

How far must we still take '1662' into account in Ecumenical Relations To-day?*

TO discuss this question meaningfully we must know what we mean by "1662." We presumably do not mean simply the fact of the ejection of Puritan ministers from their livings within the Church of England under the Act of Uniformity. If we meant simply that, we could say that this was an unhappy event in church history, that there were, no doubt, faults on both sides, that in any case it happened a long time ago and since then the relations between the Free Churches and the Church of England have improved out of all recognition; and conclude that this unhappy episode in the past is best regarded as a piece of past history, to be taken into account only by historians writing the history of the Christian churches in Britain.

But what we mean by "1662" is, I take it, not just the fact of ejection, but the convictions, on both sides, which resulted in it. And what we are asking, I suppose, is how far we must take those convictions into account in ecumenical relations today. So we must first ask what we consider those convictions to have been. This is a nice question for church historians to answer, especially as the word "convictions" conceals a difficult, possibly an insoluble conundrum, namely: "How far were the happenings of 1662 the outcome of theological principles held by the parties to the dispute, and how far were they the outcome of economic and social forces, and the political intrigue which resulted from the handling of those economic and social forces, the whole complex finding one of its expressions—in a fashion more natural to that day than to ours—in terms of ecclesiastical theory?" One need not accept a theory of economic determinism, nor need one attribute insincerity to the protagonists in the dispute, to see that there were other influences at work besides theological convictions, and to acknowledge that the connection between theological principle and economic, social and political circumstances is not a simple one.

To assess these factors rightly one does perhaps need to be a church historian, which I am not. Fortunately for me, so far as the Free Church side of the matter is concerned, F. G. Healey has given us an assessment of the theological convictions of which 1662 was an expression. For the purposes of this paper I propose to make

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use of his analysis. In his volume¹ written for the tercentenary, Healey writes :

“Four convictions . . . were implied in the stand taken by the ejected ministers in 1662. Those convictions were (1) that the authority of the visible Church, in any matters concerning its Faith and Order, is distinct from and not subordinate to the civil authority; (2) that the revelation of God mediated through the Scriptures is the supreme standard within the Church in matters of Faith and Order; (3) that the historic episcopate is not a divinely required constituent of the visible Church, and that the validity of the exercise of the functions of spiritual oversight and of the ministry of the word and sacraments by ministers duly ordained otherwise than by a bishop, but agreeably to the will of God as discerned through the Scriptures, should be recognized; and (4) that the orderly worship of God should not be required exclusively to follow the patterns laid down by a particular book.”

These convictions have since been affirmed by the Assembly of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in almost identical language. They may presumably, therefore, be taken as convictions which the general body of Congregationalists in England and Wales consider to be both valid and important today.

Unfortunately, I have seen no comparable statement from the Anglican point of view concerning the theological convictions which led to the ejection and which are regarded by Anglicans as valid and important today. But if we are considering the event of 1662 in terms of the theological convictions within it, and if we are considering those convictions in the context of inter-church relationships today, then we have to recognize that the convictions on the other side of the dispute are to be taken with equal seriousness and considered with equal sympathy, respect and understanding as those on our own side. This is one precondition of anything we can call ecumenical relations.

There is a second large issue of a preliminary kind raised by our question. That question implies that the event denoted by 1662, or at least the theological convictions to which the ejected ministers bore witness, are of importance to us in our church life today. Presumably that importance is more than the importance attaching to a notable happening in the history of our churches. It is something to which appeal is made; it is apparently some kind of criterion by which we are expected to judge our contemporary actions and policies. In short the appeal to 1662 seems to imply that it has some kind of authority for us. Now for us Congre-

¹ F. G. Healey: *Rooted in Faith: Three Centuries of Nonconformity, 1662-1962*. Independent Press, 1961.

gationalists, this is rather a curious claim to make. We are not, are we, notable for our appeal to tradition? Indeed, in expounding the second of the two convictions underlying the ejection, Healey remarks that "the authority of the Scriptures in matters of Faith and Order should not be whittled away by speaking about the Bible *and* tradition, and acting contrary to what is based in Scriptural revelation by appealing to extra-Scriptural tradition."² Yet our question seems to imply an appeal to 1662 as to a tradition having some authority for us. What does this mean?

To explore that issue with any thoroughness would get us into deep waters—waters in which I would find it difficult to keep afloat. It would, of course, involve a discussion of the traditional debate about the authority of Scripture and the authority of tradition in matters of Church Order—a debate which, at any rate within the traditional frame of reference, seems to me to be largely outmoded. But it would take us much deeper than that. It would plunge us into the far more pertinent and exciting discussion of the nature of history. In that discussion, secular and church historians, philosophers and Biblical scholars are all involved. It has radical implications not only for the understanding of Church order and inter-Church relations and of the mission of Christians in the world, but also for a whole range of academic disciplines, for economic theory and practice, and for national and international politics. I wish I had the competence to use our question as a starting point for a discussion of this stimulating and to my mind crucially important subject. Since I have not, I must be content to suggest some points which seem to me to bear on our topic and to do so without trying to substantiate them.

1. The appeal to history cannot be an appeal simply to external happenings which are held to be the same for all persons at all times, so that if they are seen differently this must be due either to misinformation or to deliberate distortion. On the contrary, the recording of occurrences and the writing of history involve a process of selection and selection involves the application of criteria which are not simply implicit in the occurrences but are also brought to these occurrences from outside them. The process of selection is therefore also one of interpretation.

2. In the writing of history the interpretation depends in part on the standpoint and circumstances of the writer. He necessarily sees the occurrences from his own standpoint and that standpoint is determined by his circumstances. Those circumstances include whether or not he believes that occurrences have a meaning and, if so, what kind of meaning they have in their totality.

3. But the interpretation given in the writing of history, while it is not simply read off from the occurrences, is not simply imposed

² *ibid.*, p. 118.

on them. The historian is not free to invent occurrences to fit in with his interpretation nor to suppress those of which he has knowledge which conflict with it. History as a written record emerges in the interaction between occurrences as given and the historian's own standpoint and circumstances. It is, as I believe someone has said, a dialogue between the present and the past.

Now that is no doubt a very vulnerable set of assertions in a highly controversial field. But if it is anywhere near the truth of the matter it has consequences for our subject. It implies that a historic event is not something entirely external to us. As event (and not simply occurrence) we are involved in it, for its meaning is partly the meaning *we* find in it. And the meaning we find in it is not necessarily identical with the meaning others at different times and in different circumstances find in it. "1662" as historic event does not necessarily mean entirely the same thing for us as it did for our forefathers in 1862 or 1762 or for those who were actors in it in 1662. Nor does it necessarily mean entirely the same thing for Anglicans today as for us, or for Anglicans in 1862 or 1762. But neither can it mean entirely different things, for it is but one occurrence.

If this is so, it is important for inter-church relations. For instance, it puts the old debate about the appeal to Scripture *versus* the appeal to Scripture and tradition in quite a fresh context. On the one hand, except on a theory of verbal dictation by God, the element of tradition cannot be excluded from Scripture, and the meaning men find in Scripture cannot be divorced from their own specific, local and temporal circumstances; and on the other hand, tradition is equally relative to the circumstances of successive generations and is as much subject to change as, say, successive histories of ancient Greece.

This is not to deny the uniqueness of the events to which Scripture testifies. It is, however, to suggest that both that uniqueness and the authority those events have over us must be justified on wider grounds than simply the claim that they are "history" or even that they are "scriptural," though both of these may be important elements within the justification. Nor is it to deny the importance of tradition for living the Christian life and ordering the life of the Church. It is, however, to suggest that the understanding and use of that tradition are more complex matters than the assembling of patristic evidence about the ordering of the ministry, or a summary of the actions and statements of ejected ministers. It would be foolish as well as harmful to ignore the element of "given-ness" in both Scripture and tradition, or to suggest that it was identical in both. But it seems to me that there is a greater element of plasticity in the appeal to either than we commonly recognize and that that appeal is intimately bound up

with those mysterious but powerful links which bind us in the community of the people of God, which is much more like an organism than it is like an institution.

In short, it seems to me that the appeal to Scripture alone and the appeal to Scripture and tradition are alike questioned by the current debate on the meaning of history; that to continue the argument in the terms in which it has been conducted hitherto is to go on living in an intellectual world much of which has disappeared; that the contemporary expression of the conviction which led the ejected ministers to insist on a serious and sustained appeal to Scripture is to set about discovering afresh and in terms of the circumstances of our own day what an appeal to Scripture means; and that in the discharge of that task we shall be helped and not hindered by the insight which Anglicans and Orthodox can bring from an experience which has included an appeal to tradition.

A further consequence is of even more importance for inter-church relations. If it is right to see historic events as determined both by the occurrences and by the interpretation of the historian from within his own standpoint and circumstances, it would seem to follow that no form of church order can claim final validity purely on historical grounds. We can, I suppose, be content to be simply archaeologists in the matter and assert that the church must be ordered in such and such a fashion because it was so ordered in the New Testament or in the patristic period or in the 17th century. We shall thereby hasten the process of making the Church what it already seems to be to many of our contemporaries—a curious museum specimen.

If we refuse to have the matter settled by archaeology, then we must justify any form of church order, in any generation, by its meaning. (Here I might interpolate that it is at this point that I find much difficulty with the argument sometimes advanced that what is called the historic episcopate can be accepted with no interpretation attached to it. I cannot understand how something can be historic and yet not have a meaning.) But we have seen that the meaning of an occurrence is not wholly given with its occurrence in history; it is also seen by the historian who interprets that occurrence. And we have seen that the meanings seen by historians in the same occurrence will vary in different times and places according to the historian's circumstances and standpoint. Thus no church order can be justified as to its meaning simply on the ground that the church was ordered like that at such and such a period, because the way "like that" is understood will vary with the varying circumstances and standpoints of historians in different times and places. No claim for finality in church order, if that claim involves a meaning and is not a claim merely to be repeating the past, can have validity simply on the basis of an appeal to history.

This no doubt is no more than one way of expressing a fundamental Reformed conviction, that the Church must be constantly reformed according to the Word of God, provided that "the Word of God" is understood to mean a living word heard through Scripture's testimony to Jesus Christ and made contemporary through the Holy Spirit, and not as simply a written document. At what is possibly a deeper level, it may be one way of recognizing that the Christ who has come is also yet to come in open and full manifestation, and that any attempt so to order the life of the company of his people as to bear witness to him who *has* come is necessarily provisional and partial because he has *yet* to come. It is to deliver church order not from its roots in the historic event of Jesus Christ but from mere archaeology, and to set it in the living present of the "now" between his coming and his coming again.

This seems to me to be important for current inter-church conversations and still more for those which may perhaps be just around the corner. For it points to one of the great divisions between the Reformed and the Catholic traditions which no body has yet succeeded in bridging—and I do not think either Anglicanism or the Church of South India is really an exception to that statement. A church guaranteeing the Gospel by its historic continuity as an institution is one thing. A church living between the coming of Jesus Christ and his coming again and knowing the forms of its life to be both a witness to and under judgment by the one Christ is another. But the significant context for the dialogue between them is not the history of the Reformation. It is the context of the meaning of the Gospel in 1962. 1662 is significant for this dialogue just in so far as it helps us to understand the Gospel today—and no further.

This brings us to the third of the convictions outlined by Healey, viz: that "the historic episcopate is not a divinely required constituent of the visible Church, and that the validity of the exercise of the functions of spiritual oversight and of the ministry of the word and sacraments by ministers duly ordained otherwise than by a bishop, but agreeably to the will of God as discerned through the Scriptures, should be recognized."³ The negative part of that statement is at bottom the rejection of a claim on the part of a particular form of Church order to be absolute. The positive part of it is an affirmation of the validity of ordering the life of the church at any point in history in accordance with the will of God as discerned through the Scriptures. The depth and pertinence of both rejection and affirmation are, no doubt, apparent to us: I do not imagine that there are any amongst us who would wish to go back on them.

The perplexities arise when we wish to go forward from them.

³ *ibid.*, p. 117.

On the one hand, if we reject the claim of one form of church order to absoluteness, and if we recognize that the Scriptures do not give warrant for any single form of church order but rather indicate considerable fluidity and diversity, then are we not bound to reject any claim for absoluteness on behalf of the church order in which we stand? We can all wax eloquent about the folly of being bound to an episcopal system and about the iniquity of regarding bishops as channels of grace. Are we prepared to be equally eloquent about the folly of being bound to a seventeenth century concept of the gathered church, or the iniquity of regarding a full-time, professional ministry as essential to salvation, of the church, if not of the individual? The recognition of the relative and contingent element in all church order puts radical questions to the Reformed conception of the ministry as well as to the Catholic, to the gathered congregation as well as to the parish system. If we reject absolute claims for church order, we are thereby committed to a radical, thorough and constant reformation of our own church order "in accordance with the will of God as discerned through the Scriptures." We cannot engage fully in this reformation in isolation from our fellow Christians of other traditions, but only in conversation and common action with them. "The will of God as discerned through the Scriptures" is not our private property: it is made known to the whole people of God.

On the other hand, to affirm that church life is validly ordered at any point in history by the discernment of the will of God through the Scriptures is to raise the question of the place of historic continuity in church life. We may reject episcopacy (at any rate in the form with which we are most familiar, that shown in the history of Anglicanism) as an indispensable, and even more as the sole, form of historic continuity. But our appeal to 1662 itself is evidence that we do not thereby reject any place for historic continuity in the church as a visible institution. To press the principle of "constant reformation" to its logical conclusion may theoretically lead to a conception of the church as newly created from moment to moment. In practice, we all have to recognize that a visible institution has some form of continuity in history and that this inevitably plays a rôle in the actual life of all churches. It seems to me that a deeper understanding than we have yet achieved of what that rôle should be is a pressing need in our time. Here again, conversation with those who know the Catholic tradition from the inside may help us, and the celebration of 1662 might well provide a starting point. We are rightly prepared to examine "oversight" as a necessary element in the good ordering of the life of particular churches and in their right relationships to each other. Ought we not to ask ourselves what is the right expression in church order of our continuity with the past—an expression

which will neither usurp "the crown rights of the Redeemer," nor leave us at the mercy of a mere traditionalism ("we've always done it this way!") uncontrolled and unreformed by theological criticism?

What might be called the "boomerang" effect of re-affirming the convictions indicated by Healey is apparent again in respect of the first of them, that "the authority of the visible Church in any matters concerning its Faith and Order is distinct from and not subordinate to the civil authority." Certainly in a world of welfare states, of totalitarian regimes and of exuberant young nationalisms there is every reason to reaffirm that conviction, and to rejoice that it is increasingly valued amongst Anglicans, as witness recent steps in the Church of England towards claiming autonomy in the ordering of its worship and in ecclesiastical appointments. We may note, too, that the affirmation of liberty from external control in the ordering of a church's life is fundamental to the ecumenical movement. The enforcement of conformity, whether by a state or by a dominant church, makes real ecumenical relations impossible for it prevents free conversation amongst churches on the basis of a mutual respect for each other's churchmanship. In this sense, the re-affirmation of this conviction is a necessary contribution to the development of ecumenical relationships. At the same time, we may recognize that the question of the limits of tolerance in a religiously plural society has by no means been answered, either in 1662 or subsequently.

But in a world in which the organized community plays an increasing rôle, simply to reaffirm the freedom of the church from external control can be a pretty negative kind of affirmation. The question more and more confronting our fellow Christians in many parts of the world is: "What is our responsibility as Christians, and what is our responsibility as churches, towards the communities within which we live?" One can observe some of the wrestling with that question in the writings of Christians in Eastern Germany or Czechoslovakia, for example, or in a different setting in the publications of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in India, as well as in possibly more familiar instances nearer home. There is a very narrow base from which to answer that question in the negative assertion: "The Church must be free from external control in matters of Faith and Order," though that affirmation is an important safeguard against making the church identical with any national community, so confusing the Gospel with the national religion of any human community.

Many states are prepared to accord freedom in matters of their faith and order to religious associations within their bounds—and at the same time to "write them off" as private irrelevancies. Do we not need a far more positive doctrine of the relationships of the church not only to the state but also to the other corporate struc-

tures of human societies? Without it, are our churches not in danger of becoming religious clubs, with no deep and continuing sense of responsibility towards the human communities in which they are set? We would, I take it, still resist any attempt on the part of the state to control the ordering of our church life—though we might well be flattered that the state thought it sufficiently significant to want to control it. We may well be critical of Anglicanism for continuing to tolerate—albeit with obviously increasing restiveness—Parliament's control over the Church of England's liturgy and the Sovereign's control over ecclesiastical appointments. But would we really welcome the disestablishment of the Church of England? Would we be wise if we did? Do we really consider that the severance of any official relationship between church and state would benefit the influence of the gospel on the life of our people as a nation? Do we in fact, *in any sense* believe in a national church? If we answer that question in the negative, the onus is on us to expound what relationships between the church and the corporate structures of the life of the community we consider are required by obedience to the Gospel. Or are we content with an individualism which leaves most of the major issues of our day outside our responsibility as churches? It is at least possible that we shall pay heed to such questions and be more likely to find constructive answers to them in conversation with, and not in isolation from, those churches such as the Anglican, and in a wider and different relationship, the Orthodox, whose relationships with the political and other structures of human society have as churches been far more intimate than our own. It is equally possible that we have something essential to say to them from our experience of a clearly distinct and autonomous churchly authority. Perhaps what we all need most at this point, is, first, a theological understanding of human societies as spheres for the development of human creativity within a world created and preserved by God; and, second, a theology of the church which will take equally seriously the church gathered as the "called out" community *and* the church dispersed through its members in the life of human communities of all kinds. It may be that this is one task to which loyalty to our inheritance from 1662 is pointing us.

These questions are not, I think, unconnected with the fourth of the convictions Healey mentions, viz: "That the orderly worship of God should not be required exclusively to follow the pattern laid down by a particular book." At first sight, that may seem to be the most "dated" of all these four convictions. If it is thought of simply in the context of free prayer *versus* a set liturgy, debate about it is not likely to be profitable in an age when the issue is not the mode of prayer but the validity of any prayer at all; not the form of worship, but the reality of any act of worship. But if we

are inclined to regard this as rather a "dead horse" of an affirmation, is that perhaps because we do not take the *public* worship of God with real seriousness? And is one reason for that because we really regard worship as a purely private affair—like the hostess who on enquiring what her weekend guest proposed to do on Sunday, and receiving the answer that he proposed to go to church, remarked: "Oh, yes? My husband's hobby is fishing."

At the end of an address delivered during the Assembly of the Congregational Union in 1918 on "Congregationalism and Reunion," P. T. Forsyth had this to say:

"What society needs is a new heart much more than a new organization; and when all is said, the Church alone has the secret of that renewal. But the charm cannot be worked by a divided Church, by a Church which is only a faggot of ecclesiastical egoisms, sturdy independencies and private pieties. It can only be done by a Church that is palpably the great sacrament to history of the Kingdom of God. Is the notion meaningless to you? Spare some of your concern from the Sacraments the Church *has* to consider the Sacrament which the Church *is*. And ask, 'Is my Church sacramental in this great and historic sense, whether to the nation or to the locality where it is set? Or is it thinking more of itself than of the Great Church on the one hand or the great world on the other?'"⁴

We must surely beware lest, in rejecting an *imposed* liturgy, we reject that ordered worship which is the fitting service, the *leitourgia*, of God and which is sacramental to the public life of the community. And in learning afresh what it means to engage in priestly worship for the community, we have much to learn from, as well as something to teach, our Anglican and Orthodox brethren.

By this time you may possibly be saying: "But what has this to do with the subject, with ecumenical relations? Apart from the occasional reference to learning from Anglicans and Orthodox, all that has been said about our use of 1662 concerns the renewal of our own church life as Congregationalists." Well, what I regard as important for us in the event of 1662, considered in the context of ecumenical relations, is I believe implicit in what I have said. Let me conclude by briefly trying to make it explicit.

1. We cannot, and we ought not to want to, escape from or ignore our history. The basic reason for this is the Incarnation. God deals with us through the events of time and space, not apart from them. We must take seriously the insights we have been given through the event of 1662 into the nature of the Gospel and the Church.

⁴P. T. Forsyth: *Congregationalism and Reunion*. Independent Press, 1952, p. 71.

2. We must take them seriously in an ecumenical context. That means much more than being polite to Anglicans at the points where our convictions differ. It means, first, using these insights for and on behalf of the Great Church, and not merely as the justification for our continued existence as a separate denomination. Perhaps we could express it by saying that our churchmanship must be grounded primarily in the universal church and only secondarily in 1662 and all that it stands for. Our churches are created by God's act in Christ, not by the Ejection of 1662. We are churchmen first and Congregationalists second. Or we might put it that we seek the good of the whole company of Christ's people first, and our own good only within the good of that whole community and not apart from it. The practical implications of this on local as well as on national and international church relationships will bear thinking about. It is not an attitude which is yet common in those relationships, but it seems to me basic to the difference between churchmanship and sectarianism.

It means, second, using those 1662 convictions for the sake of what they can teach us of the nature of the churches responsibility towards the world. Ecumenical relations are in a sense only a secondary matter. What is primary is the church's witness to and service in the world, for the church exists for God and for the world and not for itself. Ecumenical relations are more than inter-denominational co-operation and conversation. If we take with any seriousness the conviction about the church pointed to in the word "ecumenical," we are compelled to think of the church's responsibility towards the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world, the sphere of human existence in its social organization and in its entirety. In that context, what matters is that the ordering of the church's life should be such as to enable it to serve the world in the name of Jesus Christ, to point from within the world's life to new life in Jesus Christ and in Christ to offer on the world's behalf due worship to God.

None of the issues we have been considering is in my judgment irrelevant to that basic calling of the church. But to consider them in that context is to put them in a new setting—not in the setting of an argument *within* Christendom—the setting in which all our present ecclesiologies arose—but in the setting of a world which does not know who is the source of its true life; in short, in a missionary setting. That alters their significance both for ourselves and for inter-church relations. If we can use these affirmations to contribute to the more faithful discharge of the calling of the whole Church, then we shall be observing what in my judgment is the only rightful celebration of 1662.