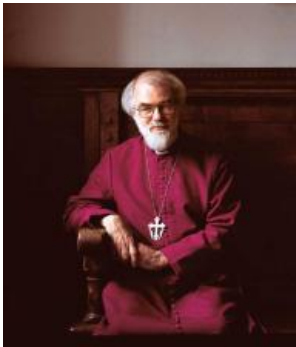


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On Discussing Doctrine in Public

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We must first express a bit of sympathetic understanding for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. As the spiritual head of the Church of England — a state church, after all — and as head of the Anglican Communion, he is in the awkward position of having every word he utters made a matter of potential media attention.

That said, this particular Archbishop of Canterbury seems to have a more difficult time than most making himself clear. At one point, even the British press warned him that his statements were so confusing that reporters had difficulty knowing what the Archbishop was trying to say. Just a few weeks ago he responded to atheist Richard Dawkins by stating: “There are specific areas of mismatch between what Richard Dawkins may write about and what religious people think they are doing.” That is about as convoluted a

response as one might imagine possible.

So, just before Christmas, the Archbishop granted an interview to Simon Mayo of the BBC [text at [The Telegraph](#) (London)] in which he discussed the particulars of the Christmas story in the Gospels and the traditions of Christmas handed down over the centuries. The interview caused a media sensation of sorts, with some headlines suggesting that the Archbishop had described the accounts in Matthew and Luke as mere myth and legend. Thankfully, a full transcript of the interview was posted by [The Telegraph](#) (perhaps motivated by journalistic self-defense) and readers can judge for themselves.

Dr. Williams, formerly a very well-known academic theologian, did suggest that much of what many people (including many Christians) associate with the nativity accounts in the New Testament is simply not to be found in the biblical text. The Archbishop suggested that he would well “pass on the oxes and asses” because they are not found in the biblical accounts. He was absolutely correct to point out that nativity scenes with shepherds gathered on one side and three wise men on the other side are historically inaccurate, if honestly so. In his words:

Well Matthew's gospel doesn't tell us that there were three of them, doesn't tell us they were kings, doesn't tell us where they came from, it says they're astrologers, wise men, priests from somewhere outside the Roman Empire. That's all we're really told so, yes, 'the three kings with the one from Africa' - that's legend; it works quite well as legend.

As he might have pointed out, Matthew does indicate that the magi were more than one in number and that they brought three different gifts. Matthew does not indicate the number of magi.

There can be no doubt that many Christians are confused about that the New Testament actually teaches about the events associated with the birth of Christ. Many believers are certain that the Bible includes a cast of characters including a cold-hearted inn keeper and a little drummer boy. Neither appears in the accounts; both commonly appear in church Christmas pageants.

In making these clarifications the Archbishop was doing what any careful Christian leader should do — explain the faith and the Scriptures. Even so, he did so rather awkwardly. Indeed, when he got to the virgin conception of Christ it was more than awkward. The Archbishop was, by intention or not, an agent of subverting the truthfulness of this biblical teaching.

Here is the specific section of the interview:

Simon Mayo: *You were a prominent part of a Spectator survey in the current issue which headlined 'Do you believe in the virgin birth?' there are some people in this survey who would say they were Christian who don't have a problem if you don't believe in the Virgin birth; how important it is to believe in that bit?*

Archbishop Williams: *I don't want to set it as a kind of hurdle that people have to get over before they, you know, be signed up; but I think quite a few people that as time goes on, they get a sense, a deeper sense of what the virgin birth is about. I would say that of myself. About thirty years ago I might have said I wasn't too fussed about it - now I see it much more as dovetailing with the rest of what I believe about the story and yes.*

Simon Mayo: *Christopher Hitchens and many others make the point that isn't the translation for young woman rather than virgin? Does it have to be seen as virgin; might it be a mistranslation?*

Archbishop Williams: *It is... well, what's happening there one of the gospels quotes a prophecy that a virgin will conceive a child. Now the original Hebrew doesn't have the word virgin, it's just a young woman, but that's the prophecy that's quoted from the Old Testament in support of the story which is, in any case, about a birth without a human father; so it's not that it rests on mistranslation; St Matthew's gone to his Greek version of the bible and said "Oh, 'virgin'; sounds like the story I know," and put it in.*

The Archbishop doesn't want the virgin birth to be "a kind of hurdle" that persons must believe in order to "sign up" for the faith. Instead, he suggests that he himself was once not "too fussed about it." Now, he does see it more as "dovetailing" with the rest of the biblical account. He defends Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14, but suggests a very strange model of biblical inspiration in the process.

We should be thankful that the Archbishop of Canterbury did not deny that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary. Indeed, the Archbishop seems to have grown in appreciation for the theological significance of this biblical truth.

At the same time, his choice of language and means of expression lacks a certain confidence and candor that such a discussion requires. I point to this example in order to remind us all — all who speak of these transforming truths in public — of the necessity of speaking with honest and straightforward confidence about what the Bible teaches. It is not "fussy" to insist that belief in the virgin conception of Christ is a central part of the New Testament account of Christ's incarnation and birth. Why not just state clearly that the Bible teaches this truth, and therefore that Christians are to believe it with confidence as both true and important?

Is that too much to ask? May God grant us all courage and wisdom to speak the truth clearly as a matter of Christian truth-telling, witness, and leadership.

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