

Defending the church's truth claims

7. Building a creed - blocks and intellectual tools

Christmas the festival. It is difficult to imagine the nativity stories without all the trappings, but Christmas was not a festival celebrated by the early church. The climate of opinion was at first against it. Origen, perhaps thinking of the emperors' rude birthday festivals, wrote that in the scriptures sinners alone, not saints, celebrate their birthday. When Christmas was first celebrated, the feast was held in different months in different places. It came to seem useful to hold it on the day of the pagan feast of the unconquered sun and so, perhaps, take some of the heat out of the old religion. It took more than three centuries to shake down into its present date in December.

Christmas the faith. In the meanwhile learned men were busy arguing about 'the faith'. It was a formidable task to make sense of all the material available. As I understand the matter, the original two christological moments gave little trouble. Despite the belief of Paul and presumably of all the first communities of followers, the 'resurrection moment' seems to have sunk without trace. The 'baptismal moment' never caught on.

The early church fathers were faced with Christian writings embodying different traditions and understandings concerning a 'virgin' conception, a 'son of god' and a pre-existent word, ('logos'), or 'wisdom', which became flesh, the relationship between all of which was not immediately obvious. They had no sense of the historical order in which the writings had been written, nor any feeling that the historical order of writing might affect the weight which could be attributed to one rather than another. They did not think in terms of eyewitnesses and 'hearsay'. The building blocks were simply texts all of equal weight embodying the tradition of the apostles, that is, all that was traced by succeeding generations of followers back (as they believed) to Jesus himself through the medium of the apostles.

The building blocks. Apostolic texts were 'given'; but what actually was 'apostolic' was quite undetermined. Our four gospels originally had no named authors. Other writings were 'attributed' to Apostles to give them weight. The Gospel of Thomas begins "These are the secret words which the Living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote. And he said: 'whoever finds the interpretation of these words will not taste death'".(tr. Wilson op. cit. p.285) At first, some followers thought that the statements in that gospel were good building blocks in any argument, others did not. It depended on which community of believers you were a member of.

Broadly speaking, the early fathers approached the writings which they accepted as 'apostolic' as writings inspired by God. The interpretation of scripture came to be governed by perceived tradition - what was everywhere, always and by all people believed (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum*); but not everyone agreed what was the content of this tradition. The problems the early

fathers faced in establishing what was the true faith in the face of differing understandings of the nature of underlying reality engaged the intellectual energies of several generations. The winners recognised each other as the Catholic Church; the losers were vilified as 'heretics'. It is difficult to see how the church could have survived otherwise.

The tools. The intellectual tools which were available to the early fathers, bishop and presbyter, look less than satisfactory to us. From Paul they had learned to argue terminologically, using 'proof texts' found in the Jewish scriptures, usually in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. One did not have to use the whole passage in a proof text; it was permissible to extract a word or a phrase, associate it with another word or phrase in another text and use the result as a 'proof' of your argument. By this means Paul (in Galatians 3. 6-18) 'proves' from Genesis the exact opposite of what chapter 17 of Genesis states in the plainest possible words about the necessity for circumcision of male believers: see EP Sanders *Paul* OUP 1991 at pp 54-60. What Paul 'proved' in this way took its place in 'scripture' when his letters were collected.

Learned men had the tool of typology, which enabled them to discern that persons, objects and events in the Jewish scriptures symbolised and 'prefigured' some person or thing in the life of Jesus.

They had the gift of literalism - the vivid poetic representation of a special relationship as 'sonship' quickly hardened into a physical son, with flesh and blood which were hard to account for. One early solution was to say that Jesus only seemed to be a man, and that the apparent flesh and blood were an illusion. 'John' particularly was fierce against that suggestion.

Bishops and presbyters also had as intellectual tools the subtle concepts of post-classical Greek philosophy - ousia, prosopa, hupostasis.

They had little interest in the biography of Jesus.

Tools we take for granted had not been invented in time for them to use them; they had no 'form criticism', 'redaction criticism', 'Sitz im Leben', or criterion of dissimilarity.

What was orthodoxy?

Each interpreter believed that his understanding of the material was true orthodoxy.

At first, if the bishops in Asia Minor were against you, you could move and hope to find more congenial minds in, say, Alexandria. No final solution of doctrinal problems was possible until five things had happened. First, the fixing of a 'canon' of 'apostolic' writings by the churches of Rome and Asia Minor at some time after 150 CE. Over time that limited both what texts were copied and what texts were regarded as valid ammunition in support of an argument. (It ensured incidentally

that subsequent generations were ignorant of James, the brother of Jesus, and the insights of the first Jewish followers in Jerusalem, who knew Jesus best.) Secondly, the winners had to establish as against the losers that such a thing as a tradition of what was 'everywhere always and by everyone believed' existed and that they possessed it. Thirdly, someone had to undertake the task of trying to reconcile everything in the canonical books in a continuous and systematic way, if necessary accounting for some items as 'allegorical'. Dr Williams suggests (in his book *Arius* SCM Press 2nd Ed 2001 p.148) that the first to attempt to do so was Origen (died c. 254 CE). Fourthly, the conversion of the Roman Emperor, followed by his calling of an ecumenical council, the rulings of which (because the emperor would enforce the rulings) no local council of bishops could safely ignore - Nicaea 325 CE. Fifthly, the establishment by bishops of their exclusive authority as interpreters of the faith by suppressing the authority of learned presbyters, such as Arius. Dr Williams suggests (ibid. p.86 and following) that this also happened about 325 CE. Only then was the way open for a serious attempt to impose one magisterial, apostolic, ever-deepening understanding of the word of God as set down in 'scripture'.

Monotheism. It is, I believe, important to recognise that what was at stake in all this intellectual agonising was nothing less than monotheism. This was the mature insight of the priesthood of the Jewish people. Their tribal God had once been perceived as one amongst many other tribal gods, but by the time of Jesus He had long been recognised as somehow the one true god, (though as Paul's letters show, there were still troublesome 'principalities and powers' to be reckoned with). As Jesus came to be perceived by the pious mind as more and more exalted, monotheism began to appear to be more complicated than anybody had previously supposed.

In Part 8, the various resulting creeds of the churches.