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Relations with Rome:

the present situation and the immediate prospects

ROGER BECKWITH

The entry of the Church of Rome into the ecumenical movement, sanctioned at the Second Vatican Council (1963-5), and the rethinking of traditional positions in which many (though not all) Roman Catholic theologians were already engaged before the Council met, have provided the setting in which the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) has been meeting since 1970. It has devoted itself to doctrinal differences: practical questions, like mixed marriages, have been handled—not as yet very fruitfully—by others. But the Commission has rightly recognized that if the doctrinal problems could, by a miracle, be resolved, the other issues would fall into place.

It at once took as its agenda the three controversial themes of *Authority, Eucharist and Ministry*. In its *Authority* statement it devoted some attention also to the Marian dogmas; and it is now, as a result of requests from the Church of England on the one hand, and from the Anglican Churches in South Africa and South America on the other, taking up the two further themes of the *Church and Justification by Faith*, which it hopes to combine in a fourth statement. This, together with responses to criticisms of its earlier statements and some further treatment of the unresolved problems listed at the end of its *Authority* statement, is intended to complete its work; and an adequate and agreed answer to all these difficult questions would indeed go a long way towards bridging the 400-year-old breach between Canterbury and Rome.

Of course, a *rapprochement* between one of the Reformation families of churches and the Church of Rome could not stop there. If the Commission succeeded in resolving the differences between Anglicans and Rome, this would be a major step towards resolving the differences between Lutherans and Rome, and between Presbyterians and Rome. And though such a development has in the past seemed most improbable, there is one new factor which could make a difference. This is that Rome now has a pope from the East, primarily concerned for agreement with the Orthodox; but if, in the recently inaugurated discussions between Rome and the Orthodox, Rome were to agree to downgrade all its councils and definitions since the Great Schism between East and West (which would seem to be essential if those discussions are to make any progress), this would vitally affect its relationship with the churches of the Reformation as well.

If all went perfectly smoothly, ARCIC would finish its final comprehensive report in 1981, the various provinces of the Anglican Communion would approve it by the end of 1982, the Church of Rome (having by that time made substantial concessions to the Orthodox) would approve it at the world-wide Roman Synod of Bishops in 1983, the Pope could visit Britain with the new aim of re-establishing communion with Canterbury in 1984, and the main task of the commission appointed to succeed ARCIC would be the practical implementation of these decisions.¹ If all went perfectly smoothly, . . . If, on the other hand, Pope John Paul's conservatism of outlook prevented him from making substantial concessions to the Orthodox, it seems likely that it would also prevent him from making any similar concessions to Anglicans. And there can be no doubt that real concessions would be needed—more of them than ARCIC seems as yet to recognize. The differences between Rome and Canterbury are not squabbles about words, and the resolution of them is not simply a matter of saving faces. Truth is at stake and consciences are involved: no progress will be made without this fact being steadily held in view.

The Commission's work to date has been *The Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine* (1971), *The Statement on Ministry and Ordination* (1973), *The Statement on Authority* (1977) and *Elucidations* (1979), all published by SPCK and the Catholic Truth Society. The last named is the Commission's response to criticisms of its *Eucharist* and *Ministry* statements. The *Authority* statement was conceived as the first of the three, and stood first in the preliminary drafts published in 1971, but it was deferred because of its difficult subject, and the Commission's response to criticisms of it has yet to appear.

The Commission's aim, in dealing with its various topics, has been 'substantial agreement', i.e. 'unanimous agreement on essential matters where it considers that doctrine admits no divergence', while 'if there are any remaining points of disagreement, they can be resolved on the principles here established' (*Eucharist*, para. 12; *Ministry and Ordination*, para. 17; *Elucidations*, para. 2). On each of its topics it considers that there are these 'essential matters where . . . doctrine admits no divergence', but it evidently also considers that on each of them there are secondary matters where disagreement is tolerable. *Elucidations* provides two examples: the adoration of the reserved sacrament, and the necessity of episcopacy. The Commission lays great emphasis on the importance of the believing reception of the sacrament (*Eucharist* 8f; *Elucidations* 7), and can therefore understand the historic Anglican objection to adoration as being a practice at least alien to the purposes of the institution (*Elucidations* 8f). On the necessity of episcopacy, the Commission is content to leave things in obscurity: it is sufficient that both churches are determined to maintain episcopacy for themselves (*Elucidations* 14). In dealing with the former question, the Commission adds a comment which

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deserves to be quoted:

That there can be a divergence in matters of practice and in theological judgments relating to them, without destroying a common eucharistic faith, illustrates what we mean by *substantial* agreement. Differences of theology and practice may well co-exist with a real consensus on the essentials of eucharistic faith—as in fact they do within each of our communions. (*Elucidations* 9)

The similarity of this standpoint to that of the 1931 Bonn Agreement between Anglicans and Old Catholics is worth noting.²

The basis on which the Commission makes its distinction between primary and secondary matters deserves pondering. At the beginning of two of its statements, it says that it intends to write in a manner 'consonant with biblical teaching and with the tradition(s) of our common inheritance' (*Eucharist* 1, *Ministry* 1), i.e. consonant with biblical teaching and with such elements of pre-Reformation tradition as both churches have maintained. In its *Authority* statement, naturally, it goes somewhat further, saying that

Assisted by the Holy Spirit they (the apostolic community) transmitted what they had heard and seen of the life and words of Jesus and their interpretation of his redemptive work. Consequently the inspired documents in which this is related came to be accepted by the Church as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith. To these the Church has recourse for the inspiration of its life and mission; to these the Church refers its teaching and practice. Through these written words the authority of the Word of God is conveyed. (*Authority* 2)

and that

All such restatement must be consonant with the apostolic witness recorded in the Scriptures; for in this witness the preaching and teaching of ministers, and statements of local and universal councils, have to find their ground and consistency. (*Authority* 15)

Clearly the Commission is here siding with the one-source theory of revelation (Scripture only) and not with the two-source theory (Scripture plus tradition) which was contending with the other at the Second Vatican Council, and is asserting not only the supremacy but also the sufficiency of Scripture in something like Anglican terms (compare Articles 6 and 20). On the one hand, Scripture is 'inspired' and 'normative', and teaching must be 'consonant' with it; on the other hand, Scripture is the 'ground' of teaching, and contains 'the apostolic witness', 'the authentic foundation of the faith'. Tradition, though important in its way, exists to transmit revelation, not to augment it. Presumably, therefore, it would be right to infer that the Commission's distinction elsewhere between primary and secondary matters is fairly closely related to its distinction here between what is in Scripture and what is not.

But although the Commission thinks it right and necessary, on occasion, to choose one interpretation of Roman (or Anglican) teach-

ing rather than another, as it does over the one-source or two-source debate, it is still clearly intending to proceed from the authentic teaching of the two churches and to see how far they can be reconciled—not to produce some *tertium quid*. This is plain from its occasional references, especially in footnotes, to distinctive Roman terminology and documents and to statements of the Thirty-nine Articles and the Lambeth Conference (*Eucharist* 6; *Ministry* 15; *Authority* 18f; *Elucidations* 8f, 15f), but especially from the four unresolved problems listed in *Authority* 24, which centre on the First Vatican Council's teaching about the papacy and on the Roman Marian dogmas. The Commission is only being realistic in trying to proceed from the two churches' official teaching,³ but the result of such a procedure has always in the past been an irreconcilable collision.

Is there any hope of a better result now? It is probably only by the use of the Commission's distinction between primary and secondary matters, or matters in Scripture and matters outside it, that such a result could be achieved. Conservative Roman Catholics, who have tended to oppose ARCIC's work, would of course object to such a distinction being pressed, and much would depend on whether the Pope gave them his support or not. But if this distinction were pressed, one would have to say at once that the infallibility and universal jurisdiction of the pope are not in Scripture, unless they are in the Petrine texts; and they can only be found in the latter, as the Commission states, by 'putting a greater weight on the Petrine texts than they are generally thought to be able to bear' (*Authority* 24a). Similarly, the doctrines that Mary was born without original sin and that at the end of her life she was taken bodily into heaven are obviously without any clear support in Scripture, and it is because of this lack of apostolic or scriptural support that the Orthodox Church (which accepts the latter belief but not the former) considers that neither belief ought to have been defined as a dogma.⁴ If these teachings were not indeed retracted by the Church of Rome (which might be the Anglican ideal) but were simply reduced in status from that of dogmas necessary to salvation to that of pious opinions accepted by the Roman communion—and nothing less is likely to satisfy the Orthodox—there does not seem to be any compelling reason why Anglicans should not be satisfied as well. Would it not, therefore, be reasonable to ask and hope that this should be done, and for ARCIC to consider making the proposal?

Are there any other matters which invite similar treatment? It seems to me that there are two of particular importance. In *Authority* 19, the inerrancy of General Councils is asserted. This, of course, is genuine Roman teaching, but it is not something taught in Scripture. Since Anglican teaching is the reverse (see Article 21), there is a strong *prima facie* case for treating this also as simply a Roman pious opinion, and it is to be hoped that, in its response to criticisms of the

Authority statement, the Commission will do something of the kind.

The second point is one on which the Commission has already responded to its critics, but without making any genuine concession. On some matters, notably the eucharistic sacrifice, the priesthood of the ministry and the necessity of episcopacy, *Elucidations* makes a conciliatory response. We have already referred to the last issue, and on the other two, even if what is said in paras 5 and 12 is not fully satisfactory, it does at least make clear that the Commission has no intention of derogating from the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice and priesthood. The document also plays down the diminishing Anglican problem of female priesthood—which nine Anglican provinces have now voted against—and calls for the 1896 condemnation of Anglican orders to be reconsidered (*Elucidations* 15f). On the real presence in the elements, however, no concession is made. It is merely conceded that Christ's presence is not 'confined' or 'limited' to the elements (which is not the point at issue), and a real giving of himself is held to be inseparable from a presence of his body and blood in the elements (*Elucidations* 6f). This is a second case where the Commission is not only going beyond Scripture but is denying Anglican teaching. The historic Anglican teaching is that Christ is 'verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful (i.e. believers) in the Lord's Supper', as the Catechism puts it, not that he is verily and indeed present in the elements. His presence in the elements was, indeed, something which Anglicans were concerned to *deny*, so long as Rome made it the basis for doing what the Commission studiously avoids—magnifying the sacrifice of the mass and minimizing the importance of reception. This was Cranmer's attitude in his writings *On the Lord's Supper*. Hooker, involved in a different controversy, against those who tended to deny a real *reception* of Christ, argued that this error would be by comparison a much worse one than Rome's, and that it was a secondary question how Christ was present, provided he was really received (*Ecclesiastical Polity* 5:67:7). Anglicans today could agree with Hooker that it is only a secondary question, not fully determined by Scripture, and when the Commission can see its way to do the same, this issue too should surely be on the way to an amicable accommodation.

Is it really conceivable, however, that the Commission's frail little statements, brief in compass, scantily documented, sometimes obscure and occasionally in stark opposition to Anglican teaching, could pave the way to a reconciliation between Rome and Canterbury? Who can tell? Yet if the Commission is prepared to change its stance on the two points last mentioned, if its future statement on the *Church* and *Justification* proves genuinely acceptable,⁵ if there is goodwill and desire for unity in truth on both sides, with a readiness to renounce what is contrary to Scripture and to treat what is absent from Scripture as merely secondary, it surely could be so. Rome

would still not be the same as Canterbury or Canterbury as Rome, but on this basis the two could be at peace.

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NOTES

- 1 On this proposed new commission and related matters, see *ACC-4: Canada 1979* (London, Anglican Consultative Council, 1979) p 7f. It has now been announced that the Pope will visit Britain in 1982. However smoothly things went, such a programme as is outlined here could hardly be complete by then.
- 2 Clause 3 of the Bonn Agreement reads:
Intercommunion does not require from either communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian Faith.
The text may be found, among other places, in C.B. Moss, *The Old Catholic Movement* (SPCK : London 1948) p 347.
- 3 The very limited changes that have taken place in official Roman doctrine (as distinguished from practice or the views of individuals) can be studied in the decrees of Vatican II. They chiefly relate to religious liberty, the salvation of the heathen, the validity of non-Roman baptism and the relationship between the episcopate and the papacy. On the matters which concern ARCIC, Vatican II reasserts the inseparability of Scripture, tradition and the teaching church (*Divine Revelation* 9f, 12, 21, 24), the infallibility and universal jurisdiction of the pope (*Church* 13, 18, 20, 22-25, 45; *Eastern Catholic Churches* 3; *Ecumenism* 2; *Office of Bishops* 2, 8f), the infallibility of General Councils (*Church* 25), the identity of the church of Christ with the Roman communion (*Church* 8, 14f; *Eastern Catholic Churches* 2; *Ecumenism* 2-4; *Religious Freedom* 1, 14), the immaculate conception and sinless life of Mary (*Church* 56), her bodily assumption (59, 68), merit (*Sacred Liturgy* 104; *Church* 48f), transubstantiation (*Sac. Lit.* 7; *Church in Modern World* 38), the sacrifice of the mass (*Sac. Lit.* 7, 47f; *Church* 11, 28, 34, 51; *Priestly Ministry and Life* 2-5, 13f), adoration of the reserved sacrament (*Priestly Min. and Life* 5, 18), the unique priesthood of the clergy (*Church* 10; *Priestly Min. and Life* 2, 5, 13), and the invalidity of the orders of the Anglican and other Reformation churches (*Ecumenism* 22).
- 4 See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books : London 1963) p 264f, quoting Vladimir Lossky. Cp. also *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue : the Moscow Agreed Statement* (SPCK : London 1977) para. 11: 'The Church cannot define dogmas which are not grounded both in Holy Scripture and in Holy Tradition'.
- 5 The important questions on justification for the Commission to consider are directly posed by R. G. England in *Justification Today: the Roman Catholic and Anglican Debate* (Latimer Study 4, Latimer House : Oxford 1979). See also R. T. Beckwith et al., *Across the Divide* (Lyttleton Press : Basingstoke 1977).