

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION by David Tacey (Emeritus Professor, Latrobe University- an academic working across the fields of religion, literature and Jungian psychology)

How can the Scriptures be Believed?

.....

Note: The material below is not a transcript of the presentation. It is a very abbreviated overview of key points presented, in the context of a tight word limit. It aims merely to give the reader the “flavour” of the talk, rather than to include the detail of the many points covered. For a more comprehensive coverage, the reader is referred to “Beyond Literal Belief – Religion as Metaphor” by David Tacey (John Garratt publications, 2015).

.....

David’s talk was centred on interpretation of the scriptures, with emphasis on the New Testament Gospels. His thrust was on how we should properly read the scriptures, so an alternative title was “How should the Scriptures be read?” rather than “How can the scriptures be believed?”. The recurring point was that, if belief is grounded on the certainty of historical events having occurred, we miss the real truth in them. Similarly, those who dismiss the scriptures on the grounds that many alleged historical occurrences never occurred, or indeed could not possibly have happened, throw out the scriptures’ claim to truth erroneously. Both errors arise because the scriptures were never meant to be read as historical narratives.

All major religions today – and Christianity in particular – were locked into a mindset of reading the scriptures as historical narratives, and because they contained many stories that strike the modern mind as “just not believable”, this is a major reason why “believers” are dwindling in number. To many secular people, the stories of religion are unlikely fairy stories that have no bearing on what we understand today. On the other hand, for traditional religious people, they are supernatural miracles and wonders that happened to holy people in days of old. In the New Testament, stories rejected by the secular mindset include the virgin birth of Jesus, walking on water, feeding vast crowds from miniscule resources, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and so on.

But David said that neither the secular perception nor the typically religious perspective does justice to religion. Both are ways of pushing religion away from personal impact, one into fantasy, the other into purported history.

The problem is that the scriptures were never meant to be read primarily as fact. In David’s assessment, only about one-third of the Gospels is fact, while the remaining two-thirds was always meant to be read as myth. But the modern mindset has corrupted and debased the original sense of “myth”. In reality, a myth is neither fantasy nor falsehood, but a deliberate structure erected around a historical context to convey not the fact of certain happenings but the *significance* of them, and in particular the *spiritual meaning* of them. Thus, the scriptures should not be read with the mindset of *logos*, which has come to dominate the western world, and whose dominance has been exacerbated since the time of the “enlightenment”, but with the mindset of *mythos* instead.

Furthermore, scholars of all the major religions have known for a long time now (beginning at least three hundred years ago) that none of the gospels was written by anyone who was an eye-witness to the events contained in them. The dates and locations of writing have been determined with considerable precision, and the authors whom we still call Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are now

recognised as “ascribed” names. In any case it has been demonstrated that multiple authors were involved in the writing, while the dates of writing were actually decades after the death of Jesus. Thus, the past tradition that they were eye-witness accounts (which still persists among many) is no longer tenable. Furthermore, their literary genre was well- and- long known to Jewish people from among whom the message of Jesus was spread as *Haggadic midrash*. This was overtly the equivalent of myth (with myth being properly understood in the ancient sense, not in the modern day sense of fantasy or mere legend, let alone a falsehood). *Midrash* is a form of embellishment deliberately chosen to make the apprehension of spiritual significance more dramatic or forceful; thus, most often it is not meant to convey that “this happened” but that the significance is “as if this happened”. More particularly, *Haggadic midrash* refers to the interpretation of a story by relating it to another story in sacred history. Hence, for example, the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes is presented to connect with the older sacred story of God feeding the Jews with Manna through the intercession of Moses.

Hence, the writing of scripture well after the historical time of Jesus – and he *was* an historical figure – represents not only a persistent oral passing down of a tradition of Jesus’ sayings and mission, but also a consolidated reflection on the spiritual significance of it all, including the true significance of Jesus himself.

David has experienced many examples of rejection of his message, but insists that he continues in order to awaken in people of faith a deeper appreciation of their faith. He calls for a demythologising of religion, but not in such a way as to lead to the collapse of meaning and spirit; on the contrary, his aim is to reinstate a deeper respect and understanding of it. He sees the muddle that religion has put upon itself as succinctly summarised by Joseph Campbell, as follows:

Half the people of the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions are facts, and the other half thinks they are not facts at all. As a result, we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies.

He calls upon institutional church leaders to abandon their entrenched paradigm of treating all the stories of scripture as historical fact, and to embrace the *mythos* mindset as the basis of its teachings. However, he also sees this as an extremely difficult task, because they have so much of their authority invested in the other paradigm, and also because it requires a truly spiritual response from within the reader of scripture. The latter is more difficult than responding to the “wow factor” of perceived miraculous events, but that is the challenge of religion of the future.

.....