is on so-called 'liberals' that we shall have to rely. They are accustomed to deal with the work of scholars and sensitive to many of the difficulties this work may raise in the mind of the secular enquirer. How many will feel able to undertake the task? Will the defence be made entirely in the vernacular which the hearer can understand?

There have been many works of critical scholarship published since Albert Schweitzer published in 1906 the book known in its English translation of 1910 as *\*The Quest for the Historical Jesus\**. There has been a small explosion of 'historical Jesus' studies since SGF Brandon suggested that Jesus was really a political figure, a revolutionary, in 1967. There has been a revolution in our understanding of Judaism in the time of Jesus since EP Sanders published his *\*Paul and Palestinian Judaism\** SCM Press Ltd, 1977, (or so a great many scholars seem to think). The fact is that we know more about Jesus and his times than any previous generation of Christians born since the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE; more than all the great popes and doctors of the Middle Ages; more than Gregory VII, more than Innocent III, more than Thomas Aquinas; more than Martin Luther, more even than John Calvin. You would have thought that all this new knowledge would be of great assistance in putting the matter of Jesus before persons outside the church who set great store on information and reason. But no. This new material can not be deployed to best effect because of a 'no-fly zone' in place above the faith propositions in the creeds.

It is worth enquiring who imposes the no-fly zone and to what purpose. It seems to me that there has been a prolonged neglect, amounting in the end to a refusal, to draw any conclusion from the work of the church's own scholars which throws doubt, or might throw doubt, or could by any person be supposed to be capable of throwing doubt, on any of the church's current faith propositions. There is in effect a tacit no-fly zone for scholars above the creeds. It is not clear that the policy was ever formally agreed upon and minuted. It is not difficult to see that it is the current leaders of church institutions who effectively set the limits of the no-fly zone and that they do so as servants for and on behalf of God. Church leaders do not explain their position and we are left to imagine how such a curious intellectual stance could come to be regarded as normal in church quarters. I suggest that it is time that there was some debate in the pews as to whether the imposition of a no-fly zone is ultimately productive, or counter-productive. Nobody supposes that God needs this protection, nor that Jesus does. Is it that persons in the pews inside

churches need protection? Is it that particular faith propositions about the nature of the underlying reality need protection? Is it that those in authority believe that the church would crumble if any serious doubt were to be thrown on the faith propositions in the creeds? (It would be perfectly understandable to maintain the no-fly zone in order to attempt to preserve a church institution, and it might as a matter of judicious choice be proper to do so; but then again it might not). There are serious issues here and they can not sensibly be shelved indefinitely, because the fact that a no-fly zone is in fact imposed is not neutral. It sends out a powerful message to any one who happens to be listening. It is not difficult to imagine what conclusions a sceptic who happens to notice its existence is likely to draw. A prolonged refusal to draw any conclusion from the work of the church's own scholars which throws, or might throw, or could by some naïf person be supposed to be capable of throwing, doubt on any of the church's current faith propositions sends a clear message to the sceptic outside. And the message is, surely, two-fold and it is this: first, that the church suspects that it is not founded on a rock after all, but on a flimsy structure which could not for one moment withstand close scrutiny, and, secondly, that the church fears that, if it came to the crunch, God could not cope with the modern world which humankind has made. Is that really what we want to be heard to say?

What can we reasonably expect of clerical persons whom others categorise as 'liberal'? I suspect that we can expect a certain reluctance to engage in a defence in the vernacular, not only because of the no-fly zone, but also because of the inherent ambiguity in their position (as I see it). It seems to me that the whole culture of the church and its method of training clerical persons these last many years has conditioned persons training for the ministry or the priesthood to looking at individual texts in a scholarly way, but to switch to Inerrancy Mode when faced with a faith proposition. The switch is, I suspect, absolutely automatic and involves no conscious decision. It will, I imagine, have come as a shock to them that someone could suggest that this is an attempt to have it both ways about the Bible. It will be shocking in part because they are not conscious of making an attempt to do anything, let alone any such deplorable thing, and partly because it is not normally in their nature to try to have things both ways. It is painful to suggest that, if you persist in treating the same words on the same pages of the same books in one way in seeking an answer to one intellectual problem, but in a quite different way when seeking the answer to another, it may even look from outside as though there is a question of intellectual integrity at stake here. These implied criticisms may be just, or they may be unjust. It is only if a clerical person accepts my suggestion that there are two genuinely alternative approaches to the Bible and that as a matter of common sense they are mutually exclusive that the question of making up the mind to adopt one alternative consistently throughout arises. At that point a clerical person may justly become prey to indecision. At that point the burden of the cure of souls and the vows they have taken will almost inevitably tip the scales in favour of the status quo. Conscientious clerical persons will decide that for excellent practical reasons it is better to go on quietly 'having

things both ways', if that is what I choose to call it. So we can't count on all of them.

Will the defence of those who attempt the task be effective? At the heart of their defence of the truth claims a contradiction will lie, and it is difficult to suppose that that contradiction will go unnoticed. The clerical persons we are considering in this paragraph do not whole-heartedly believe that God is the author of holy scripture, but, for a number of reasons which they find compelling, they do not question the propositions about reality in the ancient creeds. They believe that God is the God of history up to a point, but hesitate to draw any conclusion potentially 'damaging' to 'the Faith' from the church's history. They think that, on the whole, biblical scholarship is a good thing, rather than something intrinsically evil; but can not summon up the blood to apply the work of biblical scholars to the contents of the creeds. Being fully convinced neither that God is the author of scripture, nor that God is still actively at work in the labours of biblical scholars in recent history, they find themselves on what used to be called 'the horns of a dilemma'. That is not a position from which a persuasive defence of anything is likely to be achieved.

I regard 'putting the old creeds in the church safe in the vestry' as saying in effect, "yes; but I wouldn't put it quite that way now"; but to some even that looks too much like abandoning the creeds altogether. As to my suggestion that a serious case can be made that the creeds may actually be misleading about the underlying reality, clerical persons must of necessity approach the defence of the church's truth claims under the constraint of their vows. They are bound by their vows to defend as best they can the traditional faith propositions in the creeds, or some more contemporary-sounding trinitarian-type substitute. They do not have the option of turning back to Peter and Paul and proclaiming a no-frills monotheism, even if they wished to do so, and even if that proclamation to the modern world were guaranteed success, which, of course, it is not.

When it comes to mounting a thorough-going defence of the church's truth claims in terms which 'critical human identities' outside might find convincing, it looks as though we are probably on our own.

In these circumstances I think we are entitled to say with the exemplary disobedient soldier on a 'charge' (immortalised in the Army's \*Manual of Military Discipline\*), "I will lay down my arms and soldier no more", adding on our own account, "the truth claims being indefensible as far as I can see (and the officers not contradicting this), I shall waste no more time trying to defend the solution to yesterday's Christian crossword. I shall set out on pilgrimage, with such like-minded persons as I shall have the good fortune to fall in with, to try to re-discover the Christian vision.

We must, I think, hope that clerical persons may one day (preferably before it is too late) come to be prepared to recognise openly that what Peter, Paul and James believed might (if appropriate circumstances were ever to arise) point the way towards the construction of a respectable alternative to the 'traditional' belief, which, so far as it consists of propositions, is no longer intelligible. But we must

expect no overt help in present circumstances in constructing such an alternative way of putting the matter of Jesus to our contemporaries. If we in the pew could somehow help and encourage each other, who knows what might come of it? - for good or ill, of course - that is not in our hands.

Taxed with undermining the Faith with scholarship, Dr Jenkins once memorably Bishop of Durham, now long retired, asked his questioner "Has God stopped work?" As I have already indicated, there is, I believe, another equally fundamental question to be asked about having it both ways: "Do we in our heart of hearts fear that, if we put the creeds reverently in the church safe in the vestry, God would leave himself without witnesses?"

As to the past, it must be obvious that I find it much more difficult than others do to be sure which of the many things that happened in the past were actually guided by the Spirit. The poet Ovid pointed out many years ago that as often as he turned his baser nature out with a pitchfork, just so often it came trotting back once more. It is the human factor which makes me doubt that church history is an unmitigated account of what God intended. It is because of the damnable human factor that the view of church history which affirms that what is was intended by God gets perilously close to an affirmation that might is right.

As to the future; the church 'owes it' to those outside. I take the view that a 'missionary' church which operates in the Western world owes it to those outside to pick up its courage to draw conclusions from more than a century of work by dedicated biblical scholars. In these pieces I have been trying to use the work of biblical scholars (so far as I have come across it), first, in order to discover how (as a matter of history) the church has arrived at its current truth claims and, secondly, to form a view as to whether those truth claims can be defended - defended, that is, in terms which those people outside the church who set great store on reason could reasonably be expected to find convincing. I have suggested that the creeds adopted at Nicaea and Chalcedon are no more than a human way of putting faith claims about an underlying reality, not God's way of putting it, nor the underlying reality itself. I have suggested that the creeds are no more than one way of putting faith claims relating to Jesus, not the only way of putting faith claims. I have pointed out that Peter and Paul did not believe the church's current faith propositions and understood the underlying reality and Jesus' relationship with it quite differently. I have noted that the vision and approach of Peter and Paul might make an easier exemplar for modern persons (see further Part 17). Dr Williams referred in his Dibleby lecture to "opening up some of the depth of human choices". I hope I have begun to open up the idea that the Bible offers followers of Jesus two choices, first, a choice of apostolic tradition and, secondly, closely allied with that, a choice as to whether or not they perceive and proclaim Jesus as a Person in a Trinity. I have put forward the idea that, looking at the matter historically, we can derive from the letters of Paul a reasonably clear understanding of the earliest apostolic tradition represented by Peter and James, which I have characterised as a 'no-frills monotheism'. I suggest that the answer we find to the problem of how we can properly understand that God deals with us humans will be decisive of the choice we make. I have suggested that this sort of problem has

arisen for Christians before, notably for Paul trying to understand and make sense of God's relationship with his original chosen people, the Jews. I have suggested that the particular question we face as to how God may properly be understood to act towards us can be put in concrete terms by asking whether we believe that God is at work today in the labours of biblical scholars and historians, or not, or only up to a point. I have suggested that we shall get little help from the church in answering this basic question because the church itself is in two minds and, worse still, those from whom we might reasonably expect a lead are also themselves in two minds. Many think that the answer is that God revealed all, once and for all, long ago when he authored certain manuscripts. However anxious all this may make us, the fact that we seem to be in rather a lonely position does not remove our obligation to try to talk to those outside in terms which they can understand. It remains up to us to try as best we can to satisfy what I believe to be the church's obligation day by day.

Religion and war and another unavoidable choice for Christians. To my mind the most chilling matter that has emerged in these pieces is that a belief in the inerrancy of scripture is embedded in the credal foundations of Christianity as we know it. All Christians are committed to it (more or less, that is: see Parts 14 and 15). This puts so-called 'liberals' (who actively believe something quite different about the old manuscripts) in a false position; but, worse than that, the belief in the inerrancy of one's Holy Book, in its guise as 'fundamentalism', has brought the world to war. Belief in the inerrancy of 'my' Holy Book is the scourge of our time, not just a little local difficulty which is tearing institutional churches apart. Some Jews, some Christians in the Bible belt in the United States and some Muslims are happy to be at war because they all believe that their cause is underwritten by God. We rightly hear calls for Muslims who are not Fundamentalists to stand up and be counted. I want to suggest that one of the most important choices open to every follower of Jesus today (as important in its way as whether or not he or she buys by way of fair trade, or marches for justice, or for peace) may be whether he or she goes quietly along with fundamentalism, or chooses to assert openly and without any ambiguity whatever that there is another way. Biblical scholars could give a helping hand, if only one side felt able to offer it and the other to accept it. As 'the news' is unfolded before us in the newspapers and on our television screens, do we suppose that a choice on this matter can be avoided much longer?

Choices for those outside the church. Those outside the church see clearly that fundamentalism is an affliction that sooner or later strikes all monotheistic religions which venerate a Holy book. It results in petrification of a once living tradition. What can we say to those who see this so clearly to open up for them 'some of the depth of human choices'?

In Part 17: Can we begin to put the matter of Jesus another way?