Quaestiones disputatae

Roman Faith and Christian Faith

These three short papers were delivered at the 72nd General Meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, held in Pretoria, South Africa, on 8–11 August 2017. The 'Quaestiones disputatae' session was chaired by the President of the Society, Professor Michael Wolter. The first two papers engage with Teresa Morgan's book, Roman Faith and Christian Faith, and Professor Morgan responds to them in the third.

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In her remarkable book on πίστις and *fides* in Greco-Roman culture and the New Testament, Teresa Morgan emphasises that for Christian and non-Christian alike πίστις most fundamentally has to do with trust in the context of interpersonal relationships.[1] Christians are unusual in the way they project trust and trustworthiness into the sphere of the human relationship with the divine, but they do not assign new semantic content to this terminology. What Morgan has to say about Paul is typical of her emphases throughout her long book:

> Paul's main interest is in *pistis* as relationship-forming … As such, he sees πίστις as predominantly an exercise of trust which involves heart, mind, and action. Like all trust, it is intimately connected with belief, on which it depends and which depends on it. That certain things are true, such as that Christ died for human sins and was raised from the dead, is integral to Paul's preaching, and he undoubtedly wants those to whom he preaches to believe them. But this kind of belief is not the essence of Paul's preaching nor of Christian *pistis*.[2]

We have here a classicist's version of a familiar hierarchy: a privileging of the personal relationship of trust over so-called 'propositional' beliefs that are somehow both integral and non-essential.[3] I propose here to invert that hierarchy: for Paul

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1 T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 *Roman Faith*, 261.

3 Morgan's approach to her entire topic focuses not on 'the propositional content of a proclamation' but on 'the unique *shape* of trust … as it operates in a community and discourses about that community' (*Roman Faith*, 23; emphasis original). By contrast, it is said that theology and

and other early Christians, beliefs come first. These beliefs are *credal*, shaping individual and communal identity; the term 'propositional' is inappropriate here.[4] These beliefs are also *counter-intuitive*. Those who are dead and buried do not return to bodily life. Yet Jesus did so, and we too shall rise bodily when he comes in glory with the clouds, manifesting a lordship over all things that at present remains hidden. Because such beliefs are prima facie so implausible, they must be asserted and inculcated all the more forcefully.[5]

Believing is the intended perlocutionary effect of preaching; preaching and believing are correlates. 'So we preach and you believed', says Paul after summarising the common apostolic gospel in a series of credal affirmations about Christ crucified, buried and risen (1 Cor 15.1–11).[6] Paul preached and the Corinthians believed (ἐπιστεύσατε, v. 11), although if what Paul preached was untrue then their believing or 'faith' was in vain (κενὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν, v. 14; cf. v. 17).[7] Here as elsewhere in Paul, the substantive πίστις is rooted in the act of πιστεύειν, an act so comprehensive in its scope that those who have responded positively to the Pauline *credo* can be described simply as οἱ πιστεύοντες (1 Cor 1.21; 14.22) while πίστις can serve as a metonym for the entire content of Christian preaching and teaching (Gal 1.23).

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reasserts one fundamental yet counter-intuitive Christian claim (the bodily resurrection of the dead) by appealing to another

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other disciplines 'typically focus on propositional belief rather than on relationships involving both belief and trust' (24).

4 A 'proposition' is the (true or false) assertion that *X* is the case, without reference to the speaker's self-involvement in the speech-act of asserting. To describe the credal affirmation that 'Christ is risen' as a 'proposition' is to put it on a level with 'dogs are quadrupeds' or 'cats have nine lives'.

5 The priority of believing might also be demonstrated from the Gospel of John, where πιστεύειν occurs ninety-eight times and πίστις not at all. *Pace* Morgan (*Roman Faith*, 394–6), this need not be viewed as an anomaly requiring elaborate explanation.

6 In the *TDNT* article on πίστευω κτλ., R. Bultmann rightly views 'πίστις as acceptance of the Kerygma' as the specifically Christian understanding of πίστις, in contrast to the primary sense of 'trust' conveyed by both Greek and Jewish usage. See G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; Eng. trans. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76) VI.174–228, at 208. The emphasis here on a distinctive Christian usage contrasts with Morgan's emphasis on convergence, and should not be too quickly dismissed as reflecting 'theological bias'.

7 Loss of this correlation of faith and preaching is one of a number of problems with the subjective genitive reading of Paul's prepositional πίστις Χριστοῦ clauses, according to which the πίστις in question is that of Christ himself. Commenting on the Pauline ἐκ πίστεως, Morgan combines this reading with others: 'By leaving *pistis* unqualified, Paul allows it to refer equally and simultaneously to the *pistis* of God towards Christ and humanity and that of Christ towards God and humanity which make *dikaiosynē* possible, and that of the human being towards God and Christ' (*Roman Faith*, 276).

(the resurrection of Jesus on the third day). Initially, the credibility of belief in Jesus' resurrection is established by way of an appeal to collective apostolic authority (vv. 5, 7–11), to the sheer number of eyewitnesses (v. 8), and to the devastating implications of an un-resurrected Jesus for the Corinthians themselves (vv. 12–19). It is from this platform that Paul launches his attack on the Corinthian sceptics for whom a renewed post mortem bodily existence is a belief too far. A future bodily resurrection is necessarily entailed in the resurrection of Jesus, its first fruits (vv. 20, 23), and the resurrection of Jesus is necessarily entailed in our Christian faith. *If* we are Christian, we *must* affirm and we *must not* question the claim that bodily resurrection is the telos of our own lives: that is Paul's argument, and from one perspective it is precisely an argument about the nature of πίστις. There is no explicit reference to human trust in God or the divine trustworthiness; πίστις has to do with the eschatological destiny of the world as disclosed in the raising of Jesus. If this counter-intuitive 'faith' fails to persuade the sceptics, Paul has other arguments to support it, derived from the created order. The seed that is dead and buried yet rises transformed is not just a parable of the resurrection but a demonstration of its plausibility (vv. 36–8, 42–4). If God can give life to a seed, why not also to a corpse? While the 'body' of the plant remains rooted in the earth, we should also recall that the cosmos is populated by an abundance of different bodies, including heavenly ones each with its own distinctive glory (vv. 39–41). If the creator of heaven and earth already has an impressive track record in conjuring glorious bodies out of non-being, how can we doubt his ability to do so in the eschaton? Doubt or scepticism is the existential threat to faith that Paul combats here, and the faith that is threatened is a core Christian belief about the nature of eschatological destiny.

Some decades later, Paul's argument about faith, doubt and resurrection is revisited by the author of 1 Clement, this time with an explicit appeal to divine faithfulness or trustworthiness. (Parenthetically, it should be noted that this text is marginal to Teresa Morgan's work, since she assumes that the literature of earliest Christianity is primarily represented by the texts included in the New Testament. In reality, the exact contents of this anthology of early Christian literature continued to be uncertain long after Athanasius first advocated the 27-book version familiar to ourselves.[8] There is no reason to suppose that Athanasius' selection corresponds to any fundamental chronological or qualitative distinction

8 In his 39th 'Festal Letter' from 367. Text in *S. Athanase, Lettres festale et pastorales en copte* (ed. L.-Th. Lefort; CSCO; Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955) 150 (Coptic, 16–22, 58–62) and 151 (French translation and Greek fragment, 31–40); R.-G. Coquin, 'Les lettres festales d'Athanase (CPG 2102). Un nouveau complement: le manuscrit IFAO, copte 25', *OLP* 15 (1984) 133–58. See D. Brakke, 'Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth "Festal Letter"', *HTR* 87 (1994) 394–419; idem, 'A New Fragment of Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon', *HTR* 103 (2010) 47–66 (including a full English translation and the Coptic text of a new fragment).

within Christian writings from *ca.* 50–150 CE. To speak of a 'New Testament' as already existing in this period is an anachronism – a point so obvious that it is generally overlooked.)

Following the Pauline precedent, the author of 1 Clement finds the basis for belief in the future resurrection in the raising of Jesus as its first fruits (1 Clem 24.1), while also appealing to phenomena of the created order to show that resurrection really is credible.[9] 'Day and night show us resurrection', and so do crops (24.3–5). Above all, there is the phoenix, that unique Arabian bird that lives for 500 years and then generates its successor from its own decaying corpse, which is then dutifully conveyed to Heliopolis so that the latest miraculous renewal can be entered into the age-old Egyptian priestly records.[10] Clement's conclusion is as follows (key phrases are in bold):

> Μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν οὖν νομίζομεν εἶναι εἰ ὁ δημιουργὸς τῶν ἁπάντων ἀνάστασιν ποιήσεται τῶν ὁσίως αὐτῷ δουλευσάντων **ἐν πεποιθήσει πίστεως ἀγαθῆς**, ὅπου καὶ δι' ὀρνέου δείκνυσιν ἡμῖν **τὸ μεγαλεῖον τῆς ἐπαγγελίας αὐτοῦ**; ... ταύτῃ οὖν τῇ ἐλπίδι προσδεδέσθωσαν αἱ ψυχαὶ ἡμῶν **τῷ πιστῷ ἐν ταῖς ἐπαγγελίαις** καὶ τῷ δικαίῳ ἐν τοῖς κρίμασιν.

> Should we find it great or surprising if the creator of all things is to bring about a resurrection of those who have served him in holiness and in the confidence of a good faith, when he demonstrates the greatness of his promise through a bird? ... In this hope, then, may our souls be bound to the one who is faithful in his promises and righteous in his judgements. (1 Clem 26.1)[11]

The listing of the 27-book New Testament occurs at 39.18 (using Brakke's paragraph enumeration); Greek text, CSCO 151, 35.

9 On the close relationship between 1 Clement and 1 Corinthians, see A. F. Gregory, '*1 Clement* and the Writings that Later Formed the New Testament', *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (ed. A. Gregory and C. Tuckett; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 129–57, at 144–51; C. K. Rothschild, *New Essays on the Apostolic Fathers* (WUNT 375; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 35–60. Rothschild's argument for regarding 1 Clement as a pseudepigraphon should also be noted (61–68).

10 In the later and better-known version of the phoenix legend, the phoenix immolates itself and its successor arises from the ashes. On the two versions, see R. van den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix according to Classical and Early Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 146–61. Van den Broek rightly notes that the Coptic translation of 1 Clement conflates both versions of the legend (156); text in C. Schmidt, *Der erste Clemensbrief in altkoptischer Übersetzung* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1908) 74. For a collection of ancient passages on the phoenix, see A. Lindemann, *Die Clemensbriefe* (HNT 17; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) 263–77; for a careful recent analysis of 1 Clement 25, Rothschild, *New Essays*, 97–110.

11 In an informative and engaging article on the reception of 1 Clement and its phoenix on their arrival (through Codex Alexandrinus) in seventeenth-century England, M. Himuro questions unnecessarily whether 'Clement' himself believed the phoenix legend ('The Phoenix in *The*

Here it is clearer than in Paul that belief in the future bodily resurrection has its natural habitat within a form of life characterised by holiness and a personal relationship of πίστις towards one who is πιστός, justified trust in a trustworthy deity. Yet credal belief remains fundamental here too. The trust in question is quite specific, consisting in the conviction that the God who in Jesus' resurrection promises the bodily resurrection of all will in due time fulfil that promise. It is that counter-intuitive belief – a belief in the resurrection of Jesus construed as a divine promise – that engenders the relationship of trust. Trust is oriented not towards an abstract creator deity but towards a God who has made a promise with a specific content in a specific way. That promise and that content can be articulated in verbal and indeed credal form, and it is the credal belief that forms the basis of interpersonal trust – and not the reverse.

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doi:10.1017/S0028688517000388

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Teresa Morgan's remarkably thorough work, with its provocative thesis, will undoubtedly stimulate further discussion of the understanding of faith in earliest Christianity.[12] Three features of Morgan's treatment of the topic deserve

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First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians', *Renaissance Studies* 12 (1998) 523–44, at 531). Himuro's article also includes valuable discussion of patristic interest in the phoenix, initiated by 1 Clement.

12 It stands alongside A. Schlatter's *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament: Eine Untersuchung zur Neutestamentlichen Theologie* (Leiden: Brill, 1885), offering a Greco-Roman background to early Christian faith, rather than the Jewish background that Schlatter presented. It also may be compared to R. Bultmann's substantial contribution 'πιστεύω, κτλ.', *TWNT* VI.174–230 (including A. Weiser, 'Der at.liche Begriff', VI.182–97). Among recent works, see T. Schumacher, *Zur Entstehung christlicher Sprache: Eine Untersuchung der paulinischen Idiomatik und der Verwendung des Begriffes πίστις* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 168; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/Bonn University Press, 2012); K. Haacker, "Glaube II/1–3", *TRE* 13, 277–304; and the massive collection of essays found in J. Frey, B. Schliesser and N. Ueberschaer, eds., *Glaube: Das Verständnis des Glaubens im frühen Christentum und in seiner jüdischen und hellenistisch-römischen Umwelt* (WUNT 373; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). See further the review of literature in B. Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6* (WUNT II/224; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 7–78.