The Authority of the Church

Rowan Williams

The issue of the authority of the Church leads in two directions. It's a question about the right of the Christian community to decide the boundaries of what's going to count as Christian, and it's also about the credibility of the Church in making any claims on the human world at large. If you think about the word 'authority' you'll see it has this interesting range of meanings. What's your authority for parking here? You need to produce some kind of documentation that you have the right to be there. 'What's your authority in saying that?' you might say in a discussion or seminar. How do we know that that belongs within this conversation? And so in this lecture I'm going to talk about both of those dimensions in the word 'authority' broadly speaking, the internal and the external: the right to determine within the Christian community what counts as Christian talk, but just as important and perhaps, in some ways more important, the claim to be heard.

To talk about authority in that second and wider sense, is of course to talk about the credibility of the Church. And I hope that as this lecture unfolds you'll see how talking about the creeds of the Church itself (what the Church decides counts as Christian language) can lead into wider discussion and reflection on what makes the Church credible. So if we're giving this a subtitle it might be 'from creeds to credibility'.

Any community needs to know what it is, what it's there for and what it stands for. Communities are ways of constructing human identity. They don't necessarily just happen and if you're not able to answer questions about what a particular community is for, what's distinctive about it, then there's no real understanding available of what kind of loyalty such a community might command, except the contingent matter of people happening to get on with each other. I'm taking it for granted that a human community is more than just people happening to get on with each other. Occasionally you hear people talking about the Church as if that were what the Church really was, just people getting on with each other with a vaguely religious slant. I think that's a slightly inadequate account of the Church, to put it mildly, and I want to dig a little bit in this question of what makes the Church distinctive. Because of course unless the Church can answer that sort of question its claim for anybody else's attention, let alone anybody else's loyalty, is going to be rather slight. So the task of clarifying in the community of Christian believers what's going to
count as Christian talk, the task of clarifying what it is that makes this community distinctive, is actually from the first moment part of establishing a community that has some sort of claim, some sort of credibility. If we think about what kind of community the Church traditionally and historically says it is, you can see that it is going to need a bit of support for its claims to be credible. Of course the Church makes some rather extraordinary statements about itself, about what it is. The Church claims that it is a community whose rationale lies in the action of God. The Church exists because God has acted and continues to act in a certain way. The Church exists because it claims this action of God is a process of reconstructing the entire human race. We ought to allow ourselves from time to time to be rather surprised or shocked by such a claim. To belong to the Church is to belong to a community which anchors itself in the action of God and which says that that action is a reconstruction of what it is to be human. Right or wrong, those are not claims that are boring. So part of the Church’s task in clarifying what it is, what it’s about, what it’s for, is to try to display in its life how the action of God has brought it into being and to display in its life an openness to, a transparency to, the action of God; that what it says and what it does will in some way make sense of this large claim to be grounded in the action of God and to be involved in the reconstruction of the human world. If the Church can’t make sense of this claim to be there because of God’s action, to be involved in the reconstruction of humanity, then the Church becomes just another human institution, a community of people who more or less get on (which is never a very plausible description of most churches anyway, but is a very bad foundation for any claim to reconstruct the human race).

The Church as just another human alliance, just another human group, won’t quite do because of the nature of the claim that the Church makes. So the Church has this very tough challenge: making sense of itself in the light of the claim that God has acted and still acts, and the claim to the reconstruction of humanity. From the very outset, I am suggesting those internal and external questions are connected: the authority of the Church within itself to determine boundaries and the credibility of the Church in the wider world. In this lecture I am not going to be talking too much about the actual mechanisms of authority within the Church (that would require probably several more lectures and would still be inconclusive) because it’s no use just concentrating on how the Church makes decisions or decides its position. The world will always ask ‘Why should anyone listen?’ and the answer to that question isn’t provided by a Church that’s struggling to be fashionable and intelligible at all costs, but by a Church that lives and speaks in such a way that it sharply challenges what the world takes for granted. If that challenge is seen to come from somewhere that is, in human terms,
deep and serious, and if the Church is itself willing to be challenged, judged you might say, about what it is talking about, then perhaps it'll begin to be credible; and I'll say a bit more about that later on.

The Early Church

So how does the Church set about making sense of itself in the light of this claim that God has acted and that the purpose of God is the reconstruc­tion of humanity? The Church from the very beginning has done this in two very basic and very simple ways. The Church has read the Bible; and the Church has performed certain actions in response to the remembered command of Jesus. A part of my argument is that the ultimate foundation of anything we say about authority in, let alone the authority of the Church, has to be focused on those basic realities. The Church has always been a reading and listening community; it's read and listened to the Bible. And the Church has always been a responsive community, doing certain things because Jesus said so; that is drawing people into the community by baptism and celebrating that community in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. These from the start have been the marks of recognition between Christian communities: if you want to know what a Christian community looks like you look for these things. Churches of the very early centuries recognise each other by exploring the degree to which they share the reading and listening practice, the reading and listening to the same books, and the degree to which, in the common practice of baptism and the Eucharist, there is a kind of structure, a recognisable shape to the regular worship of a community.

I spent some years teaching the history of the Early Church and was always fascinated by the ways in which, long before there were creeds and councils, some of these issues would come up. How do you know that this is a church? Well, what does it do? Here's a church that reads books that we don't read, is that all right? Well, probably not actually.

What do we do about it? Long question. Or, here's a community that is very reluctant to let its discipleship, as shown in baptism and Eucharist, affect its willingness to take risks for the faith. Here's a community that's not too willing to produce martyrs. Is that a real church? Good question. There are very few instant answers in that period because the Early Church was such a wonderfully messy and various set of institutions. But you can see that these are the questions that keep coming up, that haunt the discussion. 'How do we recognise?'

To read the same books, to listen to the same books being read, is to say we have the same basic story, the same basic language. The hard questions in the history of the Early Church eventually have to do with how you find
ways of talking about God that are both consistent within themselves and loyal to this shared history, this shared language that comes from reading and listening to the Bible and the practice of the sacraments.

I'll give you two examples, again from the Early Church. There's a passage in one 2nd century writer discussing what certain supposedly Christian groups say about the body; these are among those groups of that era who have a rather negative view of the body, and the theologian writing it says 'the trouble with this is that this doctrine is not in accord with the Eucharist'. In other words if you celebrate the Eucharist, if you break bread and share wine in the presence of the risen Jesus, there are certain ways of talking about yourself and your human neighbours that don't fit, and a view of human life and human destiny that plays down the significance of the body is something you can't get away with if you really know what you're doing when you break the bread and share the wine. This doctrine is not compatible with the Eucharist. Another case from roughly the same period is the schools of prophets and enthusiasts, again in the 2nd Christian century, who argued that the New Testament got you only so far and you needed a bit of extra revelation to take you to where God really wanted you to be, so that when Jesus said in the fourth gospel 'I have many things to tell you but you cannot bear them now', he meant that he would tell them later in the 2nd century through the prophets who were around at the time. Because this opened up the boundaries of what was common, what was shared in the understanding of Christians and left a rather awkward margin for new revelation in a certain part of the Church to claim authority, the Church as a whole fought its way through to a position where it had to say 'the Bible that we read and listen to is a finished thing and unless we accept that we shan't have a language in which we can really talk to each other'. If in the middle of a conversation with somebody else claiming to be a Christian they say 'that's all very well but the Holy Spirit has also told me this', the conversation runs into the sand a little. So as Christian identity and Christian doctrine shapes up in those first few centuries, it seems to be very deeply and centrally about this task, this challenge of finding ways of talking about God together that do justice to those basic signs of what the Church is. A church that reads and listens to the Bible is a reading and listening community, one that says we’re here because we’re spoken to, not just because we’ve chosen to be here. The church that also celebrates baptism and the Eucharist is a church which says 'the things we do together we do not because they seem to be useful symbols of a human togetherness, but because these are the gifts given us from the beginning'.

So here is the Church in its formative period struggling with these questions: how do we talk about God in a way that does justice to that? That's
where I want to say the authority of the Church, to shape and declare its teaching and the limits of its teaching, is rooted, in those two basic practices that make the Church the Church.

**The Purpose of Doctrine and the Creeds**

The doctrines we find in the great creeds of that period develop as a way of interpreting all this. It may seem a very long way from the gospel of Mark to the Nicene Creed, let alone the Athanasian creed, but the fact is that the doctrine laid out in the creeds is there because it is what those early communities thought you had to say in order to make sense of the Bible; and if you said less than that you were somehow not making sense of the Bible and you might as well go back to square one. The argument goes a little bit like this: here we are as a church community reading Christian scripture along with Jewish scripture, the New Testament and the Old Testament. We read this Christian scripture as something that comes to us from God, just as Jewish scripture is read as something that comes to us from God. That means that the events behind Christian scripture must be seen as God’s gift in the same way as the events behind Jewish scripture. They give a new and definitive sense to those earlier events. And that means that the God who is at work in the events behind the New Testament, the Christian scripture, is a God identical with the God of Jewish scripture but also with the freedom to reshape all that’s been said earlier on. So in short, what’s going on in Christian scripture is God. Therefore, the heart and centre of Christian scripture, the figure of Jesus Christ, must be a figure in whom the work and the reality, the love, the life and the freedom of God are simply and absolutely there. How on earth do we say that with clarity?

And so the great debates and upheavals of the 4th century and 5th century unfold in all their terrible complexities. But they’re there not just to give employment to bored theologians; they’re there because the Church was trying to make sense of why it was reading the Bible, and a great deal of the debate of that era revolved around precisely what sense you were going to make of this or that bit of the Bible, how you are you going to make a coherent, picture out of all that, and do justice to the reality of the action of God going on within, behind the pages of the scriptures we’re reading. Then again, a hundred years or so later when there was another round of appallingly complicated controversy about what you needed to say about God and humanity in Jesus Christ, one of the most formidable arguments used was again connected with the Eucharist. Here we are receiving the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, as carrying to us that grace and life which was in Jesus of Nazareth. We therefore assume that in Jesus of Nazareth the reality of this world and the reality of God are bound up
together, not just two bits of a rather awkward compound but woven together in one active life. How do we say that without confusing heaven and earth, God and humanity? Well it’ll take a while but it’s worth trying; this seems to have been the response of the theologians of the 5th century. The point that I’m making in all this is that the language of doctrine as it develops in the Early Church is fundamentally about looking to the practices of the Church – what does the Church actually do week by week? and working out what the implications are and aren’t and what you can and can’t say, and what allows you to go on being faithful to those practices, making sense of them without talking nonsense. That’s the process of creating doctrine. The authority of the Church to undertake this task of defining its own language is something that comes from the fundamental sense that we can’t say anything useful or sensible, constructive or attractive about the Church that doesn’t finally lead us back into the realisation that the Church is here because it has been called and invited, not because somebody posted something on the 1st century equivalent of the internet saying ‘anybody interested, join in’. It’s there because it’s been summoned. The very word *ekklesia*, the Greek word for church, means ‘a community that has been summoned or called’.

So as the Church tries to establish in those centuries, what its identity really is, what its language really amounts to, it’s appealing to that basic sense without which no Christian talk happens at all. We’re here in response, we’re here in obedience, we’re here because we’ve been invited. The form of the exercise of authority in the Church is trying to demonstrate why this way of talking, or this way of acting does or doesn’t support the practice of reading the Bible and sharing the sacraments. When people talk about heresy in the Early Church they’re talking about those actions and ways of talking which, in the eyes of the majority, seemed to subvert the very idea of being a called, summoned, invited community. Without that you don’t have the sense of God’s primary action reaching out to the reconstruction of the human race.

**Authority and Truth**

Now this is rather different, I think, from the idea that the Church is given authority in and of itself to declare the truth. At times there have been theologies that have swung perilously near that extreme, as if God directly guarantees to the Church a capacity to discover and declare the truth. There are certain versions of catholic theology across the centuries, which to the non Roman Catholic may seem to have gone that way. Nor does it mean that the Church is gifted with unusual logical acumen in order that it may bit by bit unscramble the implications of a set of propositions delivered at the very beginning. It’s a bit more complicated than that and a
bit more conversational than that. It's the Church discovering, as time goes on, what does and doesn't belong within a conversation between people doing the same things: reading and listening, getting wet, eating and drinking, the fundamental categories of Christian identity.

So the Church has, you might say, no authority, no authorisation to go onto another footing without sacrificing its basic identity. If the Church were to say 'from now on we will discuss questions of identity and boundaries and limits without any reference to the Bible or the sacraments', something very drastic would have happened to the Church. You might well say it could still be an interesting human community, but it would be at least an open question whether it would be anything like what the Church has for the last two thousand years said it is and whether it would have any claim for that vision of the wholeness of human community which it puts at the centre of its work. And when other criteria seem to be at work in marking the boundaries, the limits of what can be recognised as Christian speech, that marks some kind of serious break. There may be argument, there may be uncertainty, but what matters is that we are still in some sense speaking the same language because we recognise that we are doing the same thing. This may seem a very basic and rather boring way of putting the authority of the Church but I think that is what, as a matter of fact, the history of the Church shows us. When we stop appealing to these things that we do together then our whole claim to a distinctive identity and a distinctive mission begins to disappear. Unless you should think this is just about doctrine in remote ages, the Church producing a lot of doubtless very helpful but not really very interesting statements about the Trinity or the incarnation, I'd remind you of the greatest event of Christian self-definition of the last century – the Barmen Declaration, made in 1934 by the so called Confessing Church in Germany, in resisting the decrees of the Third Reich. If you read that declaration, which was drafted by the greatest theologian of the age, Karl Barth, you'll see how the themes I've been talking about actually come to life in a very specific, very dangerous situation. The legislation of the Third Reich attempted to limit the rights of people of Jewish origin within the Church. A point made by Barth and the others involved in the Barmen declaration was: if you say that, then we cannot understand what you think you're doing when you read the Bible. You cannot say that and claim consistency with these practices because the Bible is a record of God's people, Jewish and Gentile, and it's impossible to read and to listen to those texts and go along with the legislation of the Third Reich.

And there've been less dramatic but in some ways equally strong statements in other contexts, like the Kairos document in South Africa in the 1980s, making a similar point. If you say that and if you do that, if you
limit the Christian community on racial grounds, then we don’t know what you think you’re doing when you read the Bible. The conversation ends. We no longer have a common language.

So that’s part of what I think is going on in the age when the Church was authoritatively trying to shape a sense of its doctrine and teaching. The authority to declare some kind of limit to what’s going on in the Church’s speech and action derives from the way the Church says what it is and who it is in those basic actions of reading scripture and celebrating the sacraments.

**Different Ways of Reading the Bible**

Things change in those practices. The way the Bible is read has shifted a good deal from age to age, more than we sometimes think. In the first few Christian centuries reading the Bible was something you did with very intense meditation and prayer, and the people you looked to help you with it were not necessarily the clergy, let alone professional scholars, but holy people with philosophical insights, who would take you through the slightly misleading surface of the text and tell you what the real, that is the symbolic, meaning was. And that remained the majority way of reading the Bible until the early Middle Ages, when Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century says ‘well no, actually: the Bible is about the events of salvation; and therefore beyond all symbolic senses is the literal sense, what actually happened and what God actually meant to happen, and our reading has got to give that priority’. That in turn had a very considerable influence on the way that the Reformation read the Bible: ‘forget the symbolism, what does it say?’ Then as biblical scholarship begins in the 18th century and comes to its great historic climax in the 19th century, you have to ask a whole set of rather different questions about how you read, where the literal sense of the Bible seems to be slightly less clear than it was before. I’m not saying that any one of these ways of reading has to be regarded as the right and the only one, just noting that within the history of reading the Bible quite a lot of things have happened and are still happening. You don’t have to be a total literalist, in the modern sense, about the Bible to see it as God’s gift, which definitively sets out how God acts.

These are discussions and debates, which continue. What matters is whether or not the Bible is still seen as the call of God, a summons or an invitation. I can remember a lecture given in Cambridge sometime in the late 60s by a distinguished German theologian on aspects of the parables of Jesus. In some discussion about this, the visiting German theologian said very passionately, when faced with a lot of rather pragmatic English people, ‘but do you think the Bible is a word from elsewhere?’ When that ceases to
be taken for granted, then the possibility of Christian conversation suffers accordingly.

**Authority and the Church’s Credibility**

This is where I want to turn to some reflections on the second kind of authority, I mentioned, authority in the wider sense, the credibility of the Church. I have already indicated some of the ways in which I think my two ways of coming to authority are connected. By what authority does the Church claim to be heard, to be taken seriously in the wider world?

As I have already indicated, I think that claim, that authority to be heard, has to rest on the claim that we are here because of the action of God; caught up in a project for the renewal of the world. But the credibility of that depends a great deal on whether we look as if we’re listening. I’m sometimes tempted to say that the Church is at its most authoritative when it looks as if it’s listening; listening first to God, that is, listening to the call that has constituted it in being, so that the Church as a *community of people being converted* is the Church that is authoritative. Conversion is one of those words that is in danger of coming down in the world sometimes, being rather trivialised. Let’s try and bring it back into focus. Conversion is about changing the way you look, in both senses, changing the direction in which you are looking, changing how you appear. Conversion is transfiguration; it’s turning to – attentively, obediently, passionately – the source of that call and invitation, and changing what you communicate in turn to the world. So a church in which it’s not obvious that we’re listening and expecting to be changed is a church whose right to be listened to is not going to look very impressive.

The claim about a project of universal reconciliation, the reconstruction of humanity, will look very unconvincing unless (a) we are committed to reconstruction and reconciliation, (b) we recognise how bad we are at it and turn again to the source of our life for renewal and for change. A missionary church that speaks with authority is a church that is prepared to look at itself with honesty, to admit its failures and yet consistently to reorient itself towards reconciliation and renewal.

One of the most interesting of many passages in St Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians is that one in Chapter 6 where he speaks about the ways in which he commends himself. The first part of that chapter is really about Paul’s authority as an apostle, and what does he say about his authority there? He commends himself by his failures as well as his successes, in death as in life, as unknown and well known, as ‘dying and behold we live’. Just as later in that wonderful epistle in the eleventh chapter, he again displays his failings and his weaknesses as part of his credentials. It’s Paul’s
way of saying 'my right to be heard has nothing to do with whether I am now getting it all right. My right to be heard as in what I am trying desper­ately to direct your attention to, which is the reality to which I am answer­able. Never mind whether I succeed or fail, never mind whether I speak well or badly. The question is, is my life transparent to this?' Paul sets out very clearly the distance between his achievement and God's, his action and God's action. Paul exposes himself in his writing to the judgement of God. Paul commends himself, testifies to his authorisation by that appeal. That's why a church which has authority in the second sense, credibility in the sense I've outlined, is a church that must be seen not to be neurotically anxious about its success and a church which is in earnest conversation with the heart, the centre, the origin of its life, its own criteria of authority, a church aware of its failures, a church wrestling with those things which make clear the priority of God's action. Somehow in all this, it should be a church which is producing transparent lives as evidence of its origin. Not clinching evidence; you can't simply say 'oh look, there's a saint, the church must be right'. Without saints it's extremely difficult to think why anyone should care a damn whether the Church is right or not, as you would not see any sense of reconciled or renewed relations, changed lives. Nothing happens without that.

So a credible church is one that is always trying to let itself be judged and made sense of by the scriptural record and by sacramental actions, though that's not always a simple process. A credible church is one that's always willing to face the fact that it is not God, that there is a distance between what it achieves and does, and what God achieves and does. A credible church is a repentant church and a grateful church, not a smug church, not a church which is freewheeling on its own success.

But transparent lives, converted lives in a church, these terms oblige us to think a bit further about another dimension of this whole discussion. A transparent life is not a life in which the light of God has obliterated humanity and a converted life is not one in which renewal has blotted out the first 40 years. Transparency and conversion are words that say the human reality is still there, preserved but changed, and it is the recognisability of that humanity that also becomes part of the credibility of the Church. 'What kind of human being are you talking about?' says the non-Christian to the Christian. Well, please God, the Christian will be able to say, 'Your sort of human being, what other kind is there?' Christians do not belong to another species. The point is, the humanity Christians are talking about, the humanity that Christians believe God is working on, is actual humanity. And when the Church appears not to understand and be attuned to the complexities and the struggles of actual humanity, its authority is
once again diminished. The curious thing is that this yet again leads us back to the basics of Christian doctrine, because the central story of Christian faith is one of a human life which was utterly human, in the same sense that you and I are human, and yet utterly saturated with the action of God in a way that none of our lives is, a recognisable human life. Jesus is not a special kind of human being, and Jesus’ total unreserved transparency to God is not something that destroys that humanity. The central paradox and mystery of Christian doctrine is very tightly bound up with what we think we’re doing when we’re doing mission. (I could say in brackets here that one of the things we most need to do sometimes in the Church is to connect more closely our doctrine of Jesus Christ with what we say and think about mission – but that’s another story and material for some more lectures.)

Throughout what I’ve been saying, I’ve been attempting to suggest that the way the Church defines doctrine and the way the Church engages in mission are not two totally separated things. The integrity of both belongs firmly together. The Church has no authority, internal or external, that’s not tied to its basic practices; doing what Jesus said and listening to the record of God’s history with us. The Church has no authority to dispense with what that means. And the Church’s credibility is partly to do with that, with its willingness to be earnestly engaging with those things that make it itself, visibly struggling with its own integrity in the face of those things, but also and in the light of that, it’s to do with the Church’s capacity to speak recognisably human language.

Sometimes one of the roles that the Church exercises in society at large is to ask questions, to issue challenges, where a society seems to have forgotten how to speak a really human language. In one of his poems W. H. Auden describes ‘the ogre’, a monster of tyranny. He wrote it in the late 1960s at the time of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, and he speaks about how totalitarian oppression can’t actually speak human language.

The ogre strides with hands on hips
While drivel gushes from his lips.

Tyranny can’t speak ‘human’ and the Church at times needs to say that this or that kind of talking which is oppressive or lazy, or exploitative, cruel, prejudiced, exclusive, is not talking ‘human’. The Church’s ability to show that what it means by human is what other humans mean by human is part of this issue of authority. Not for the sake of the Church being relevant, accessible, but for the sake of the Church being faithful to what it’s supposed to be, drawn into God’s action for the redemption of humanity, the reconstruction of the world and humans in it. There is no short way of resolving the tension this sets up between tradition and adaptation. No instant way of telling us what next week the boundary will be. But we can
still construct a robust sense of the authority of the Church so long as our fundamental belief is that God has acted and is acting, that God is a free creator, that God works directly in Jesus and that God enables our present response to Jesus. The details of the creed follow from that, but unless you begin with a sense of God acting you won't see how to get to the creed. I'd say that even those credal affirmations that cause most trouble to some people - the virginal conception and the empty tomb - only make sense if you have a vivid, a living, apprehension of what it is to believe in a God who acts. It's from this that there comes the authority to challenge a world where humanity can become forgotten or overlaid.

I've mentioned the Barmen declaration; let me mention a much less well known figure of the 20th century, partly because I knew her brother and some of her friends, a Russian refugee called Sofia Michaelovna Zernova who was thrown out of Russia in the early 1920s landing up in Paris. Sofia Michaelovna was a terrifying lady, as many Russian ladies are and were, and she was notorious in France and England for beginning casual conversations with strangers on trains and so forth, by saying things like 'What is your relationship to your guardian angel?' and 'With how many articles of the Nicene creed do you have difficulties?'. The story of Sofia Michaelovna which I treasure most is that of her intervention on behalf of some other refugees in a French factory at some point in the 1940s. She'd gone in to try and get work in the factory for some refugees who'd come to her for assistance and had a long conversation about this with the managing director who said 'I can't do anything madam, I don't see why you bother about these people after all they're animals' and Sofia Michaelovna said 'Monsieur, they are images of God. I will explain to you how you ought to behave to images of God.' It sounds as if the manager had the full force of Sofia Michaelovna for some time, and eventually said 'Perhaps we could find some accommodation. If you have any more images of God madam, please bring them along.' The connection, you see, between doctrine and attitude in practice is not an abstract matter; and I think that Sofia Michaelovna, talking to the factory manager about images of God is a rather good example of how the authority of the Church is exercised; not by Popes and Councils and Archbishops, but by a Christian spirit who has understood what it is to be in the company of an active and inviting God and to live life accordingly.

'Ve misunderstand authority', said one great Anglican writer a hundred years ago, 'if we think the best example of authority is a policeman'. The right and the power to make a real difference in human life, which has to be what authority is finally about, depends on something rather larger than a legal or constitutional structure, the practices of discipline. At the end of
the day, what makes a difference in the world is God; and the authority of the Church, both within its structures and beyond, rests on whether it is letting God through, the God who has established his identity in the events of revelation. It’s sometimes been said that Christianity is always transforming itself into something that can be believed – that’s quite a neat summary of what some more revisionist Christians would like to say about the processes of reviewing and revising doctrine. I have to say though that I’m not so sure. I think it’s rather more a case of Christians always transforming themselves into people who can be believed, which is a slightly different matter. The transformation of Christians into people who can be believed depends on knowing that at the heart of this practice and this tradition lies the action of God, the purpose of God in renewing creation and acting accordingly. If we understand that, then, I suggest, we understand a bit of what the authority of the Church means, grounding it in some of the most primitive senses of authority to appear in the Bible. For authority so often comes across, in the Gospels especially, as the freedom for change, change into images of God, into what we were made to be and meant to be, authority establishing itself in the reality, the depth and integrity of conversion: Christians being transformed into people who can be believed.

Notes:

The Most Reverend Dr Rowan Williams is Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Experiential Grounds for Believing in God and a Future Life

Paul Badham

In this article I propose to make two claims. First that religious experience provides us with rational grounds for believing in the existence of a transcendent reality which can influence and transform our lives. Secondly I shall argue that religious experiences near death provide rational grounds for believing that this life is not all there is. Talk of Heaven or of Buddha’s Pure-land may not simply be a way of talking about the enhancement of our lives in the here and now, but may also point to the possibility of a transformed life after death.
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