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A Protestant Critique of Anglicanism

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THE following article attempts to draw as sharply as possible the line between the Anglican and the Protestant interpretations of the Christian faith. In a time when the world is mortally torn by its divisions and the Church is genuinely moving toward the healing of divisions too long impenitently perpetuated, the accentuation of a cleavage must seem particularly ill-conceived. The world cannot be expected either to hear or to heed a gospel of reconciliation committed to a Church which is itself unreconciled. And the Church cannot speak with healing power to a sick and sinful world if contention rules its heart and mind.

This undertaking, however, is not polemical. It is frankly intended to be more irenic than some Protestant critiques of Anglicanism have been or could be, even though less generous than others. The discussion is more irenic in the sense that both Anglicanism and Protestantism are regarded as historic forms (in intent and practice) of the Christian faith neither of which requires the extinction of the other for its own continuing life and effectiveness. The attempt to explore the plain differences between Protestantism and Anglicanism does not need to rest, therefore, upon *ad hominem* argument. The discussion will be less generous in the sense that the plain differences between Protestantism and Anglicanism are regarded as irreconcilable, so that the gulf between them is not bridged either by the circumstances of commonly accepted events and symbols antedating both historic Christian forms, or by common points of doctrine and reciprocal historical influences.

The line between Protestantism and Anglicanism cannot be seriously drawn upon the assumption that the plain differences between them are less plain than they are. It may be argued that the differences have become unimportant. But it is difficult to see how such an admission would serve the purpose of a reconciliation between Anglicanism and Protestantism. A reconciliation on such a basis must be frustrated by the dilemma between an historic church which had no true ground of being (in which case there would be nothing to reconcile) and an historic church which had so little effective relation to the true ground of its being as to have become, in fact, quite other than it appears (in which case there would be nothing worth reconciling). The unity of the Church is now, as at the first, the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift bestowed upon a faithful witness to the Lord of the Church whose the Spirit is. But the reunion of churches cannot be the work of the *Zeitgeist*. If so, it would be the achievement of a Church which had come to regard faithfulness to the temper of the time as the primary clue to a faithful witness to the Church's Lord. An undivided Church, therefore, is not as such the Church of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, a divided Church need not be a disunited Church. An open and unyielding discussion of what divides Protestantism from Anglicanism may serve the unifying work of the

Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world by faithfully seeking the distinction between a faithful and an unfaithful witness in the Church to the Christian faith.

I

Anglicanism is difficult to dissent from because it is difficult to define. The term has, of course, an historical and not a theological origin, being bound up with the earliest beginnings of British constitutionalism. It is thus synonymous with the Church of England, a usage which is not altered by the reformation of Henry VIII. Nevertheless, this reformation made possible the introduction into the Church of England of a characteristic set of theological principles which subsequently gave to the term *Anglicanism* a theological significance. When, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the Tractarians began to call the Church of England to repentance and to a return to the Thirty-Nine Articles, Anglicanism lost its general historical significance and became a term of theological controversy. The Tractarian concern for dogma as the cure for the mental and moral laxity of the Church of England eventually focussed upon the problem of ecclesiastical authority and order as the *raison d'être* of the English Church. The continental Reformation and the Holy See being equally execrable to the Tractarians, they attempted to overcome the lamentably schismatic position of the Church of England by a passionate and learned exposition of its apostolic character. Newman's celebrated tract on "The Prophetical Office of the Church" makes the *casus belli* quite plain. Protestantism was so committed to the right of private judgment in religious matters that it had no way of protecting the Christian gospel from the rising tide of liberalism.¹ Rome, on the other hand, had become so committed to an ecclesiastical institution as to have fostered beliefs and practices which obscured the apostolic mandate and example upon which its catholicity was presumed to rest. The true Church, according to Newman, was both apostolic and catholic. The Roman Church had retained the catholicity of the true Church but lost its apostolicity. Anglicanism could claim the apostolicity of the true Church though having lost its catholicity. When this essay is brought together with Newman's studies in the development of dogma, it is easy to understand how his discovery that the apostolic teaching and office had changed by a law peculiar to itself without essential alteration opened the way for Newman's eventual decision. But it is also easy to see that Newman's real concern was not the apostolate but *schism*; with the result that the relations between God and the soul² came to take

¹ Newman defines *liberalism* with a succinctness which, in the light of what has subsequently happened to the mind and authority of the Church, seems almost clairvoyant. It is "the mistake of subjecting to human judgment those revealed doctrines which are in their nature beyond and independent of it, and of claiming to determine on intrinsic grounds the truth and value of propositions which rest for their reception simply on the external authority of the Divine Word". Cf. *Apologia*, Note on Liberalism.

² Cf. *Apologia*, new edition, pp. 4, 241, where Newman speaks of the early and persistent influence of these relations upon him in a way strongly reminiscent of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The change in his own pattern of thinking about them is an instructive parable of the problem under discussion here.

on a position of secondary importance to that of mediate religious authority in distinguishing the Christian faith and in defining its assurances.

These well-known matters are worth recalling because they have a direct bearing upon the theological significance of Anglicanism. The Tractarian movement may be said to have had two far-reaching effects upon what, since that time, may properly be called Anglicanism. In the first place, the term became a designation of the parties within the Church of England so that an ambiguity came to surround its precise significance. There were those who, while not uniformly committed to the dogmas stressed by the Tractarians, were nevertheless the constant and outspoken representatives of tradition and ecclesiastical order in the Church. For this group the Tractarians had already pre-empted the designation *Anglo-Catholic*. There were, however, also those who were persuaded that the revitalization of the Church of England was not to be expected from the Anglo-Catholics but rather from a continuation of the doctrines and methods of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. It is this division between Anglo-Catholicism and Evangelicalism in the life and thought of the Church of England which gives to Anglicanism the theological ambiguity which is easily and often mistaken for theological inclusiveness. A Church which embraces both the Articles and the Prayer Book, which is thereby committed both to the atonement, justification, universal priesthood and to the incarnation, tradition, and mediating orders, and which can, therefore, both revise its liturgy in accordance with the theological debate about its precepts and hold fast in liturgy what the shifting currents of doctrinal controversy might engulf—such a Church seems to possess both the tentativeness and the universality appropriate to the gospel of redemption for all men by the God who made all things. Against such "catholicity," a more decisive, and therefore limiting, exposition of Christian faith and life seems to lack both the charity and the humility, both the peace and the long-suffering which are among the first fruits of the Holy Spirit among men. But the ambiguity in Anglicanism is vexatious to the critic because its catholic and evangelical elements are so compounded as to complicate if not liquidate definition and also because the critic seems to be contending for what in the light of Christian history itself can be effectively shown to be at once too partial and too full of pride.

Nevertheless, the Tractarian movement has had another far-reaching effect upon Anglicanism which makes it possible to bring its ambiguity under critical scrutiny. This is the centrality which Tractarian scholarship and Tractarian polemics have given to the episcopate. The Oxford movement of a century ago effectively destroyed Erastianism as an apologetic for the establishment and set the case for it squarely upon dogmatic ecclesiastical ground. Hence it is possible for the Anglo-Catholic to argue that the apostolate is the scriptural and historical justification of the episcopate so that without it the Church could not be the Church and the gospel could not be reliably continuous in history. And the Evangelical can argue that the Church can more reliably and effectively be the Church with the

episcopate than without it since its emergence can be traced to a concern to be faithful to what the scripture indicates about the apostolic office, and its usefulness as an agent of catholicity can be shown to have no adequate alternative. Thus the episcopate is lifted above the issue of Establishment or Disestablishment and acquires the guardianship of the apostolicity and the catholicity of the true Church. Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals may read Anglican divines and the Church Fathers differently at many points, but they are united in the common acceptance of an unwillingness to depart from the episcopate as defining the pattern⁸ in terms of which the Christian faith and life are to be understood and practised.

Anglicanism may, accordingly, be defined as the historic form of Christianity which regards the norm of Christian faith and life as defined by the episcopate. It is this view of the Christian faith and certain of its implications with which this discussion is, on theological grounds, in sharp disagreement.

II

Before turning to this disagreement, a brief word must be said about Protestantism. Protestantism is an awkward critic of Anglicanism because it too is difficult to define. The Protestantism of the Reformation is one thing. The Protestantism since the Reformation is another. There are, to be sure, lines of connection between them, most of which, in so far as they are fundamental, are forgotten. The misfortune of Protestantism is that its theological foundations in the thought of the Reformers have never effectively supported the confessional structures erected upon them. Consequently sectarianism has found no adequate limits and Protestant thought has been enervated by an increasingly irrelevant battle between its own brand of scholasticism and the various currents of secular thinking which may be conveniently and essentially gathered under the term *liberalism* in Newman's own sense of the word. Certainly the original and ecumenical meaning of the Christian faith has been more carefully sheltered under the episcopal mantle against the storms of controversy between scripturalism and rationalism, between creed and society, than under the earnest but misguided zeal of those who neglected to consider that the priesthood of all believers was not synonymous with the priesthood of all individuals, and that justification by faith was not synonymous with the anarchy of private judgment.

⁸ Whether fundamentally, as with the Anglo-Catholics, or ultimately, as with the Evangelicals, is, in the last analysis a distinction without a difference. "There is nothing," writes Canon Lacey, "in the nature of a sect, or of sectarian controversy, to make schism inevitable. To the Church of England has been reserved the distinction of demonstrating this in practice" (cf. *The Anglo-Catholic Faith*, p. 8). "In the Anglican tradition," writes an Evangelical, "freedom and adaptability are possible, safeguarded from the whims of individuals, the enthusiasms of groups, and the pressure of temporary interests by a norm of faith and worship rooted in history and to be amended only by the considered and democratic will of the Church" (cf. the essay on "The Body of Christ," by Canon Charles F. Smith, in the volume entitled *Anglican Evangelicalism*, edited by Alexander Zabriskie). To the first, a Protestant may be allowed to add: "nothing, except sin and grace"; and to the second, "it is just possible that the norm of faith has been amended by the considered will of the Holy Spirit."

The theological foundations of Protestantism in the thought of the Reformers are, however, being rediscovered. The dialectical theology has made it plain that the universal priesthood of believers was always held by the Reformers in definite though dialectical relation with the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments; and justification by faith was never held by the Reformers apart from a definite though dialectical relation to the atoning death of the Redeemer and the work of the Spirit. Consequently, a doctrine of the Church and a doctrine of society are as fundamental to the thinking of the Reformation as to Catholicism. The critical point is that the pattern of thinking about these vital matters of the Christian faith is significantly different when one stands on the foundation of the episcopate. It may be, as Dr. Lowry suggests, that "Christian thinkers must march together from different directions and strike simultaneously. William Temple and John Baillie and Rudolph Otto and Soeren Kierkegaard are not rivals in the world of present Christian thought. They are all needed. Each has his place in the great task of clearing a way in the hearts of men for the Christ, that He may enter in."⁴ But it would be a rash ecumenicity indeed which would too readily suppose that these diverse gifts were *by virtue of their diversity* the channels of the one Spirit. It is just possible that the current serious return to the essential affirmations of the Reformation is a legitimate chapter in the further history of the Church. If so, the counter-reformation has not yet triumphed, even though compounded of Anglican winsomeness and the urgent unification of a global world.

Protestantism may, accordingly, be defined as the historic form of Christianity which regards the norm of Christian faith and life as defined by the dialectical relation established by the Holy Spirit between the Word and the Sacraments, on the one hand, and the community of believers, on the other. The Holy Spirit is the Lord of history and of believers in the continuing exercise of His redemptive authority in the world. The Word and the Sacraments are dialectically (*i.e.* not unequivocally, but always and simultaneously in affirmation and negation, in bestowal and judgment) related to the community of believers because the Word and the Sacraments are never possessed and incorporated but always received as promise and gift in an act of decision which denies them and so required the promise and the gift again. It is on the ground of this view of the Christian faith and certain of its implications that a Protestant would find Anglicanism inadequate and unacceptable.

The episcopate or the inner witness of the Holy Spirit!—this is the fundamental issue which divides the Reformation understanding of the Christian faith from Anglicanism. This is what makes Anglicanism, however Protestant it may allow itself to be, necessarily and essentially Catholic. Catholicism seeks to guarantee the universality of the Christian gospel by the unity of ecclesiastical order and tradition. And it is this conception of the Catholic and Apostolic Church which the Reformers emphatically repudiated because there was no guarantee that such a Church could also be called *Holy*. *Dei providentia et hominum confusione*, it is no longer necessary to be

⁴ Cf. *Anglican Evangelicalism*, p. 141.

polemical about the matter but it is terribly important not to be confused. The faithfulness of the Church is on trial. For the issue between the episcopate and the Holy Spirit is an issue precisely because the norm by which Christian faith and duty are defined is at stake in the antithesis. The distinction between the succession and the transmission of apostolic authority, the debate over Scripture and Tradition, and the interminable discussion of exegetical and historical evidence, have too often been pursued for their own sakes and have obscured the point at which these contrasts touch the nerve of the Church's faith and life. Catholicism in none of its forms has ever supposed that the episcopate was the foundation of the Church. Catholicism and Protestantism are at one in the recognition that the gospel is the evangel of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and that only in so far as He is the Head of the Church and alive in it, is the Church His Church and worth preserving. The Reformation contention is that the Lord is present and alive in the Church as Word in sermon and sacrament and as grace-bestowing and faith-generating Spirit. It does not see that it was ever otherwise between the Lord and His disciples, and it cannot admit any other historical connection between the Lord and His disciples than the Lord's own incarnation, passion, and resurrection. Precisely because the episcopate purports to be such an historical connection, it is involved in the dilemma of being either provisional and dispensable or normative and indispensable in the continuing relations between the Lord and the Church. If the former, the episcopate can scarcely claim apostolicity and catholicity, for these are otherwise defined. If the latter, it binds to its mediation the work of the Spirit which thereby becomes other than the Spirit of the Lord, that is to say, no longer Holy Spirit. The apostolic character of the Church is, according to the Reformation, defined by the preaching of the Word and the administration of the two Sacraments instituted by the Lord. The catholicity of the Church is defined, according to the Reformation, by the free activity of the Spirit in the hearts and lives of those who have received the Word and the Sacraments. That Church through which the Spirit of the Lord is at work in the world is the Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

III

This conception of the Church rests, as already indicated, upon a prior conception of the relation between the Lord Jesus Christ and those who believe on Him. It is clear, therefore, that there are implications here affecting the whole corpus of historic Christian doctrine. I have space to call attention only to two very general considerations which seem to me to emphasize the impasse between Anglicanism and Protestantism. One of these considerations has to do with the pattern of Christian doctrinal thinking. The other consideration has to do with the ordering of Christian living.

It is not accidental that Anglican thinking about Christian doctrine has been characterized by the principle of *continuity*. There is a continuity between revelation and history, between faith and reason, between grace and nature, between the gospel and the world. The expression and perpetuation of this continuity is the characteristic

office of the Church in the world. This continuity, indeed, is the chief beneficence of the episcopate and is its ultimate theological justification. According to the principle of continuity as a principle of Christian thought, the providence of the world's Creator has so ordered the course of nature and history as a preparation for the incarnation. The incarnation, in turn, disclosed both the meaning and the redemption of the created order, a meaning and a redemption which, owing to the atoning death of the Redeemer and the bestowal of His Spirit, are sacramentally continued, as historical reality and possibility in the Church. The Church thus gathers the meaning and the fulfilment of history into itself, and the crux of history becomes the problem of ecclesiastical order. Evangelicalism has, to be sure, endeavoured to stress the atonement and the justification and sanctification of the believer against the Anglo-Catholic stress upon the incarnation and the sacramental character of the Church and history.⁵ Evangelicalism has not yet carried the day. And it is still an open question whether Reformation thinking can be done under a prior commitment to the Anglo-Catholic conception of Catholicity. Certainly unless the Reformation is to be regarded as bereft of a worthy mind of its own, it can scarcely be claimed that such Reformation thinking is being done in the Reformation sense. Evangelicalism proves nothing so much as the importance of the pattern in which Christian thinking is done.

According to the Reformation, the pattern of correct Christian thinking is shaped by the principle of *discontinuity*. Revelation and history, faith and reason, grace and nature, the gospel and the world are neither mutually exclusive nor supplementary. They are perpendicular to one another. This means that the central affirmations of the Christian faith are always both affirmed and denied in every historical moment. Only in so far as there is a sharp break between the gospel and the world are the redemptive act of the Creator and the faith of the redeemed genuinely new acts. Only the discontinuity between these two acts deals adequately with the freedom of the divine activity in a rebellious world. That is why the Reformation finds the Incarnation understandable only in terms of the Atonement and why it regards forgiveness as the good news made available to all by the death and resurrection of the Lord of history and the Church. The gospel of forgiveness is not a possibility of history. But it is a possibility *in* history because God has acted there and in so far as it is proclaimed and appropriated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When the continuing activity of the Spirit is transposed to the continuity of history or an historical institution—even in a sacramental universe—it is difficult to see how the kerygmatic and apostolic character of the gospel can be maintained.

IV

But if this discontinuity is to characterize the pattern of Christian thinking, what is to be said about the Christian life in a world which after all does hang together and in which, if faith is not to be vacuous, it must issue in activity? There is, in short, a problem of order. No

⁵ Cf. Temple, *Nature, Man, and God*, especially Lectures i-iii, viii, xii, xix, xx.

Anglicanism has a solution of this problem that is at once simple and concrete. The historic episcopate in a world in which grace and nature are continuous can order the assurances of the Christian faith and the duties of the Christian life with unmistakable authority and adaptability. The primary office of a mediating priesthood is to localize and guarantee the sacramental continuity between grace and nature, and the number of such points of "meeting"⁶ can be determined according to the requirements of tradition and occasion. The laity, too, may bring its activities under orders with greater or less inclusion of specifically religious discipline. All of life can thus be visibly oriented toward and directed by the visible Church as the Body of Christ in the world. The Reformation, on the other hand, has a solution of the problem of order which is less simple and concrete because it is never free of dialectical relation between the Spirit and faith. This does not mean that grace is not localized. Nor does the Reformation neglect to orient all of life visibly toward the visible Church. But in view of the freedom of divine activity and the rebellious character of the world, the Body of Christ is always regarded by the Reformation as possessing an invisible membership, and the office of the ministry is not the localization and authorization of grace but rather the uninterrupted designation of the terms on which the decision of faith under the guidance of the Spirit could occur. Thus, the line between the gospel and the world is never identical with the line between the Church and the world. It is not the business of the Church to transform the world by the visible incorporation within itself of more and more of the world's life. An established Church may have its occasion amidst the vicissitudes of history but it has no theological justification. The business of the Church is so to witness to the Word and the Sacraments in the world that the Spirit will descend with power and do His regenerative work both in the Church and out of it.

A Church that regards itself as charged by episcopal authority and mediating orders with a gospel that is continuous with the world is one kind of Church with one kind of gospel. A Church that regards itself as charged by the authority of the Holy Spirit and vocational orders with a gospel that is discontinuous with the world is another kind of Church with another kind of gospel. In the words of another and abler critic of Anglicanism, "we are far more tolerant of one another's strange religious or quasi-religious fancies than were the men of even a generation ago. . . . What has happened is a vast deepening of our sense of the mystery of things, and a consequent increase in our intellectual indulgence toward honest guessing."⁷ Perhaps this kind of humility and this kind of tolerance may be allowed to keep Anglicans Anglican and Protestants Protestant until the Spirit Himself enlightens both the mystery of things and the honest guessing with the light of the Truth.

⁶ The term is Evangelical. Cf. *Anglican Evangelicalism*, p. 180.

⁷ H. L. Stewart, *A Century of Anglo-Catholicism*, pp. 347-48.