

## **OPINION PAGE IN IRISH TIMES**

### **MATURE FAITH HAS NOTHING TO FEAR FROM CRITICAL REASON**

**By Sean Goan and Kieran O'Mahony**

**Today is Little Christmas, the traditional end to the festive season. Sean Goan and Kieran O'Mahony mark the occasion with a response to Andrew Furlong's pithy pre-Christmas questioning of the story of Jesus**

**Two days before Christmas, Andrew Furlong, on this page, questioned the credibility of the Christmas story (The extraordinary story of Christmas: is it credible?, Opinion and Analysis, December 23rd).**

**In fact, his real question is the credibility of Christianity as such. As the season draws to a close and Christians hear stories of wise men following a star, perhaps this is the moment to offer an alternative, equally critical reading of the biblical text that is not inimical to faith.**

**On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho there stands today the Inn of the Good Samaritan. In this way, a purely literary character is furnished with material evidence of historical existence. The innocent believer can still pray there; the critically-informed visitor will smile. The fact that the Good Samaritan never existed, pace the physical inn, does not diminish the power of the parable to generate existential truth. Is the parable true, nevertheless? The question alerts us to the existence of different kinds of truth: historical truth and narrative truth. The parables of Jesus are examples of narrative truth.**

**The four Gospels of Christian tradition combine in an intriguing way, historical and narrative truth. In general, the gospels are not historical in the narrow sense of literal reports of what took place. They belong rather to the first-century category of writing called a bios, a life.**

**In such early lives, reporting exactly what happened was not the goal of the writer, but rather putting forward a profound understanding of the person. As noted by Furlong, faith in the resurrected Jesus provided not**

**only the motive for writing the gospels but also strongly influenced the manner in which the story was put together. Furlong, however, thinks that the gospel writers and ultimately Jesus himself were seriously deluded. Is this a necessary conclusion from a critical reading of the text?**

**The ordinary reader notices a difference between the stories to do with the ministry (from the baptism of Jesus to his death on the cross) and the stories "outside" the ministry, i.e. the birth stories and the resurrection appearance narratives. Even the stories of the ministry are not history as we would conceive it. The birth and resurrection narratives, however, are clearly of a different quality of writing.**

**In the case of the resurrection appearance narratives, these stories explore the identity of the risen Jesus and how the believer comes to resurrection faith. On the other hand, the birth stories in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 explore the identity of Jesus in relation to God, in relation to Judaism and in relation to the believing Christian. The rich texture of the narratives is achieved by a double deployment of intertextuality. On the one hand, the stories clearly depend on many strands of narrative in the Hebrew Bible, so it is not too much to say that the characters and even the characterisations come from the Old Testament. For example, the Joseph of the amazing technicolour dreamcoat is the template for the dreamer of Matthew 1-2. (The church recognises these links in the lectionary readings for Advent).**

**On the other hand, the stories anticipate, in a quite theological way, the identity of Jesus, as it will unfold in the ministry. For example, the shepherds of Luke 2 represent the marginalised and ritually-unclean, the very people who will be the focus of Jesus's ministry in Lukan account (see Luke 15). And so on, throughout the first and second chapters of Matthew and Luke.**

**As T.S. Eliot put it in his poem *The Coming of the Magi*, "there was a birth, certainly". There is a tight historical core to the birth stories - the baby, the parents, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Herod. However, the surrounding stories (genealogies, annunciations, dreams, journeys, angels) are not attempts to report literally what happened but rather explorations of meaning, not too remote from Jesus's own use of parables.**

**The writers could have communicated the same content by writing purely conceptually (as in the Prologue of John), but they chose instead to write symbolically and surely much more effectively. Behind the text lies an experience of faith for the first Christians: the mysterious God, who is always greater than we can say, who is not a being in the cosmos, but the cause and "is-ness" of all that is. This mystery has drawn close to humanity through creation, through all religions, through music and poetry and, we believe, expressed himself fully, graciously, wonderfully in the single human life of Jesus of Nazareth. In the arresting words of the Fourth Gospel, no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.**

**The critical issue here is not the nature of the biblical texts, but the prior question of revelation: is all religion just a human projection or has God taken the initiative?**

**The continued appeal and resonance of the Christmas stories is a tribute to their genius and inspiration. For the critical reader, this other way of appreciating the texts brings an extraordinary depth of insight into the religious and theological concerns of the gospel writers. We find ourselves in agreement with Andrew Furlong regarding the chiefly theological rather than historical nature of the texts. (This is, in fact, a commonplace of modern biblical scholarship). What matters here is not only the nature of the texts, but the attitude one brings to them - lack of Christian faith is as strong a hermeneutic as Christian faith. It may even be stronger, because it must have univocal, positivistic assessments. The all or nothing approach implied in fundamentalist readings, which curiously enough Furlong seems to have adopted, is not the only option. Mature faith has nothing to fear from critical reason. Following stars cannot be left just to the theological astrologers!**

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