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Believing the believable: we need to talk

Has much of Christianity become a case of believing the unbelievable, asks Hilary Wakeman

'There are parts of the Creed that I don't actually believe, but I like saying it.' A young man said at a recent gathering. I am beginning to think that what he said is a clue to what is happening in all our churches, Catholic and Protestant. It could be showing us what lies at the root of the decline of Christianity.

Two thousand years ago there lived a man called Jesus whose teachings altered the history of the world. His own personal godliness gave those teachings power, and made them live into the centuries ahead. But after his death the story of his life was mythologised by his followers, as so often happened in those times. The followers themselves became the building blocks of a vast institution. When disputes arose, particularly concerning the nature of Jesus - just how godly was he? - then the church authorities, and even secular authorities like the Emperor Constantine, wrote out formulations of belief to which all Christians were required to assent. This was a time when the earth was thought to be flat, and heaven and hell to be actual geographical places above and below the earth. Naturally, the beliefs about Jesus fitted into that understanding of the world. Jesus was said to have come down from heaven, and ascended into it again. As our understanding of the universe grew, our theological statements were left behind. As late as 1950 the then Pope was defining as an Article of Faith the idea that Jesus's mother Mary was 'assumed' into heaven after her death: that her actual flesh and bones were taken into heaven and reunited with her soul. As the scientist Richard Dawkins has pointed out, 'What can that mean, if not that Heaven is a physical place, physical enough to contain bodies?'

That is just one small example of the way our theological statements have got stuck in the past. And people are rejecting them. Often they struggle for years with the dishonesty of standing in church Sunday by Sunday and proclaiming things they know are not true: that Jesus began life without a human father, and ended it without a normal death; that he was not only human like the rest of us but was also made of the same material as the (non-material) God. They struggle, and try not to think or talk about it all, and then leave the Church, often sadly. Outsiders, faced with apparently having to take ancient myth and metaphor as literal twenty-first century truth, do not come into the Church. And we do not talk about any of this.

The young man with whose remark I began this piece probably represents a far greater proportion of Christians than he realises. How many of us have for years felt vaguely guilty at saying words we do not really, heart of hearts, believe, but have gone on saying them because they sound beautiful, and comfort and uphold us when we say them? The loss of the old Latin Mass is still felt keenly by many Catholics, just as many Church of Ireland people prefer the sixteenth century language of the old Prayer Book services, even those parts where the theology is barbaric. In both cases, the music of the language carries us into the intuitive part of our brain, as stained glass windows and incense do. In that intuitive, right-brain mode we feel closer to God than when we say the prosaic words of the modern services.

So this is what I think is happening: we are accepting out-of-date doctrine because it sounds good and feels good when we say it as Creed or prayer. But underneath our comfort lies an

unacknowledged sense of dishonesty, that all the time is laying the hand of death on the Church. How do we resolve this?

Above all, we will have to be truthful. We will need to admit to each other, and to outsiders, that the words we say do not have to be taken literally, but are often the sort of poetry and paradox that let us into a non-rational perception of the divine. We will need to admit that as long as we are limited-range humans there is no one Truth to which we can all assent. But we can each try to discover what is genuinely true for us, at each stage of our life; and allow other followers of Christ to do the same, just as we allow Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists their own understanding of the divine.

With new-found integrity, our faith in God will be free to grow. Our devotion to the figure of Jesus and his teachings, and our sense of the presence in us of 'the mind that was in Christ', will be free to grow. It is a tremendous prospect. God be with us.

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