

Open Letter to the Sunday Times

13th May 2003

Dear Sirs,

I write in response to the article by Christopher Morgan 'Archbishop upset by tide of hate mail' (11 May 2003)

The article, which is ostensibly about hate mail received by the Archbishop of Canterbury, mentions Church Society as a body that opposed his appointment. The insinuation in the article is that we have encouraged such correspondence. It is important, therefore, that you allow us to set the record straight.

National newspapers are able to run campaigns to discredit potential archbishops by repeating false allegations about their backgrounds. However, for ordinary members of the Church of England one of the ways in which they can make their views known is to write letters. In a civilised democracy the writing of letters is an accepted way of protesting, indeed newspapers encourage it.

Following the announcement of Dr Williams' appointment we encouraged people to write and ask him not to accept the post. We hope that all those who wrote did so politely and charitably. We unequivocally deplore the writing of letters that are vitriolic or hateful. Rowan Williams is not alone in receiving such letters. Those who publicly questioned his appointment have also been subject to vitriol and diatribe in correspondence and in person.

What strikes me as ludicrous are the examples given by Christopher Morgan as to what constitutes hate. Apparently someone called Dr Williams a 'lily-livered pacifist'; given what has been reported in the press I can only assume that it was a member of the Government who wrote it! Others have apparently said that he is 'a false teacher'. If that is their conviction why is it offensive to state it? If Christian leaders contradict the plain teaching of the Bible then they are teaching falsehood.

In view of the way in which Christopher Morgan, a close personal friend of the Archbishop, has reported the story it is important to stress why Church Society and others have been so forthright in opposing Dr Williams. Those who are interested in the subject of hate mail would do well to read Dr Williams' sermon entitled 'The Touch of God' in his book 'Open to Judgement.' He writes of the letters that clergymen receive from the wretched and disturbed. But in this essay he engages in just the tactics that Christopher Morgan deplores.

The Church of England upholds the conviction in its doctrinal formulas that the Bible is the Word of God. This has been the mainstream Christian position for two millennia. It centres on the fact that the Bible is divine revelation, not written in some mechanical way but God the Holy Spirit so directing the human authors that what they wrote was the Word of God. In his essay Dr Williams asserts that sections of the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, are 'page after page of paranoid fantasy', the 'rantings of John the Divine about his theological rivals' and the 'product of a diseased mind'. How is this different to the 'hate mail' described by Christopher Morgan? By any standard it is venomous language against the human author, John. In the understanding of the Church of England it is also venomous language

against the divine author and is therefore in the eyes of many blasphemous. It should be remembered that the final book of the Bible contains a closing warning, 'if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of life'. We do not doubt that such language will shock many people, but this is the language of the Bible that we in the Church of England uphold to be the Word of God.

This is not an isolated sermon nor is it a view that is unique to Dr Williams. Old-fashioned liberals believe that the Bible is merely a human book and encourage people to leave aside all those bits, which they do not like. Usually they produce cunning arguments to enable this to sound intellectually credible. Today's liberals still find parts of the Bible unpalatable but they wish to hold the good and the bad together in a dynamic tension. The end result is more mystical but no less damaging to real Christianity. The issue of authority always boils down to our decisions about what bits of the Bible we find acceptable and which bits we do not. In such an environment ordinary Christians apparently need experts to tell them what the latest fads and fashions of scholarship allow them to believe.

Those who uphold the historic doctrines of the Church of England, that is mainstream Christianity, reject any such idea. The Bible is the Word of God and because of this, an ordinary Christian believer, who seeks devoutly to learn from the Bible will know far more of God than a learned professor who feels free to pick and choose what they find acceptable in the Bible. It was this incredible realisation, which eventually freed the Church of England and the English nation from the tyranny of the medieval church.

Yours faithfully,

David Phillips (Rev)
General Secretary, Church Society