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# Review Article

TREVOR A. HART

## The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England

*The Mystery of Salvation : The Story of God's Gift*

Church House Publishing, 1995, xiii + 225 pp, £6.95

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**I**t is recounted of the Scots Enlightenment philosopher David Hume that, upon hearing of a sermon by Jonathan Edwards on 'The Usefulness of Sin', he erupted with the indignant inquiry, 'But what the devil does the fellow make of hell and damnation?' I must confess that it was with a similar burden of curiosity that I initially approached and interrogated this book, a hermeneutical strategy shaped in large measure by media responses to the volume's publication. I ought to have known better. Those wishing to discover the answer to Hume's question may turn to paragraph one on page 199 where it is (I think) answered. But be warned; whatever the curious principles of selection employed by religious correspondents in their frenzied bid for air time and column inches may suggest, the key to this book certainly does not lie here.

This report is the third in a series (following *We Believe in God* [1987] and *We Believe in the Holy Spirit* [1991]) treating core doctrines of the Christian faith, and doing so in a particular way. Unlike some Doctrine Commission reports of the past there are no signed chapters; instead the entire report is owned and presented to the Church by the Commission as a whole (x). Its pages reflect a lengthy and constructive process of writing, discussion, reflection and reworking out of which there emerges a remarkable degree of broad consensus in relation to the major themes treated. Of course there will have been many differences of understanding and expression among the Commission's members, and to some extent one may engage in a crude source-critical exercise, tracing particular distinctive emphases and concerns, and identifying the points at which one voice seems to have been modified and qualified by another. But such differences are enveloped and held together convincingly (rather than artificially) within what is apparently a clear shared commitment to the broad incarnational and trinitarian structure of catholic Christianity. Some may lament the absence of maverick voices and perspectives in the text, and think the final result oppressive or contrived. Such readers will doubtless have preferred the public jousting and open disagreements which characterised the format of some past reports. Others will find the consensual approach here altogether more appropriate and valuable in a document which, while it is certainly not intended to have

prescriptive or binding force as an expression of what the Church of England believes, is nonetheless offered as a guide for those wanting to integrate their tradition-nurtured faith with the questions, concerns and challenges of contemporary life. The report engages head on with the concerns of the wider human community; yet it is primarily a church document, offered to the Church by the Church and for the sake of the life of the Church in its ministry to the world. It is not a collection of papers from a symposium testing the diverse and conflicting intellectual possibilities available on the shelves of the theological supermarket. Interesting and important as the latter genre may be, it has limited value in the task of directing Christian men and women who are seeking the contemporary meaning and significance of the tradition within which they stand.

*The Mystery of Salvation* begins by considering the particular challenges presented by our cultural context to the articulation of a Christian soteriology. The impact of scientific cosmologies upon human self-understanding, changing social attitudes (especially the emergence of feminism), and the increased awareness of religious diversity and detailed knowledge of other faith traditions are each singled out as particularly worthy of recognition and direct address in any attempt to reformulate the gospel tradition for today. Space is also given to a sensitive account (delightfully illustrated with references to contemporary literature) of the so-called secularity of modern life, characterised by loss of any obvious sense of the sacred or of transcendentals laying claim to moral and intellectual allegiance. The fragmentation resulting from this loss of bearings, it is suggested, undermines any attempt to articulate a shared diagnosis of the human condition and, subsequently, poses a significant problem for those seeking to bear witness to a salvific economy which addresses that condition. This opening chapter is helpful in drawing attention to some important features of contemporary western culture, but it sets out an agenda which the report as a whole does not subsequently keep clearly in its sights. To be sure, there is a lengthy chapter towards the end of the book on other faith traditions, and periodic glimpses of feminism (some of them in less than obvious contexts) and science interrupt the flow of argument elsewhere. For the most part, however, the discussion is pursued without being clearly orientated towards these concerns.

The opening chapter seems to share a common assumption that our context is in some way more resistant to the gospel, and thus presents a more profound challenge to the theologian than any prior to it. It is an assumption which is at least worth questioning: has there ever been a culture which was not at root antagonistic to the gospel except, perhaps, in appearances which proved ultimately to be dangerously deceptive? To suppose so would seem to risk historical misreading of earlier contexts (as if the cultural milieux of first-century Palestine or fourth-century Alexandria were somehow more naturally receptive to the gospel of a crucified Lord) and, more importantly, to foster the dangerous notion that the burden of theological responsibility lies in tracing and building upon available points of contact and continuity

between the gospel and contemporary intellectual mores. Of course our context presents very particular and radical challenges to the Christian tradition; and of course these must be taken absolutely seriously and responded to. But they should not be allowed to call the sole tune to which theologians dance; and we ought not to forget that the relevance of the Christian gospel has often been its inherent scandalousness when judged by the standards of alternative traditions.

One of the most serious challenges to the church today in fact seems likely to be an overriding optimism concerning the human condition, its capacities and destiny. Such optimism is manifest in various forms and degrees in some types of humanism, evolutionary models of history as progress, and emergent 'New Age' spiritualities alike. The root supposition is that humanity is if not 'divine' then fundamentally good and noble, and suffering at most from behavioural difficulties which can and will be transcended through political, social, psycho-therapeutic and other forms of human self improvement. How should the Christian theologian respond to this sort of self understanding? While it is no doubt true that the western Christian tradition has underplayed the theme of the goodness of creation, and has too often overdosed on self-deprecating and unduly pessimistic portrayals of human depravity and darkness, the genuinely tragic side of human existence is surely no optional extra to a Christian anthropology. Its loss or effective obscuring in the interests of a correlation with 'what people these days find acceptable' could easily lead not just to the trivialising 'Disneyfication' of the gospel, but its ultimate betrayal and relegation to irrelevance. This report nowhere commends any such strategy, I hasten to add. I wonder, though, whether it might not have identified the problem more clearly, and indicated more forcefully the legitimacy of and need for (here and elsewhere) a response to culture rooted in resistance and the willing embrace of the scandalous.

Similar issues arise in connection with chapter 3, which focuses on the relationship between salvation and history. For the sake of clarity we are offered a threefold taxonomy of Christian views on this subject. Such schemes are always extremely vulnerable to the charge of inadequacy, of course, since they can never accommodate every variation and qualification. They must be adjudged on the basis of their broad brush account and their ability to locate the reader quickly and efficiently within the landscape of views available by drawing attention to landmarks. The first category of views listed here are those which are in one way or another 'world affirming', which locate salvation as a reality very much *within* history. Then there are described for us 'world renouncing' views which want to escape from history into eternity, and at best concede the anticipation of an essentially ahistorical redemption within the here and now.

Lastly, the report itself offers us a typically Anglican third way which combines strengths and eliminates weaknesses in the aforementioned alternatives. This Hegelian achievement would insist that the world is basically 'good' but nonetheless in deep and serious trouble. It needs God to act in

order to redeem it and to restore order. This God does through entering the historical process as a creature and so restoring and completing his original creative project rather than abrogating it or starting from scratch. Redemption thus envelops the fleshly and historical, but transcends history through resurrection. I must confess that having read this and then re-read it I found myself asking how precisely it differed from what I had always taken to be the sort of thing believed by most basically orthodox Christians. As such it is an enormously helpful and balanced statement. I'm not clear, though, that it really serves as a progressive synthesis in which the conflicts between 'world affirming' and 'world renouncing' views are transcended.

The problem, I think, is that the original categories focus on the wrong issue. Any category which effectively thrusts Israel's prophetic tradition and Teilhard de Chardin together ('world affirming'), while the alternative makes bedfellows of Plato and Karl Barth ('world renouncing'), seems desirous of some careful recasting. The categories draw attention to things which these figures may have in common, but by doing so divert our attention from the far more significant things which nonetheless set them decisively apart. I wonder whether the location of 'salvation' within or beyond history is really the lodestone by which to set the course for such a discussion. More germane, perhaps, is the question of the relationship between 'nature' and 'grace', or of the inherent capacities and incapacities of nature or history to realise 'redemption' in one degree or another. One might cast the same issue differently in terms of agency: does salvation erupt or evolve from within the potential of the natural order and through the independent activity of humans? Is it 'historical', that is to say, in the sense of being able to be accounted for and accommodated within the continuities and potentialities mapped by the 'laws' of historical science? Or is it contingent on an irruption of divine action which in some sense clearly interrupts and even conflicts with the natural sequence? The hope of Isaiah and Jeremiah was not rooted in an omega-point lying at the end of an evolutionary process, but in the faithfulness of Yahweh to retrieve an otherwise hopeless situation. If Barth refused to 'affirm' the inherent capacity of fallen nature for redemption, he certainly believed in the capacity of God to redeem it, and his 'world renouncing' emphasis did not dissuade him from a political commitment and involvement with poverty and injustice rooted firmly in a conviction that such a salvation *must* have an impact on history.

Chapter 2, 'The Giver and the Gift', explores the basic meanings of the term 'salvation' within Christian contexts. It suggests, helpfully, that the word bears numerous distinct and complementary senses reflecting the many different social and cultural contexts within which the idea was born and has developed and been interpreted. If we seek for some underlying continuity or unity among these distinct construals, then this can perhaps be found in the insistence that to be 'saved' invariably involves receiving some benefit or help from the hand of God as gift. Intrinsic within the concept of gift is that of a personal framework for giving and receiving:

In receiving the gift as a gift, I receive at the same time the giver's gift of himself or herself. In the same way God gives himself to us in all his gifts of salvation. If we have any of them without recognising them as gifts of God, we have something valuable. But to experience them as gifts, to recognise the giver in the gifts, is to know God. This is what Christians call salvation. (36)

This emphasis on the irreducible gift aspect of redemption serves to set Christian soteriologies decisively apart from various contemporary alternatives couched in terms of self-realisation or self-fulfilment. But, the chapter affirms, more yet needs to be said, for the God who gives himself in giving these gifts is not known by Christians as an undifferentiated subject, but as the triune communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit into the very dynamics of whose life we are adopted and elevated (we share together with the incarnate Son in the Spirit who, being poured out into our lives, prompts us to cry, 'Abba! Father!'). There is no lifting of us out of the sphere of the human or the historical in order to participate in this divine life; God has earthed it within history by the incarnation of his Son and the outpouring of his Spirit on all flesh. The exposition here is rich and insightful, and integrates trinitarian, incarnational and redemptive language in ways which have too often been held together in the western tradition (especially its Protestant end) only in the liturgy. The chapter continues with a brief discussion of God and gender, and of the importance of both differentiating and yet discerning continuity between creation and redemption.

Space compels a rather brief description of chapters 4 to 6, each of which, in its own way, surveys the variety of images or metaphors of salvation to be found in the biblical tradition and the interpretative heritage of the church. Chapter 4 concentrates on the apostolic material and contains some penetrating and helpful insights (e.g. the linking of crucifixion to slavery, 99). Chapter 5 explores 'modern restatements of some of the principal ways in which Christian people have understood the mystery of salvation' (101), including discussions of substitution, sacrifice, victory, representation, solidarity in suffering, and other central strands of Christian reflection on the nature of God's redemptive action. This chapter is perhaps the most obvious index of theological diversity among the commission's members. The unresolved tensions between differing models where they exist remain largely unresolved. Nonetheless the descriptive accounts offer a helpful overview. Chapter 6 attends to the distinction between what we are saved from and what we are saved for. Its distinctive purpose is not entirely clear, inasmuch as in doing so it covers some of the same ground as chapter 5, but the framework is different and the treatment helpful.

What I found surprising in these chapters (and the appendix to the report which really belongs together with them) was the way in which the penal or forensic metaphors which have so dominated the tradition of atonement theology in the West were treated. It is fair to say that the language of Jesus' death as a judgement or punishment, and the imagery of the law court and execution chamber, have received too much exclusive attention in western

Christianity. It is also true that they can be and sometimes have been crudely handled in such a way as to render them dubious and (in terms of the standards of the same scriptural inheritance from which they are derived) sub-Christian, particularly in terms of the doctrine of God latent within such accounts. The report says all this, and fair enough. But I looked in vain for any serious attempt to rehabilitate this particular cluster of images, or to identify the valuable insights which might be supposed to lie within or behind them, no matter how uncomfortable the metaphors themselves may be. An apparent attempt to do so (122f) rapidly changes direction without addressing the key issues. The appendix to the report effectively affirms the tradition of Abelard, Socinus and Rashdall, and offers little hope of anything of genuine value being retrieved from the 'objective' tradition of Augustine, Anselm and Calvin for contemporary understanding. It concedes that the latter theology is essentially that of the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Prayer Book, but does little more than tacitly excuse these on the ground that their particular historical context made this virtually inevitable. I have no brief whatever for exalting the penal and forensic imagery at the effective expense of everything else in Christian soteriology, but it seems to me that a much more careful attempt ought to have been made to explore the resources of such language before effectively consigning it to the file marked 'historical interest'.

Chapter 7 concerns 'Christ and World Faiths'. The now commonly-accepted distinction between exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist outlooks is presented, although the chapter itself attempts to modify and move beyond it. The heart of the chapter lies in the willing acknowledgement that 'the major faiths bring salvation...to their followers in varying but significant degrees' (167). This is certainly not intended to detract from the uniqueness or non-substitutability of Christ as incarnate Son of God and universal Saviour. In this respect it shares ground with those inclusivists who wish to see God at work in other faiths drawing people (in one way or another) to a salvation rooted in Christ. The discussion is informative and accessible. For some it will concede far too much in the direction of the 'redemptive significance' of other faiths; for others far too little. On the whole that is not a bad place to be in theology. But I do wonder about the terms in which the discussion is couched. Why should other religious faiths be the channels through which God chooses to work redemptively (in either an inclusivist or a pluralist outlook)? Is religion really the most obvious context for God to make meaningful and redemptive contact with people? We should not suppose so too quickly and without further reflection. It might well be argued that the presence of religion raises barriers rather than provides opportunities for such contact, and that if we are seeking the activity of God's Spirit outside the church we might do well to look elsewhere than within the confines of organised religion.

Another question provoked by this chapter concerns the model of salvation which is supposedly being identified as present, or partly present, or potentially present in and through the ministries of world faiths. A partial

account points us to such generalities as being enabled to escape from what destroys life, and to embrace health, peace, prosperity and blessing. No doubt these are indeed things associated with salvation, and are to be discovered empirically among the adherents of other faiths. But are these not merely the gifts rather than the Giver? How does the 'salvation' being pursued here in the world faiths, that is to say, relate to that described for us in chapter 2 in terms of essential relatedness to God, and recognition of the Giver in the gift? These are questions which could helpfully have been picked up to give this chapter more of a sense of integration with the report as a whole.

Finally, we end where we began in chapter 8 with a discussion of the character of the Christian hope: resurrection, parousia, purgatory, praying with the saints, and hell all treated in fourteen pages! Whether 'Hell is not eternal torment' is actually the most interesting or the most contentious statement in the chapter readers must decide for themselves.

The Doctrine Commission is to be congratulated on the production of a report which informs the reader and stimulates responses and questions about issues at the very heart of the Christian tradition. It is clearly written and accessible to a wide range of readers. As such it ought to serve as a resource for study and discussion in many different contexts within the life of the church. Let us hope that the consensual nature of the document and the commitment to serious engagement with core doctrines will continue to characterise reports from future Commissions.

**The Revd Professor Trevor A. Hart is Professor of Divinity at the University of St Andrews and Convenor of the Doctrine Commission of the Scottish Episcopal Church.**