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Review Articles

The Nature of Christian Belief: A Statement and Exposition by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, Church House Publishing, 1986, 39 pp. £1.25 ISBN 0 7151 3710 7

Introduction[1]

For many Christians, the publication of this report brought a sense of relief and pleasure, tinged with not a little surprise. It appeared that the Report had marginalized the Bishop of Durham, whose various utterances had prompted the process leading to the Report; in the opinion of the leading article in *The Times,* the conservative and traditionalist strand of the Church of England held the high ground. The debate in General Synod in July, 1986 added a new twist to the story, when Dr Jenkins made an impassioned contribution to the debate, defending his point of view, and making a new assertion: that a God who was believed to be willing and able to work only occasional miracles involving intervention in the physical order of the universe would be either 'the very devil' (by virtue of his refusal to intervene to prevent evil) or a non-existent 'cultic idol'.[2] This speech dominated the headlines, and left matters in considerable confusion, in the light of which sufficient pressure was brought to bear upon the leaders of the Houses of Clergy and Laity to call for separate sessions in November, 1986. At these sessions, a composite motion was discussed, the crucial part of which was as follows:

> That this House affirms belief in the Virginal Conception and the Empty Tomb to be the faith of the Universal Church and the Church of England.

This was carried in the House of Laity by the remarkable margin 163 – 10, and in the House of Clergy by 125 – 45 (with 30 abstentions).

The first part of the motion, which welcomed certain positive statements in the Bishops' Report, and the third part, which called for those of differing views to enter a continuing dialogue, were not disputed. The significance of the crucial motion quoted above is that it goes further than the Bishops in declaring belief in the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb to be not only the faith of the Universal Church (which the Bishops accepted), but also the faith of the Church of England, rather than merely an expression of the faith of the Church of England (as the Bishops had declared it).

There the matter presently (January, 1987) rests. We are too close to events to obtain a proper perspective of them, but a number of aspects of the situation merit comment and consideration.

1 The Overall State of the Church of England

Seasoned observers have commented upon how the atmosphere within the Church is probably more open today than for many decades to accept the truth of the

1 I am grateful to Dr S. W. Gilley and the Revd C. M. Jones for their comments upon an earlier draft.

2 *Report of the Proceedings of General Synod* 17, July 1986, Church House Publishing, p 466.

miraculous as understood in the traditional sense (I am well aware of the subtleties of definition of what constitutes a miracle, but I cannot go into that here). The Bishop of Durham apart – and this is in some degree what *does* set him apart, even from many of his admirers – it is very often defenders of the modernist position who seem unsure and defensive. Recent decades have seen in science the progressive unveiling of the unique character of the universe, and a prominent scientist-turned-theologian, John Polkinghorne FRS, former Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge, can refer to the the analogous rationality of the unique features embedded in Christian tradition, and in particular the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God and man, together with the unprecedented events, such as the Empty Tomb, which accompanied and surrounded him.[1] On other fronts too, such as the exposure of the philosophical weaknesses of the older critique of miracles, the support for traditional views has been strengthening. The recent votes in the Houses of Laity and Clergy illustrate this, and had a division of opinion been allowed in the House of Bishops (we are reliably informed!) then a considerable majority would have backed the stronger view enshrined in the motion carried in the other Houses.

It is becoming ever more clear that, despite lively opposition, a gradual change is under way in the Church of England, moving the balance in favour of the traditional view of the status of the central credal and scriptural miracles of the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb. This is associated in part with a wider evangelical revival, evidence of which is penetrating more deeply into the structures of the Church of England. The situation is posing two major challenges to Evangelicals: on the one hand, to their coherence as a group, as they grow larger and become more diffuse, and, on the other hand, to the responsible use of the increasing power which they enjoy within the Church of England. If the Bishops' Report has a conservative tone, with political hedges to accommodate quite a diversity of view, it offers not a bad corporate indication of the present state and direction of the Church.

2 The Role of the Bishop of Durham

As has happened so often in the past, an individual with unusual, but by no means exceptional gifts, has acted as a catalyst to initiate a new phase in the history of the institution of which they are a member. The Church had been drifting in a conservative direction for, let us say, twenty years, and suddenly the largely subliminal changes were tested and forced into the open. The Bishop-designate, like many others of the older liberal generation, was genuinely surprised to find his views at the centre of controversy. The reaction of some who share the Bishop's views has been to lie low, regret that a fuss has been occasioned, and hope that the relative calm of the post-*Honest to God* years could be restored. To some degree this may happen, as the press tires of repeating faded headlines, and if a cautious approach to the appointment of bishops is maintained. But there are grounds for believing that controversy around the question of the status of the central credal miracles will re-emerge.

The central issue here is the logical consistency of the position adopted in the Bishops' Report. Professor Keith Ward has attacked the Report as a '39 page contradiction', inasmuch as it argues strongly for the truth of the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb as the teaching of the Universal Church, and then (in paragraphs 50 and 62) declares them optional.[2] There is however, an even deeper problem

1 *One World*, SPCK, London 1986, pp 74ff.
2 'No Escape from This Logical Tangle', *Church of England Newspaper*, 13 June, 1986, p 3.

than Professor Ward noted, a problem which has not been lost upon the Bishop of Durham: one cannot responsibly have a theology of 'optional stumbling-blocks'. That is to say, either the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb are essential to the Christian Faith, or they are non-essential. If, at the end of the day, they are non-essential, then, in an age which does not easily recognize miracles, they should be relegated to the margins as no more than optional illustrations of the Incarnation and Resurrection. And this is where the communicator, the Welsh evangelist, in the Bishop of Durham has asserted itself: in today's climate, he says that they are now unhelpful illustrations; inhuman births, conjuring tricks with bones, medieval hangovers, and so forth.

On the surface, the language of the Bishops' Report is much stronger: it does not speak of the credal miracles simply as illustrating the Incarnation and Resurrection, but as expressing and affirming them. Yet the Report stops short of confessing belief in these miracles as essential components of the official, received, corporately held faith of the Church of England. This apparently strong, but ultimately limited, defence of the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb then poses a serious problem for a preacher and teacher of the Gospel: if, in order to have the maturity of faith to which, by definition, a Bishop must aspire, one does not have to accept the veracity of these miracles, why preach or teach them? Our Lord saved his strongest condemnation for religious people, for the Scribes and Pharisees who cluttered the Gospel with inessential obstacles and complications. This is the point which the Bishop of Durham has grasped and will not let go; his attempts to downgrade the significance of the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb have not been due to any desire on his part to commend scepticism and doubt, but have arisen from his laudable desire to render the evangelical core of the Gospel as simple as possible. He has faced the Church of England with an uncomfortable choice: are the central miracles of the creed ultimately essential or non-essential? While the Bishops' Report presents, relatively uncritically, arguments for the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb, and gives rough treatment to arguments which are commonly advanced against them, at the end of the day it regards them as non-essential. For this reason, one national commentator presented the Report as a victory for the Bishop of Durham.[1] In one sense he was correct, but in another sense the Bishop must consider the Report to be most unsatisfactory, for it presents a strong case for an ultimately unnecessary belief in miracles. While I believe that his own solution, to marginalize the credal miracles, is quite wrong, I have a real sympathy with his underlying analysis of the problem. The Church does very often present a confused and confusing message to the world. Affirmation of the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb needs a somewhat different justification from that given in the Bishops' Report. We shall turn to this issue after first looking at the question of the individual and collegial responsibility of bishops for the faith of the Church, a topic considered in the final section of the Report.

3 The Individual and Collegial Responsibility of Bishops

While allowing that Bishops have both a duty to guard the process of theological exploration in the Church, and a right to enter into questionings on matters of belief, the Report concludes that 'in all he says he must take care not to present variant beliefs as if they were the faith of the Church'; and 'he must always make as sure as he can that his hearers understand what that faith is and the reasons for it' (§70). Professor Keith Ward likened this to laying upon bishops like David Jenkins a 'duty of deceit'. That the Bishop of Durham has no intention of abiding by the

1 Walter Schwarz, 'Open to Doubt', *Guardian*, 7 June, 1986.

strictures of the Report was well illustrated in his Synod speech in the debate, which contained no indication that the view that the traditional miracle-working God of Christianity was the very devil was the least bit deviant! Yet if it would be unrealistic to expect a strict observance of the Report's injunctions here, it is surely correct to insist that anyone choosing to accept office in an institution also takes upon himself a responsibility to respect and uphold the traditions of that institution, until reasoned debate and careful decision sanctions a change. Any institution needs discipline and order.

There are two problems here. First, we are still living through the transition from a time when discipline and order were too tight, including the dreadful judicial murder of dissenters, to the modern reaction in which discipline and order have become too loose. Secondly, the Church is a most peculiar institution, inasmuch as it is also the mystical Body of Christ. It consists of sinners, justified by grace through faith, each of whom should be all too aware of their personal shortcomings. We are still, I think, a long way from establishing in the Church a sensitive yet responsibly effective pattern of order and discipline at a whole variety of levels, from bishops to candidates for baptism.

The underlying issues here, the nature and exercise of authority in the modern, post-Enlightenment world, are not really faced in the Report, and it is interesting to note that in the very week of its publication, the Bishop of Durham gave a well-publicized lecture berating those who sought 'infallible and definitive answers' in matters of faith and practice.[1] It is one of the very useful features of the ARCIC discussions that the difficult questions concerning authority in the Church are being faced in relation to the Pope as well as to the Bishop of Durham, but there is a long way to travel before the chasms on each front will be effectively bridged.

4 Miracles and the Gospel

The relation between faith and history has been one of the perennial issues of theology, and it has recurred in a particular form in the recent controversy. The second major section of the Bishops' Report attempts to address this question, and in many ways this is its crucial section; if the reasoning here is cogent, so is that behind the later treatments of the Empty Tomb and Virginal Conception.

> Historical fact does matter . . . There is solid historical fact without which the whole Gospel-writing exercise, on its own terms, would have been pointless . . . Christian faith needs a sufficiency of historical fact to retain its traditional identity . . . If none of the events presented in Scripture as being this Love in action, or only an inadequate selection of them, ever happened, that faith would be untenable. Unlike some other religions, Christianity is a house which had to be built on the rock of actual events. (§22-26).

The point is laboured, but is it convincing to claim that historical fact matters in the complete absence of any indication of *which* historical facts matter? One could be forgiven for wondering if the repeated affirmation that historical fact matters has acted as a smokescreen to avoid facing the difficult question of *which* facts matter. But underlying or preceding this question is the issue of the *role* of historical event in the reality of Jesus Christ. In this connection, a paragraph from the speech by the Archbishop of Canterbury introducing the General Synod debate is important:

> That the vast majority of Christians throughout history have accepted the Empty Tomb and the Virginal Conception as historical facts is not in dis-

1 'Reflections on the Distinctive Nature and Calling of Anglicanism and the Church of England', copies available from the Bishop's office.

> pute. Any other interpretation is a departure from that held in the universal Church. For this majority, such facts sustain and illumine faith in the Resurrection and Incarnation. But they are by no means the only facts on which those great central events rest. That is why it is possible to believe fully in the Resurrection and Incarnation while reserving judgment on these specific historical points. Faith does not centre on negations – the absence of a human father or the emptiness of a tomb. The mainstream of the Church believes that these negations are entailed by its affirmations, but they cannot be said to be the heart of the matter. It is the action of God, in uniting with himself our human nature, not the passivity of Joseph, which is central. It is Christ risen in the completeness of his glorified humanity, not the vacating of a tomb, which is central.[1]

The Archbishop is here maintaining that the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb are both evidence for and illuminations of the faith in the Resurrection and the Incarnation, the latter expression corresponding to the use of the verbs 'express' and 'affirm' in the Report itself. He also, incidentally, is candidly admitting that to permit doubt in the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb (as the Report in effect does) is to permit a departure from the doctrinal standards in the universal Church.[2] Such a departure, which should be viewed as a very serious matter, is not, according to the Archbishop, a matter for undue alarm, because of the wedge he has driven – or assumed – between the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb and the realities of Incarnation and Resurrection. But was it not, then, more than a little odd for the Church Fathers to include in the creeds of the ancient Church reference to matters which here are portrayed as quite secondary? The awkward question which the House of Bishops ought to have addressed more adequately is whether there is an intrinsic connection between the Virginal Conception and the Incarnation, and between the Empty Tomb and the Resurrection.

At the centre of Old Testament, New Testament, and early Patristic faith was the claim that the Creator, who was the source of history, was also redemptively at work within history. Jesus is the fulfilment of God's action in the midst of Israel and all nations, a fulfilment which is enacted in a human life engaged in confronting and overcoming the effects of sin and evil in the down-to-earth realities of history. Jesus does not come just to point to the Kingdom of God; in a real sense he embodies it in his own person. The miracles he performs are miracles of the Kingdom, which bursts in upon those he encounters. The Kingdom is greater than a collection of individual acts of Jesus, but it would be wrong to separate the person from the work of Christ. Jesus acts authentically, as a person in whom act and being are in complete harmony. This is why the Fathers were so unwilling to accept the Hellenistic or Gnostic attempts to separate the essentials of faith from the realities of God's action in history, whether those attempts were presented in full-blown Gnostic dress or in the more accommodating clothes of the Christian Platonism of Alexandria, as exemplified by Origen. But this is also the early Christian context in which the essential details of the Creed took shape. The references to Christ's birth from a Virgin, his crucifixion under the datable Pontius

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1 *Report of Proceedings of General Synod*, op. cit., p 454.

2 In relation to the Virginal Conception, the Bishop of Salisbury, Chairman of the Doctrine Commission, and widely understood to be one of the chief drafters of the Report, went further and agreed that the Report 'sanctions a departure from the accepted sense of the Universal Faith as reflected in the Creed'. He went on to admit that he felt this 'very strongly as a difficulty'. (*Soundings*, BBC Radio 4, 3 June 1986).

Pilate, his resurrection on the third day, all anchor the condensed confession of the Church in the actual realities of historical event.

One of the greatest dangers to the modern western Church is to fall into a separation between faith and history which was emphatically rejected by the ancient Church. Perhaps it is the endemic individualism of western culture, which has developed hand-in-hand with an increasing concentration upon religious experience as the source of our knowledge of God, which, more than anything else, has fuelled the re-emergence of this disjunction. Under the onslaught of rationalism, secularism, materialism and so forth, the modern age has seen a retreat by the Church into the apparently safe harbour of religious experience, secure from the intellectual storms battering at the door of the Church. If this has been true in the type of Protestant liberalism sired by Schleiermacher, it has also been seen in the pietistic and charismatic strands of evangelicalism. Liberation theology, for all its youthful naivety, has issued a massive challenge to western Christianity to reclaim the reality of God's action in history. While this is increasingly being recognized by American and especially European theologians, it must be asked if the same can be said of the establishment theology of the Bishops' Report. To talk of faith in the Incarnation and Resurrection as if these 'realities' could exist apart from God's decisive acts in history in Jesus Christ, as defined by the credal miracles of the entry and exit of Jesus from 'normal' human history, is not adequate to biblical Christianity, and merely echoes the transient norms of our individualistic, post-Enlightenment culture. Within the overall framework of our culture, the Bishops' Report is commendably conservative and affirmatory, but I am left with Lesslie Newbigin's challenge:[1] is the framework itself not in need of radical revision? In a sense, the Bishops' Report is doubly conservative: towards both the traditional belief of the Church and towards its expression in contemporary culture, the latter imparting distortions into the former.

5 The Respective Places of the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb

It has become customary in recent decades to downgrade the Virginal Conception in relation to the Empty Tomb. This has largely reflected the growth in historical consciousness, and allied attention to historical enquiry: the biblical (=historical) evidence for the Virginal Conception is clearly much weaker than that for the Empty Tomb. Yet the Bishops were confronted with the slightly disconcerting fact that whereas the Virginal Conception is explicit in the Creeds, the Empty Tomb is not. Why was one included and the other not? This is another matter which could have been treated more adequately.

To take first the omission of explicit mention of the Empty Tomb, which some have been tempted to take as evidence for its inessential place in early Christian belief in the Resurrection, the creeds were never intended to provide an exhaustive and systematic expression of the Christian faith. They were largely shaped by the particular controversies of the early Church, and various points which were well-nigh universally accepted were omitted because they had not become articles of significant controversy. Thus, for example, there is no mention of Jesus being a Jew: are we therefore to grant that Nazi theologians were justified in casting doubt upon Jesus being a Jew? Was the Barmen Declaration 'adding to the Creeds' when it asserted that Jesus was a Jew? Early in the post-New Testament period there was no major controversy over the Empty Tomb. Gnostics either denied it or resorted to an explanation in terms of a theft of the body, but they were condemned on many grounds, and controversy did not centre upon the Empty Tomb. Even a writer like Origen, who was suspect at several major points, and who was

1 In, most recently, *The Other Side of 1984*, WCC, London 1983, and *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, London 1986.

attacked for his theories of the final resurrection, emphatically defended Christ's bodily resurrection from the tomb.[1] We can assert with some confidence that the Creed assumes belief in the Empty Tomb, because it was not a disputed point, but one in which everyone of any significance in fact believed, and one which was implied in the historically precise expression 'on the third day he rose again'.

The explicit inclusion in the Creeds of the Virginal Conception was a response to the fact that it was the centre of relative controversy, for example with Ebonite Christians. But, even so, what was the inner reason for the dogma of the Virginal Conception imposing itself so quickly and universally upon the second-century Christian communities, given its relatively sparse attestation in the emerging corpus of New Testament Scriptures? The answer, I think, is that it served admirably to define who Jesus was. This can be seen by rehearsing briefly the strongest exegetical argument for the dogma – although, curiously, it is one which is omitted from the Bishops' Report. The argument runs in three stages. First, no new scholarship will ever overthrow the fact that the Old Testament requires that the Messiah be born of the seed of David. Secondly, no new scholarship will ever overthrow the fact that the New Testament presents Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. So why would the early Church have invented a story which denied that Joseph was the father of Jesus, so declaring that Jesus could not have been the Messiah? – for the New Testament traces Jesus' descent from David through Joseph. The story of the Virginal Conception thus takes us to the very heart of the New Testament's mysterious presentation of the decisive working of God in history in Jesus Christ: God steps in, as it were, to take Joseph's place, to enter the world and be born of the very lineage of David, as the true Israel.

The story of the Incarnation is that of the confluence in the one person of Jesus Christ of the eternal reality of God and the created reality of history. To the early Church the dogma of the Virginal Conception attested both sides of the mystery of the Incarnation: Jesus was born with 'normal' flesh and blood, yet, appropriately, the birth of the unique Saviour of the world was accompanied by the miraculous event and sign of the Virginal Conception. The Bishops' Report, although exhibiting an overall sympathy towards the Virginal Conception, only does so in fits and starts. A central paragraph (§59) opens with the quite erroneous claim: 'There is no indication from the early centuries that belief in the Virginal Conception was used as a proof to support the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. Its main thrust theologically was to stress the reality of Jesus's humanity'. One could supply a score of examples where prominent orthodox second-century writers *do* associate the miracle of the Virginal Conception with the divinity of Christ.[2]

It is remarkable how strong were the roots of the story of the Virginal Conception in the Apostolic Fathers and second-century writers, given its obvious potential exploitation in a docetic Christology – which was made explicit by Gnostic writers. To the early Fathers, the dogma supported both the humanity and divinity of Christ, and as such assumed a prime role in the brief identification of who Jesus was, as the main lines of Christological affirmation were laid down. This does not entail that belief in the Virginal Conception is itself central to the Gospel, but it does mean that it is entirely appropriate to it. The danger, then, is that in permitting disbelief in the Virginal Conception one is introducing an inevitable tendency to permit a defective overall Christology. The major objection made to the dogma

1 See, for example, *Commentary on John*, Book X, 20-26.

2 See, for example, St. Justin Martyr, *1st Apology*, 33; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 43f.; 68; 76; 85; 100; St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 19, 1; 2; 3; 20.3; 21.1, 4, 6; V. 1.3; *Demonstration*, 36, 38, 51, 53, 54.

in modern theology is that it compromises the completeness and authenticity of Christ's humanity, and this is acknowledged by the Report (§60). But modern theology has constantly tended to do less than justice to the traditional views of the divinity of Christ, and to lapse, at best, into various forms of adoptionism. The story of the Virginal Conception, with its inherent balance between humanity and divinity of Christ, can and should serve as a bulwark against the revival of old Christological error; that is why it assumed a central place in the Creed, and that is why it deserves a much fairer hearing than it is often given in modern theology. While defending the integrity of belief in the Virginal Conception, the Bishops' Report also concludes with the claim that 'there are certainly theological problems related to belief in the Virginal Conception of Our Lord' (§61). One would have liked to have seen the following question pressed in the Report: are these false problems, generated by a deficient overall Christology? But to ask such a question would presumably have caused an irreconcilable division of opinion among the Bishops, and clearly the production of a unanimous Report was held to be of paramount importance.

We will now look at a final issue, that historical reliability of the Bible, which will set our consideration of the central credal miracles in the context of Scripture as a whole.

6 The Historical Reliability of the Scriptures

The Bishops write that 'many Christians hold the Scripture is inspired not only in its spiritual insights but in the reliability of its historical statements. This is an entirely defensible belief' (§27). Yet they also write in relation to the Empty Tomb (and similarly in respect of the Virginal Conception) that, 'On the question whether . . . Christ's tomb that first Easter Day was empty we recognize that scholarship can offer no conclusive demonstration; and the divergent views to be found among scholars of standing are reflected in the thinking of individual bishops.' (§50). There are two major questions posed here, but not properly addressed: the role of historical scholarship, and the extent and nature of the historical reliability of the Scriptures.

On the first question, it must be stressed that, particularly in relation to events long past, historical investigation will never produce knock-down proofs or definitive conclusions. Furthermore, even a direct acquaintance with certain historical events leaves open the question of how events will be interpreted, as is clear enough from the differing reactions recorded in relation to the miracles of Christ. So it is not clear that the statement that scholarship cannot prove that the tomb was empty is of any relevance to the discussion; indeed, even the emptiness of the Tomb would not in itself prescribe the reasons for the fact, as the New Testament itself acknowleges. The early Church did not grant universal, credal acceptance to the Virginal Conception and Empty Tomb because of historical proofs which were thought available, but because they served to define the communal faith of the undivided Church, as ratified by the ecumenical Councils. The above statement about lack of historical proof boils down merely to the acceptance of the right of individuals to affirm their own faith, if necessary against the faith of the universal Church. Up to a point, this must be granted. As Anglicans, we accept that Councils can err, and in principle even the decisions concerning the Creed are open to question. Furthermore, it is not for us to judge the standing before God of someone who holds an eccentric pattern of belief. However, we cannot accept the right of 'individual bishops' to disregard the accepted faith of the universal community of Christians, unless they make it abundantly clear that their personal views are out of

step with the vast majority through the ages. One comes back again to the basic problem of the cerebral individualism of modern western culture, with its inherent disregard for the ecological, social and ecclesiastical realities of historical existence.

In the matter of the historical reliability of the Scriptures, we must welcome the general acceptance in the Report of the importance of history and the reliability of the historical witness of Scripture. But we must ask the questions: which history is important, and how reliable are the Scriptures? Unfortunately, in moden discussion we have tended to see a sharp polarization between the fundamentalist view that all history recorded in the Bible is important as actual historical event, and the liberal flight from history. An honest study of the Scriptures must, I think, acknowledge that the biblical writers allowed themselves considerable freedom with precise historical fact, but the valuable recognition of this in modern theology has raised the ever more pressing question: what are the limits of this freedom?

Thus we might accept that we find in the Bible elements of the stories which appear to be historical, and which certainly point up the truth of history, but which need not themselves actually have happened in the way they were recorded. The Bishops' Report itself mentions the rending of the veil in the temple in this category, and I am happy to declare an open mind upon the exact historicity of this. But the question remains: what are the limits? Are there facts, events in the records of the Gospel, which are so essentially and necessarily accurate that without them the story loses its meaning, and its message disappears? Do the creeds of the early Church, together with those other identifications of Jesus which were universally assumed, represent a certain historical core which is absolutely central and essential to the Gospel message? In relation to the Empty Tomb, does the overall glory of the resurrection, with its message of the conquest of death, not require an actually risen, if transformed, body of Jesus, an actual conquest of death, and not a body rotting in the tomb? With this secure historical grounding of the story of the Incarnation we would then be free to consider whether some aspects of the stories – for example, the manifestation of Old Testament worthies in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion – are creative embellishments, which draw out the significance of the basic, key events involved. It is inadequate merely to assert, with the bishops, that historical fact matters, without discussing which historical facts matter, and to what degree.

This final question, which is handled unsatisfactorily in the Report, is also quite unresolved in much contemporary evangelical discussion of the authority of Scripture. In leaving us with it, the Bishops should help to clarify and focus our minds as we attempt to forge a constructive response to the issues of our time. That the Report discusses some of the key questions facing the Church today cannot be in doubt. But it does not answer them.

The Revd Dr Peter Forster is Senior Tutor in St. John's College, Durham.