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Problems of Church Union in North India

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Progress in Church Union negotiations in North India has been greatly accelerated during the past four years by two factors, the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent States, and the coming into being of the Church of South India. To these must be added a third factor which partly arises from the other two, a sense of impatience among a large section of the educated laity over the divisions which the churches of the West have brought to us. India and Pakistan wish for union at all costs, and it is evident that many of the Christians neither appreciate nor wish to be bothered with the theological arguments underlying the divisions. The weakness of this position is obvious. So long as political events in which India and Pakistan are involved continue to keep up the sense of urgency, so long will negotiations go forward, and if the pressure of events becomes too great it is possible that completely irreconcilable elements will be included in the constitution of the new church which will later prove a source of weakness. On the other hand, any relaxation in the urgency of the situation, or any increase in the volume of criticism of the C.S.I. will inevitably delay negotiations in the north. Indeed it may be said without any fear of contradiction that at the last meeting of the negotiating committee a certain resurgence of denominationalism was due to this.

In the Preamble to the Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan, it is declared that, 'The negotiating Churches, being inspired by the belief that the will of God for His Church is set forth in Christ's prayer "that all may be one . . . . that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me" and being convinced that the situation in North India and Pakistan calls for practical unity in their Christian witness to the non-Christian world have prepared this basis for Church Union'. In this declaration there are two elements, the present situation and the will of God for His Church. If the negotiating churches are really motivated by the belief that it is the will of God that they should unite, then the negotiations are likely to reach a successful conclusion within a comparatively short time. But if the main reason for uniting is the pressure of events, and the members of the negotiating bodies wistfully regret the possible necessity for their churches merging into a united church, then negotiations may yet be long and unfruitful.

Engaged in the church union negotiations are such diverse bodies as the United Church of Northern India (Presbyterian and Congregational), the Church of India, Burma, Pakistan and Ceylon (Anglican), the Methodist Church in Southern Asia, the Methodist Church (British and

Australian Conferences), and the Baptist churches connected with the British Baptist Missionary Society. Some of these churches are highly organized, others have little organization above the congregational level; some have an elaborate discipline and a constitution which provides rules for every conceivable situation, others deliberately avoid such rules; some have an episcopal system and lay great stress on episcopal ordination, others have a traditional suspicion of episcopal authority. One could continue this list of differences almost indefinitely, but enough has been said to show how difficult the task of the negotiators has been.

The Experience of the Church of South India

It is true that the Church of South India had similar difficulties to face and has shown that they can be overcome, but in North India three problems are present which were either not present during negotiations in the south or have assumed greater importance since then. In the C.S.I. the question of episcopal ordination at the time of the initiation of the church was avoided. All recognized and ordained ministers of the uniting churches who signed the constitution of the united church were accepted as ministers of the C.S.I. whether they had been episcopally ordained or not. This no doubt made it easier for ministers of non-episcopal churches to join the united Church, but proved to be one of the main reasons why the Anglican Church is not at present willing to give full recognition to the C.S.I. In North India, as will be described later, an attempt has been made to work out a solution to this problem which, while not repugnant to other churches, will satisfy the Anglicans.

Secondly, in the C.S.I. only one of the uniting churches was episcopal in character, therefore no problem arose regarding the mutual recognition of the episcopates of the uniting bodies. In North India, the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon and the Methodist Church in Southern Asia are both episcopal in character, and the question of mutual recognition arises. This appears to be one of the most difficult problems of all.

Thirdly, in the North India negotiations the Baptist Churches connected with the British B.M.S. are taking part, whereas the Baptist Churches of the South did not join in negotiations. This has introduced problems connected with the sacraments and the nature of the church which did not have to be faced by the C.S.I.

In view of the many differences between the negotiating churches, the committee had early to distinguish between the different conceptions of unity and uniformity. One often reads as well as hears criticisms of the C.S.I. which are based on confusion between the two ideas. Church union does not necessarily mean that every presbyter must wear the same vestments, that worship in every church should be conducted along exactly the same lines, or even that exactly the same ritual should be used in celebrating the sacraments. Human beings vary greatly and some fit into one type of church background better than others. An attempt to produce uniformity savours too much of ecclesiastical totalitarianism, and any suggestion that even at some future date pressure would be brought to bear on churches to bring about uniformity would cause a breakdown in the negotiations. The Plan of Union has therefore allowed a great deal of liberty to the local congregations in matters of worship and church government, and states clearly that no change in

these matters may take place without the agreement of the Presbyter-in-charge and the congregation.

The essential unity of the uniting churches will rest in their common recognition of one another's ministries after the preliminary unification of the ministry, in acceptance of an episcopate that shall be both constitutional and historic, in acceptance of a common statement of faith, which is based on the scriptures and safeguarded by the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and in recognition of all members of the uniting churches as members of the United Church. In preparing the plan, it has been recognized by the negotiators that many of the things that separate us are not theological but are really of man's devising. But there has been a great sense of tolerance and understanding, so that member churches are being permitted to retain much that they deem precious even though the other churches in some cases cannot see their way to accepting these things for themselves.

The Forging of a Plan

It is not proposed in this article to describe or even summarize the Plan of Union. The Plan is available for study and a leaflet giving the important changes and additions made at the last meeting of the Negotiating Committee will also shortly be available. What is more interesting and profitable to us is, with the Plan before us, to notice the nature of the compromises that have been reached on some points of issue and ask ourselves whether they are likely to stand up to present criticism or the tests of practical working out when the church comes into being.

In the Plan of Union one of the most interesting and possibly one of the most debateable features is the initial unification of the ministry. This section of the Plan has been very carefully worded to allay the fears and suspicions of the various churches taking part. It says, 'The uniting Churches mutually acknowledge each other's Ministries as Ministries of Christ in His Word and Sacraments, although in our present state of division they cannot be regarded as fully representative. . . . The uniting Churches acknowledge that owing to their divisions, all their Ministries are limited in scope and authority, not having the seal of the whole Church. They therefore accept the principle of the unification of the Ministry by the mutual laying on of hands in a solemn act of humility and rededication with prayer. . . .'

'While recognizing that there may be different interpretations of this rite, deriving from different Church traditions, the uniting Churches agree that the use of this rite does not imply a denial of the reality of the ordination previously received by those now seeking to become Presbyters in the United Church; it does not imply the replacement of that ordination by a new ordination, nor is it presumed to bestow again or renew any grace, gifts, character or authority that have already been bestowed through whatever means.'

Please note the phrase, 'while recognizing that there may be different interpretations of this rite, deriving from different Church traditions'. Whatever may be the opinions of the representatives of the non-episcopal churches regarding the purpose of this rite, it appears that, as at least three bishops of the present C.I.P.B.C. will take part in the unification

of the episcopate, and at least one bishop will take part in both the central and regional ceremonies for the unification of the ministry and will lay hands on the heads of the presbyters taking part, the Anglican Church may be prepared to regard such presbyters as coming within the requirements for a valid ministry of the Catholic Church. If so one obstacle in the way of recognition of the C.S.I. by the Anglican Church should not exist in the proposed United Church in the North.

It is well that the negotiating churches should realize clearly the implications of this. It is not merely that before this service a number of presbyters had received authority from God for the work of the ministry, but had only received local and temporal authority from a section of the church for this work, and that after the service they will have received authority from the whole of the united church to minister within all the churches of the united Church. That, no doubt, is the idea which the words of the Basis of Union are intended to convey, but to High Church Anglicans the service is likely to mean much more than this. They may feel that it will have the desirable result of converting a ministry that was not episcopally ordained into one that will be episcopally ordained. Whether even this will result in the full recognition of this ministry by the Anglican Church is uncertain in view of the fact that at the Lambeth Conference in 1948 a substantial minority of the bishops present and voting, when discussing the position, 'in regard to the bishops, presbyters and deacons consecrated and ordained in the Church of South India *at or after the inauguration* of that Church' held 'that it is not yet possible to pass any definite judgement upon the proper status of such bishops, presbyters and deacons in the Church of Christ or to recommend that they be accepted in the Anglican Communion as bishops, presbyters or deacons.' It is however clearly the hope of some Anglican negotiators that such recognition will be given.

What is underlying the attitude of many Anglicans in this matter is the fact that they have now full intercommunion with the small Old Catholic Church on the Continent and they have hopes of recognition from the Eastern Orthodox Church. They hesitate to take any action which might affect relations with these churches adversely.

Problems Relating to the Anglican Church

Another interesting feature of the Basis of Union concerns the relation of the United Church to other churches. It is stated that, 'it is the intention of the uniting Churches that after union, full communion and fellowship shall be maintained with each of the several Churches with which any of them is now in communion, and the fact that any of these does not follow the rule of episcopal ordination will not preclude the united Church from holding relations of communion and fellowship with it. . . .' A similar provision occurs in the Basis of Union of the C.S.I. This has created difficulties for the Anglicans. They find it difficult to give full recognition to a church which maintains relations of intercommunion with non-episcopal churches.

Ever since 1908 correspondence and negotiations have been going on between the Swedish Church and the Anglican Church as to the possibility of establishing complete mutual recognition and intercommunion. The Swedish Church is episcopal in character, its episcopate

is historical with an unbroken succession, its ministry is in every way satisfactory according to Anglican standards, but it does not officially accept any theory of the episcopacy that prevents itself from being in communion with non-episcopal churches. This has so far been a bar to the establishment of full relations between the Anglican Church and the Swedish Church. The Swedish Church already does give communion freely to all members of the Church of England in good standing. The difficulty is not from their side.

This difficulty is still felt by the Anglican Church towards the Church of South India. The Derby Committee appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury has considered certain features of the constitution of the C.S.I. and states that certain changes in the constitution are in their opinion essential before full recognition can be given. One change that they consider necessary is that there should be reconsideration of the ultimate relation of the Church of South India at the close of the interim period to other churches not episcopally ordered.

If the Anglican Church should see its way clearly to having full relations of intercommunion with the Church of Sweden, one could hope that it would also be willing for a similar relationship with the United Church in North India, but if not, we must expect a recommendation that this provision of the constitution be changed, in the same way as is happening in the case of the C.S.I.

Another difficulty which has recently arisen in the course of the negotiations relates to the unification of the episcopate. It has been agreed that 'the episcopate of the united church shall be both constitutional and historic. By historic episcopate is meant the episcopate which is in historic continuity with that of the early church. No particular theological interpretation of episcopacy shall be demanded from any minister or member of the united church.' To Anglicans the establishment of a historical episcopate has been regarded as one of the four essentials in any united church with which they are connected, since the Lambeth Conference of 1888.

In North India the Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the negotiating bodies. This Church's bishops are consecrated at a service which appears to contemplate the creation of a separate order from that of the presbyters. But the first Methodist bishops were set aside for this work by John Wesley, who was himself a presbyter. It can be said that during the early days of the Church bishops were sometimes consecrated by presbyters, but this has not been the practice in most episcopal churches. So the question arises as to whether and to what extent the episcopate of the Methodist Episcopal Church can be regarded as historic. This question definitely affects the nature of the service for the unification of the episcopate. This may seem a small matter, but it is not. Here again one is face to face with the desire of the Anglicans to maintain the Catholic nature of the Church, which to them involves the historic episcopate, and they will not agree to any compromise that will endanger their present or future intercommunion with other Catholic churches.

To churches which have hitherto been unused to episcopacy and which may be rather suspicious of that form of church order and polity, it is essential that the powers of the bishops be clearly defined. It is understood by them that the term 'constitutional' as used in the Plan

of Union does indicate that their powers will be limited and defined. This does not mean that the bishops will merely carry out the wishes of the Church's committees, but it will ensure that they do not act in a high-handed way against the will of the Church as a whole. In the C.S.I. constitution, provision has been made for certain matters to be referred to the bishops by the synod for their opinion with this proviso that if the bishops refuse twice to submit an opinion on the matter, it may be taken up by the synod, passed by a two-thirds majority and then referred to the dioceses for their opinion. It is thus conceivable, although it is unlikely, that the church might vote against the majority of the bishops and carry its way.

The Derby Committee considers that there should be a modification of the rules of synodical procedure, clarifying and properly safeguarding the position of the bishops. The exact nature of the modification desired is not clear, but presumably it would be in the direction of extending the powers of the bishop and limiting the controls on the exercise of his authority. This is a matter which the negotiators in North India will have to go into very carefully. In the Plan of Union it is said that 'the Bishops shall perform their functions in accordance with the customs of the church, those customs being named and defined in the written constitution of the United Church'. At present however very little appears on this subject in the constitution. Does this mean that customs will develop and will later be inserted into the constitution or that the matter has not yet been taken up ?

Problems Relating to the Baptist Church

After mentioning so many difficulties that specially affect the Anglicans, it is as well to mention one concerning another denomination. It was not unexpected that when the Baptists re-entered negotiations they would ask for rewording of the section concerning baptism. They could not accept for themselves the statement that infant baptism is a 'sign of cleansing or engrafting into Christ and entrance into the covenant of grace'. They only agree to this in the case of those, 'to whom it is administered on the profession of the individual that he has been led by the grace of God into a conviction of his sinfulness, into repentance thereof, and into belief that God forgives and justifies him through faith in Jesus Christ as his Saviour'. This does not mean, as some unfairly suggest, that Baptists, like the disciples of old, want to keep children from Christ's presence. It is rather a protest against the nominal Christianity that in India may result in Christians becoming merely another caste.

In view of this objection of the Baptists the section on Baptism as it appears in the printed Plan has been reworded to read as follows:—

> '(1) Both infant baptism and believers' baptism shall be accepted as alternative practices in the United Church. Those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believers' baptism each believe that baptism as administered by them respectively is a sign of cleansing or engrafting into Christ, and entrance into the covenant of grace. They that are baptized are by this sacrament solemnly admitted into the family of God and engaged to be the Lord's. Full Christ-

ian initiation, however, is a process which is concluded only when the initiate participates for the first time in Holy Communion.'

It must be realized that the apparent agreement over the meaning and purpose of Baptism covers a very real theological difference. The Baptist negotiators apparently accepted this and felt that they could agree to work within a church which permits both these forms of Baptism, but it is almost certain that sooner or later this matter will have to be taken up again by the United Church. Possibly the disquiet that is being felt in many quarters in England and on the Continent concerning the whole question of Christian initiation, and the discussions that are taking place, will help in the solution of this problem.

The difficulties outlined above are all due to theological differences that exist in the West having been brought to India. There is one other obstacle to Church Union emanating from the connection with the churches of the West that is of a very different character. That is the question of financial support from the West. It is unfortunately true that many Missionary bodies which are prepared to support denominational activities abroad are not willing to help finance a united church. The result is that some Indian church leaders, although themselves in favour of Church Union, hesitate to vote for it. They know that if their Church ceased to toe the denominational line, funds from the West would dry up, and as they regard themselves as realists they hide their real thoughts and feelings. This is a very unfortunate state of affairs, but judging from the way political affairs and international relations are shaping, this is a matter that may decide itself all too quickly.

If connection with the Western Churches should become attenuated as sooner or later it undoubtedly will, it is hard to say what form will be taken by the United Church. It is certain that many of the difficulties mentioned above will just fade out. They are of the West and to most Indian church members and ministers they count for little. Perhaps it is in the purpose of God that through being thrown back on her own resources the Church in India should develop a church life of her own, which while differing from that of the churches of Europe and America will nevertheless provide an adequate vehicle for conveying the grace of Christ to India.

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On the level of creation as a whole, Christian evangelism involves every activity in which Christians are engaged. Where the Christian is in his normal day-to-day work, there is the frontier of the Gospel as it confronts the world.

On the level of community, Christian evangelism involves making visible in the World, and making effective, that community which oversteps every barrier and in which the wholeness of the future is already realized in part. This is the Church.

On the level of the individual, Christian evangelism involves effecting that introduction between God and man which will bring him into relation with the saving activity of God.—Daniel T. Niles in *That They May Have Life.*