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We Believe in God: A Critique of the Report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England

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What did the Commission have to do ?

The latest in what looks like becoming a series of Doctrine Reports came out in 1986 and was received at the time with a mixture of hostility and indifference. The hostility came, not unnaturally, from those whose own theological position was somewhat more clearly defined than that of the Doctrine Commission; the indifference came from almost everybody else. Three years later it cannot be said that the situation has changed much, and future generations will probably look back to this document, if they refer to it at all, mainly because one of its members was the late Canon Gareth Bennett, whose tragic death towards the end of 1987 brought into the open the problem of liberalism in the higher echelons of the Church.

For students of that phenomenon, this Report will be a document of major importance, since it sets forth as clearly as anyone could expect, what its main tenets are. It is surprising to read in the preface that all the members of the Commission were prepared to stand by every word of the text, and the Chairman not unnaturally congratulates himself and his colleagues on that achievement. However, it is not at all surprising to discover that such widespread agreement was achieved by a form of reductionism and an approach to the subject which must make the average observer question whether the end product can properly be called 'theology' at all! (In this connexion it should be said that the few Evangelical members of the Commission were Biblical scholars of distinction, though not noted for their theological acumen).

The first question we must ask is why did the Commission prepare a Report at all? Is it part of the unstoppable logic of bureaucracy that once such an enterprise is set in motion it cannot be stopped by any force known to man? Has the production of statements become such a matter of course that the Commission's work would seem not to have been done had nothing of this kind come out of it? Especially when the subject for discussion is God, what should a Commission of this type say? Does the Church of England worship a God substantially

different from that of the rest of Christendom, which would make a peculiarly Anglican statement valuable and necessary? Has God changed in some significant way, so that what was previously known about him is now no longer adequate? And what authority does this particular body of people have to make decisions which might eventually be binding on the Church as a whole?

Obviously, when the matter is put in this way, it becomes clear that the Doctrine Commission has virtually nothing to say that could possibly be of any long-term value, and the indifference with which its conclusions were generally greeted is little more than a commonsense reaction by people who have better things to do with their time. However, as the members of the Commission would doubtless be the first to point out, that is not the way in which they looked at the matter at all! For the weight of this Report has really very little to do with God, understood as an objective Being to whom we must submit according to the pattern of His revelation to us. Anyone who thinks along those lines would have been very out of place in these discussions, and the end result would seem virtually incomprehensible to him. The starting point, as the title of the Report suggests is with us, the present-day members of the Church of England, who as it turns out, have a tendency to believe in God in spite of the social trends of our age (or possibly because there are new, and as yet undetected social trends pointing back in a theistic direction).

The Church is presented as a body which offers consolation to those who are still inclined to say, with St. Augustine, that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. For these people, the kind who seek a theistic answer to life's questions along fairly traditional lines, the Church of England is specially privileged to be able to offer a haven for self-expression! In total defiance of everything for which it has always stood (and been understood to have stood, both by its supporters and by its opponents), the authors of this Report are bold to say (p.32):

If the Church is to become fully itself, it will not do so by attempting to achieve a doctrinal definition to which all can assent, for some would always be unable to assent and would then risk being 'unchurched'.

What then, is supposed to happen during the recital of the Creed at Holy Communion? Should those unable to assent to it disappear into the lavatories and return with hands washed for the Peace? It sometimes appears that what the Commission is offering is theology for the 1960s generation—freedom to indulge in virtually unlimited hedonism, secure in the knowledge that one can always go back to middle-class suburbia when the party is over! Of course, not everybody will find Christianity helpful as a description of their personal odyssey of faith, and they will have to look elsewhere,

probably in a different world religion. But there is no need to worry about this, because as the Report says:

there is . . . much in Christian and other traditions which overlaps—enough to suggest that all are in touch in some degree with a single reality which, in these different idioms, is acknowledged and worshipped as God (p.13).

In other words, you pays your money and you takes your choice!

However, it should not be supposed that the Church has nothing to offer agnostics (or even atheists). Here the Commission draws for support on the comprehensiveness and establishment of the Church of England (p.10):

It is part of the history of the Church of England that, as a national Church, it has maintained some kind of contact (sometimes uneasy, sometimes fruitful) with a large number of people who, though they might well not call themselves Christians, nevertheless continue to 'read' the universe in a way that postulates the existence of God.

Perhaps, in a Church defined like this, there really ought not to be a place for Jesus of Nazareth—after all, he was a foreigner, nasty to the establishment, rather convinced about the rightness of his own fairly clear beliefs, and therefore hardly entitled to the benefits which a national Church liberally confers on its citizen/members!

Arriving at Doctrine

In the light of all this, how are we to understand the rôle of doctrine in the Church? Doctrine presumably has something to do with a definition of faith which can be communicated to others who might like to know what Christians believe about a given topic. Traditionally, doctrinal statements have been composed as prescriptions—they state what Christians *ought* to believe, whether or not in actual fact those calling themselves by this name actually *do* believe these things, or even understand what they mean. In this perspective, doctrine carries a note of authority, based on the revelation of the Word of God. But in the understanding of the Commission, 'doctrine' is not prescriptive, but *descriptive*. This in fact, is the key to understanding the entire Report. What the Commission is doing is trying to describe what most Church members nowadays probably believe as a matter of fact, not what they should believe as a logical consequence of their Christian commitment.

The method sounds attractive, not least because it contains a democratic touch which suggests that every man's view is as good as his neighbour's, but its defects are obvious. For a start, how is one to know what the modern man in the pew actually thinks? Who indeed, is the modern 'man in the pew'? What appears at first sight to be a

straightforward reference to you and me turns out on closer inspection to be a pure abstraction—the person whose faith this Report is supposed to describe does not in fact exist. What does (or did) exist is a group of highly *unrepresentative* scholars who, by virtue of a certain liberal outlook acquired by their training in a modern British university, have reached a consensus which is scarcely intelligible, let alone acceptable, to anyone not familiar with those particular circles! The narrowness of the base on which these would-be democrats are building is astonishing, and the unsatisfactory nature of the final result is in no small measure due to it.

In deference to what might be recognized as the Anglican theological tradition, the Report accepts that Scripture, reason and ‘the cumulative experience of Christians’ (presumably what used to be known as ‘tradition’?) must be taken into account in formulating Christian doctrine. The order of these authorities is significant, as it soon becomes apparent that it is the last which exerts the controlling influence over the Commission’s work. Scripture in particular is dismissed in the following words (pp. 3–4):

The Bible is not the kind of book which can easily be made to yield a single and consistent doctrine. It consists of a large number of attempts to speak about God and to ‘read’ the world and human existence in the light of a belief in God, arising from various situations in the history and experience, first of the people of Israel, and then of the Christian Church. Certain fundamental beliefs, such as that God is one, and that he is the creator of all that is, run right through it. But the more carefully one studies the Bible, the more one becomes aware of ideas of God and responses to him which seem actually to conflict with one another.

However, this statement of the Bible’s inconsistency needs to be read over against another assertion which appears later on (p.56):

For the modern reader, the problem of the Bible is not that it does not hang together but rather that it seems to hang together almost too well, to make sense of chains of events that strike us as much more aimless than the Biblical writers let them be.

It appears that this Report is at least as contradictory as anything in the Bible! But to return to the matter at hand, the conflicts referred to are defined along familiar lines: justice versus love, transcendence versus immanence, peace and non-violence versus war and vengeance. Every serious theologian knows, and (*pace* the Commission) has always known about these paradoxes, and a good deal of the theological tradition of Christendom has devoted itself to understanding how apparent contradictions of this kind can be held together without losing overall coherence. There is no easy solution to them; if there were, the theological tradition presumably would not exist, or would

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at least have a very different character to the one that it actually has. But to say that something is not easy does not mean that it is impossible, nor does it mean that 'modern man' can afford to ignore what centuries of tradition have said on the subject. Curiously enough, the Commission itself appears to recognize this when it says (p.5):

Doctrine can be successfully formulated only from within a community which already shares certain options out of the range of possible interpretations, and has entrenched this 'tradition' in its style of worship, thought and conduct.

This statement, which incidentally might serve as a very useful description of the New Testament Church's interpretation of the Scriptures as opposed to that of Judaism, takes us back to the concept of tradition, which in the case of the modern Church, is the fruit of many centuries of thought, reflection and debate. What has resulted is a coherent and defensible position which may be appropriated by individual believers in different ways, but which in itself is far less variable than is suggested here. The authors of this Report have confused doctrine with *spirituality*, which is not at all the same thing. Doctrine may be described as the set of principles on which the practice of the Christian life (spirituality) is worked out—the two are related, of course, but not in such a way as to make only one form of application valid. To ignore this distinction, as the Commission evidently has done, is fatal to any discussion of the subject, and will of necessity result in a form of subjectivity which can only obscure the underlying facts of God's existence and self-revelation.

However, this confusion is a minor one compared with what follows a few paragraphs further on (p.5):

If Christianity, along with other great religions, believes that God has revealed himself through the medium of human speech and recorded words, then it cannot look for fixed, normative and universally agreed doctrine.

This statement is sheer nonsense. How can 'fixed, normative and universally agreed doctrine' be possible, except through the medium of human speech? Have the members of the Commission never heard of the legal tradition (very prominent in Scripture), which seeks to achieve precisely this, and knows that only by carefully defining human speech is such fixity possible? And do they not understand that the whole Western tradition of the 'rule of law' has developed because of an intense desire to give expression to human longing for freedom within the security of an objectively ordered society? A God who revealed himself through some form of mystery would offer neither freedom nor security, but tyranny mediated through those who know how to play on human emotions in the presence of the supernatural.

Of course, as we might expect, this statement is contradicted only a few lines later (p.6):

God will not violate human categories of thought. This is a significant assumption to make about one who, by definition, transcends them.

Once again, we discover the underlying illogicality of the Report's premises. On the one hand, God's use of human language forbids us to say anything 'fixed' about him; on the other, God's self-restraint in confining himself to human categories of thought presumably implies that the definitions needed for that thought to operate are not inappropriately applied to him! No doubt it is not insignificant that at the end of the argument we discover that the modern '*thirst for meaning is a factor which must be taken account of in any serious presentation of a doctrine of God*' (p.13). After pages of argument we have finally returned, by the back door, to the opening words of St. John's Gospel!

However, instead of returning to that dubiously authoritative source,—not St. John's Gospel—we are plunged into a lengthy discussion of epistemology, in which the assumptions underlying the Report are further clarified. We are told quite openly that theology begins from human experience, and this is declared to be one of the main principles on which the Report is based (p.28). Revelation, it turns out, is the objectification of this over a long period of time (p.26):

Theology inherits the long and well-winnowed experience of women and men, that there is One who makes a demand upon them . . . Because that demand is an objective reality, it issues in revelation, particularly in the sense that, through the effect of the divine demand on others, God speaks to us. This divine Word is mediated through the circumstances, concepts, lives and actions of God's own creation, and therefore requires interpretation.

Can anyone explain what this is supposed to mean? Who gives the revelation, and to whom? Who receives it, and how? Above all, who discerns between true and false (if such categories can be made to apply), and what criteria are they supposed to use to do it? When we are told, a little later, that '*theological models, whether boldly pictorial or philosophically abstract, are creative precisely because they are not literal descriptions*' (p.28), we are at a loss to know what is supposed to be meant. Theology is here being contrasted to the natural sciences (are they *uncreative?*), but the underlying impression given is that the imagination has free rein, with nothing left to control it. Anyone who questions any part of the procedure can just be dismissed as being 'literalistic'!

As examples of discarded literalism we are presented with the following (p.29):

We no longer believe, for example, that God is correctly described as a being seated on a celestial throne who regularly consigns large numbers of human beings to a place of torment somewhere below the earth, any more than we believe that creation is correctly described as an event which began at 6 o'clock in the evening of 22nd October in the year 4004 BC and took 144 hours to complete.

Is there any point in saying that the first of these images is not 'literal' in the same way that the second one is? Dare we suggest that there might be a difference between the first, which is found in the Bible and especially on the lips of Jesus himself, and the second, which is no more than a speculation of Archbishop Ussher in the seventeenth century? Would any of the authors of this Report accept that there is a fundamental difference between these two examples which ought to be respected? Once more we see how confused their thinking is, and how unreliable the criteria which they have used for making judgments about the Christian theological inheritance.

The Doctrine of God

The main section of the Report is given over to an extended discussion of the development of the Christian doctrine of God, which is divided into three distinct stages. These are preceded by a chapter entitled 'The God of the Bible', which deals with elements common to all three, and engages the reader with the concept of 'sacred history'. Great attention is paid here to the consummation of the story of salvation, in line with the modern rediscovery of the importance of Biblical apocalyptic. The general argument follows lines recognized by the mainstream of current liberal scholarship, and there will be a few surprises here for the reader who is familiar with this material. The first stage in the evolution of the Christian doctrine of God deals with the doctrine of Jesus, which turns out to be an examination of the Old Testament. It is assumed without argument that that is what Jesus believed and taught; any further development is put down to subsequent generations. Furthermore, the Report adopts a radical 'developmental' approach which most certainly could not have been held by Jesus (p.72):

. . . though it is possible to perceive primitive ideas which are eventually discarded, the process is not a matter of deliberate change, but of a gradual enlarging of perspective, which eventually effects radical correction without denial of the past.

Need one add that this is in total contrast to what both Jesus and Paul taught, namely that the primitive purity of Abrahamic religion was subsequently narrowed by the Mosaic law, which by the time of Jesus had totally obscured the original meaning of God's covenant with Israel?

It is in line with this that the disciples of Jesus appear as religious geniuses and theological innovators, turning a misunderstood rabbi into the Son of God in the wake of their experience of his resurrection. Whether this can properly be regarded as a historical event or not is not clearly stated. The authors of the Report, working under the shadow of controversy raised by precisely this issue at the time of the consecration of the Bishop of Durham (1984), knew that they would come under the sharpest scrutiny at this point, and they respond with statements which make it clear that belief in the resurrection as a historical event is acceptable, at least. In fact, the logic of their position demands that they admit this, since the main evidence for the event is the disciples' experience, and the Report is built on the primacy of experience for the religious life.

It is in the third stage of the account of the development of the doctrine of God that the appeal to experience receives its widest and most consistent application. This is in the matter of the doctrine of the Trinity which is discussed not so much in terms of Biblical evidence (of which there is more than many people today would care to admit) and historical debate (of which there has been plenty), but of the worshipping experience of the Church. For example, we are reminded on page 104 that:

Christians know that there is something wholly inappropriate . . . in saying that 'God the Father died on the cross', even if they cannot give a coherent explanation of the reason.

Why this should be so is left unexplained. Is it because most Christians lack the theological education which is necessary to understand and refute the arguments of patripassianism? Or is it because this is a 'mystery' which the worshipping mind resolves by adopting a spirit of devotion in the presence of the incomprehensible, but which it makes no attempt to understand rationally? No-one would wish to belittle the importance of prayer and the devotional life; indeed, it is refreshing to see these things being given so much attention in a Report like this. But it also needs to be said that effective prayer and devotion *rest on true doctrine*, elaborated over the centuries. The real reason why most Christians know that it is inappropriate to refer to the death of the father on the cross is that they have been taught otherwise by an ancient tradition of prayer which was itself designed to express a clear doctrinal understanding of the matter. Anglicans, in particular, have no excuse not to realize this, since the *Book of Common Prayer* was written and revised almost entirely for doctrinal reasons. Cranmer knew what he believed and wrote accordingly; he did not discover his belief as he went along!

The last chapters of this Report are frequently moving in their appeal for a renewed devotional life, and it would be impossible to

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disagree with this, but at the same time the primacy of doctrine over devotional practice needs to be reasserted, and the idea that a revival of the latter is conceivable without the former knocked firmly on the head.

In conclusion, what can we say about a Report of this kind? It will be obvious from the above that anyone who accepts the Bible as the revealed Word of God, and who draws from this the conclusion that we must submit ourselves to its authority rather than dissect it under ours will find this Report highly uncongenial, and in places even incomprehensible. What it most certainly is *not* is a statement of the current beliefs of the members of the Church of England, at least if the latter are supposed to include Evangelicals (and those who are doctrinally, as opposed to merely ritually, Catholic).

This Report makes it as clear as any document can that ours is a different religion, based on different principles and pointing in a different direction. No consistent Evangelical could have signed this Report in good conscience; most could not even have begun to enter the kind of discussions on which it must have been based. On page after page, the Evangelical reader feels compelled to cry out for a different set of presuppositions, for a different method and (obviously) for a different series of conclusions. There is really no way around this, and the sooner the true nature of the issue is made plain, the easier it will be to begin real theological debate. We cannot hope to compromise with the liberal establishment; as it is currently constituted, Evangelicals can only walk away in disbelief or succumb to its charms. What is needed is a new start on altogether different lines.

May God give us the grace to do this, and to honour his name both in our worship and in our confession of him.

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