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Editorial

DISTORTED IMAGES: AN ECUMENICAL ADMONITION

MANY YEARS AGO, in the pleasant Swedish town of Lund, the Editor of this *Journal* found himself one day in a group that included at least two notable figures, now departed from us: an eminent Anglican divine and the Primate of Sweden, Yngve Brilioth. To the scarcely concealed amusement of the company, the Anglican visitor undertook, with an air of unassailable authority, to instruct his distinguished Lutheran host in the genuine doctrine of the Swedish Church on ordination and apostolic succession. No one present at that colloquy can forget the expression of sheer amazement that spread over Dr. Brilioth's austere features as he realized that his own view of his church's teaching was being tried and found wanting.

"Which things are an allegory. . . ." Most of us yield too readily to the temptation to speak with confident misunderstanding of the teaching and life of other Christian communions. No doubt informed criticism (or better still, critical questioning) can be a real contribution to ecumenical understanding. But too many church people mistake the airing of their prejudices for informed criticism. Now that the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada are being drawn into prolonged and intensive dialogue, looking towards eventual union, they will have to guard against this failing. Past experience suggests that their conversation is sure to be punctuated by frequent observations addressed by the half-informed to the uninformed, to the detriment of growth in understanding.

As a matter of fact, one can already point to certain persistent and serious distortions of each church's image in the popular mythology of the other church. On the United Church side (to begin there), the essential character of Anglicanism is often unwittingly misrepresented. Anglicans frequently have occasion to complain of a long-standing tendency among Protestants to picture the Anglican Communion as a body that is unaccountably prevented by a small but mysteriously powerful "Anglo-Catholic" clique from expressing its true character in unrestricted fellowship with other Protestant churches, and this tendency periodically finds a voice within the United Church. Dr. J. R. Mutchmor, for example, writing not long ago in *The Christian Century* (September 8, 1965), gave utterance to it. Commenting on the reference in *Principles of Union* to five "sacramental rites and means of grace," in addition to Baptism and the Eucharist, he wrote: "It will be acceptable to the 'high church' but not to the 'evangelical' Anglicans. . . . Certainly the sacramental rites cited in the document—doubtless included as a concession to the 'high' Anglican party—will not be acceptable to the

United Church. . . . Indeed, the Committees of Ten have gone far beyond the 39 Articles adopted by the archbishops and bishops of the Church of England in the 16th century." Of course, Dr. Mutchmor could only guess at what the members of the Anglican Committee of Ten might have said to one another in private. But if he had consulted any well-informed Anglican theologian, schooled in the doctrinal and liturgical history of Anglicanism and familiar with contemporary Anglican literature, he would have seen the issue in a different light. For instance, he would almost certainly have been warned: (a) not to read the Thirty-Nine Articles carelessly or unhistorically; (b) not to ignore the existence of the Book of Common Prayer; (c) not to underestimate the Anglican consensus on sacramental teaching and practice. Perhaps he would have found it painful to "demythologize" his view of Anglicanism; most of us like to cling to our stereotypes of other communions. But in dealing with another church there is a certain practical advantage in seeing it as history has actually shaped it.

On the Anglican side, it cannot be said that there is much effort to comprehend the actual doctrinal position of the United Church in a sympathetic way. United Churchmen often protest against what they take (with some justification) to be a deep-rooted Anglican inclination to treat any doctrinal indiscretion on the part of United Church ministers as clinching evidence of a wholesale rejection of the Christian orthodoxy of the Catholic Creeds, while quietly passing over a Bishop Barnes or a Bishop Robinson as inconsequential eccentrics. It does seem fair to say that the Creeds are not equally conspicuous in United Church and in Anglican worship, and that their authority is not stated in the same terms in the two churches. It is conceivable that the Anglican and United churches do, in fact, differ significantly on the theory of doctrinal formulation and in the exercise of doctrinal authority, and that the apparent agreement embodied in the *Principles of Union* will break down as negotiations continue. But this is a question to be explored by both churches together, not prejudged by one church. Anglicans must be ready to listen while their United Church brethren explain the historical development of their position, expound their Basis of Union, or point to the Christian witness of their *lex orandi* (not least, of their great tradition of common praise). (Perhaps they will be better prepared to listen if only they will admit that they too—along with Roman Catholics and every other variety of Christian—have still to solve one or two problems in the area of doctrinal authority.) In the end, they may well find that they have lost a myth that has long ministered to their self-esteem. But self-esteem is less important in church relations than are charity and equity.

It hardly needs to be said that mutual courtesy and understanding are in themselves no guarantee of success in the difficult task of reconciling two long-separated traditions. But as long as we are content to repeat unverified opinions about each other, we are not ready even to begin the dialogue.

E. R. F.