

Comment

The latest Report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England runs to a solid three hundred pages.¹ The main theme is the priority of the community over the individual inquirer in any search for truth. The implication of this, for the Christian community, is that truth is more appropriately found and held in story and liturgy than in defined doctrine on its own.

In order of appearance the authorities quoted in the first nine pages are Dorothy L Sayers, Aristotle, and W S Gilbert (the Sentry's Song from *Iolanthe*). This endearingly unself-conscious glimpse into the cultural interior of the Anglican theological mind may seem suspiciously whimsical. It needed only the statutory donnish reference to Alice (which comes on page 67), and perhaps an allusion to Winnie the Pooh (which, unsurprisingly, I must have missed), to place this text quite exotically beyond the cultural grasp of po-faced German Lutheran professors or the kind of nimble-witted pious boys of peasant stock who still rise to the status of *éminence grise* in the official doctrine-minding machinery of the Roman Catholic Church. No prizes are offered for guessing who might be quoted in the opening pages of *their* comparable documents.

Even Aristotle does not appear here as the master of logic but rather as a philosopher who was well aware of the collective and traditional nature of the accumulation of truth. The central thrust of the Report is the insistence, against all individualism, upon the corporate structure of knowledge. Some thirty pages are given over to explicit discussion of the ideas of Gadamer, Wittgenstein, and Thomas Kuhn. But their varied stress on the essential place of the community in the constitution of all knowledge and belief pervades the entire Report.

The extreme individualism in interpreting doctrine which is assumed to be a typically Anglican characteristic is traced to the effect of the Enlightenment: "In the legitimate and proper quest for critical thought and tested knowledge, the value of religious tradition, or the 'deposit' of faith handed down by the community, tended to be under-rated" (page 46). The time has now come, however, to insist that the freedom of the individual to explore Christian doctrine depends upon the continuing existence of "the wisdom cumulatively gathered over the centuries by successive generations in interpersonal experience". The jargon may be (and may have to be) that of recent sociology of knowledge. The fact thus rediscovered is at the centre of any Catholic understanding of the nature of the Church as a truth-bearing body. This emphasis

on “corporate memory in the community of Christian faith” is unmistakably a commitment to what others would speak of as “living tradition”.

Certain recent displays of theological individualism on the part of Anglican theologians are clearly disowned by the Doctrine Commission. The most serious statement reads as follows: “One can envisage the possibility that, in the not too distant future, a bishop may be faced with a choice: either to withdraw his licence from someone whose deliberate and considered teaching cuts directly against the Church’s formularies in general as well as in detail, or to fail to do so, and thus actually to ‘unchurch’ those who find it in conscience as good Anglicans intolerable to stay in a place where such teaching flourishes unchecked” (page 140). This warning is qualified by greater optimism later on – “the lack of an official response by the church authorities need cause no dismay: the real response is to be found diffused in all levels of the Church” (page 299).

By this point in the Report the reader has certainly been offered a much deeper and more credible and authoritative account of how truth is actually discerned and maintained in the life of the people of God than anybody else in Britain today has produced. But the questions affect us all. Can the “sense” of the faithful be trusted to reject erroneous doctrine without fairly active intervention by the church authorities? Does the faith remain alive and vital among those whose primary access to the truth is by way of listening regularly to the story and participating in the liturgy – even when the formal teaching of doctrine is defective? How much “heresy” can be allowed to reach the academic bookshops, or the television screen, without undermining people’s faith? How much abstract claptrap or inaudible moralizing has to come from the pulpit before the faithful people are seriously affected?

The Report is explicitly concerned with *how* Christian truth is discovered and communicated rather than with *what* that truth is. No doubt it is *what* Anglicans believe that many would like the Doctrine Commission to tell us. On the other hand, study of this Report might suggest that it is not so easy to say what *any* Christian community believes – once what the clergy teach is placed in the context of what the people practise. The gap between what Christians believe, and how they remain in their believing, might then not seem so wide after all.

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1 Believing in the Church: The Corporate Nature of Faith. SPCK London, 1981 pp 310 £8.50