

# The Universal Church in God's Design

## Some Issues raised by the Report of Section I

BY THE REV. OLIVER S. TOMKINS, M.A.

CONFERENCE reports bear a melancholy resemblance to obituary notices. They are taken to indicate that the subject of them was once living and important, but is now dead. So it often is that matters which were vital to those who discussed them in conference, once embalmed in the stately platitudes of a Report stir but a faint warmth in the memory and leave cold those who took no part in the discussion. We begin with a flourish that "We have the mind of Christ", and we end with the lament "Who hath believed our Report?" Yet there are some reports which deserve a better fate and even fewer which obtain it. Some of the reports from the Oxford Conference of 1937 have become themselves the starting-point of new life; the "Faith and Order" reports of Lausanne and Edinburgh are, in parts, still referred to as records of notable achievement, measuring progress on the long, hard road to organic church unity. So far, there seems to be little evidence that the Report of Section I at Amsterdam, entitled "The Universal Church and God's Design", has been regarded either as a milestone or a starting-post. The writer is fully conscious of being chargeable with *parti pris* in claiming that it deserves to be regarded as both.

It is a milestone because it marks the registered mind of an Assembly of official representatives of *Churches*, not primarily the findings of specially selected and trained experts in dogmatic theology and unity discussion: it is a starting-post because it introduces into the now well-established tradition of Faith and Order reporting a new method and a new emphasis. The remainder of this article will be concerned with expanding these claims of the report to a lively and continuous examination.

### I

The first point may be briefly dismissed since it is not directly concerned with the theological content of the report but rather with its status among the many ecumenical pronouncements. Ultimately, any report possesses whatever value it may have because of its intrinsic merit. But what you may expect to find in a report depends upon who wrote it and who agreed to it when written. Like all reports, this report of Section I at Amsterdam was of course the immediate work of a relatively small group, but no one is in a better position than the secretary of the Section to testify to the degree to which it *grew*, from the interplay of minds and the checking and counter-checking of drafting, discussion, re-drafting and re-discussion, both in drafting committee and full meeting. It is an open secret that the form of the discussion was largely determined by a surprising quadrilateral, a parallelogram of creatively conflicting forces, of which the corner-points were Professor Karl Barth, Professor Georges Flovovsky, Bishop Anders Nygren and Canon Michael Ramsey. Others made decisive

interventions, notably Prof. E. Schlink of Heidelberg (who would have made a yet stronger imprint if he had even had a command of what Barth called 'conference English'. In spite of a desire to play fair, the way in which, under pressure of time, those with a good command of English have a considerable advantage in discussion must be admitted, now that English has become the *lingua franca* of the Western world and the Younger Churches. There seems to be no immediate promise of this supremacy being challenged, in ecumenical circles, by an inrush of Slavonic.) In the drafting committee, the point of view of the Younger Churches was constantly pressed by Prof. Devadutt of Bangalore; since the leading American theologian was a Methodist, C. T. Craig of Yale, the tradition which the Americans themselves call "Free Church" (i.e. the strongly "Independent" groups, Baptist, Congregationalist and Disciples) only emerged strongly as a challenge in the final plenary session, where Dr. Douglas Horton failed to secure his point—one to which we must return. Over all the discussions, Dr. Hannus Lilje, Bishop of Hanover, exercised a wise, humorous, tri-lingual and conciliating guidance. The drafting committee of twelve brought three drafts before the full section (of some 85 members), who offered their agreed report to the plenary Assembly, which insisted upon some important clarifications before 'receiving' it and 'commending' it 'to the Churches for their serious consideration and appropriate action'. Thus the final report was the outcome of initiative from a few expert theologians (some of them, like Barth and Ramsey, being 'consultants' and not officially elected 'delegates'), submitting theses for discussion (real, lively and creative discussion, no mere 'rubber-stamping') in a wider group of delegates. That group, the 'Section' naturally included those amongst the delegates who, by training and interest, had the strongest interest in this among the four choices of subject. But, like the Assembly as a whole, they were fully conscious of being officially elected representatives of their Churches and not simply individuals free to voice their unrestricted opinion. Several contributors to the discussion insisted that personally they would not wish to object at this or that point, but that they spoke on behalf of those who would object, and the report says: "because (this) is a Council of Churches, we must discuss (our difficulties) in a full sense of responsibility to those who send us, not pretending to agreements which our churches as a whole would repudiate."

This amount of description of mechanics is necessary in order to place this Amsterdam Section I Report in its context. There were those who felt that, compared with Edinburgh 1937 for example, it represented retreat rather than advance. Whether that is so depends not only on what it said but upon who said it. The significance of this report is that it was adopted by a Section, and received by an Assembly, which was composed of typical "official representatives", the sort of people who do get elected when, under any denominational machinery, the governing assemblies of Churches are invited to elect official spokesmen. Certain broad characteristics of age, outlook, wealth and so forth result. We may applaud or deplore the result, but we must recognize the fact that we are therefore dealing with a certain

aspect of *the Churches as they are* and not with those specially selected aspects of them which might have produced a more profound theology, a more prophetic utterance or a closer doctrinal agreement.

## II

Having given due weight to the question of who speaks through the report, we can now consider what it says<sup>1</sup>. The first paragraphs are a doxology for "our given unity". "We praise and thank God for a mighty work of His Holy Spirit, by which we have been drawn together to discover that notwithstanding our divisions, we are one in Jesus Christ." "It is our common concern for the Church which draws us together, and in that concern we discover our unity in relation to her Lord and Head." Notice that we claim to be 'one in Jesus Christ': we can not and do not say "we are one Church". How a man can be 'in Christ' and not, for that reason, be *in every sense* 'in the Church' is one of the *disputanda* which emerge later.

The report goes on :

"It is in the light of that unity that we can face our deepest difference, still loving one another in Christ and walking by faith in Him alone. It has many forms and deep roots. It exists among many other differences of emphasis within Christendom. Some are Catholic or Orthodox in clearly understood senses; some are Protestant after the great Reformation confessions; others stress the local congregation, the "gathered community" and the idea of the "free church". Some are deeply convinced that Catholic and Protestant (or Evangelical) can be held together within a single church. Yet, from among these shades of meaning, we would draw special attention to a difference to which, by many paths, we are constantly brought back. Historically, it has been loosely described as the difference between "catholic"<sup>2</sup> and "protestant"<sup>3</sup>, though we have learned to mistrust any over-simple formula to describe it."<sup>4</sup>

It was this line of division which was challenged in the plenary debate<sup>4</sup>. Dr. Douglas Horton, an American Congregationalist, felt that reference should be made to a third type, that of the 'gathered Church'. Anyone reading the theology of an American 'free churchman' (such for example as another American Congregationalist on Amsterdam, Dr. Walter M. Horton in *Towards a Reborn Church*) cannot help being aware of a type of protestantism subtly different from the 'confessionalism' of European Reformed Churches (let alone Lutheranism). But the amendment was lost on the ground that, in so far as there is another type here, it is a sub-division of 'protestant' as defined in the report. But one member of the Section at least is left wondering whether a real point was not omitted from the discussion, though not in the form in which it came up. The point is rather whether there are not three traditions to be considered in discussing church-unity and whether the third is not *liberalism* as

<sup>1</sup> The report in full can be read either in Vol. I of the *Amsterdam Series* (S.C.M. Press, 12/6) or *The Message and Reports of Amsterdam* (S.C.M., 3/-). In spite of quotations here, only the full text will serve to illustrate the contentions of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Clearly "catholic" is not used here to mean Roman Catholic, and "protestant" in most of Europe is better rendered by "evangelical".

<sup>3</sup> *Message and Reports*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> See *Amsterdam*, Vol. V (Official Report), pp. 58-62.

distinct from either classic catholicism or confessional 'protestantism.'<sup>1</sup> One must beware of a facile division here which attempts to divide all theology into 'Continental' and 'Anglo-Saxon', dubbing the latter 'liberal' or, in relation to social questions, 'activist'. Such a generalization was common before the war, but to-day such 'Anglo-Saxon' theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr or C. H. Dodd can hardly be called 'liberal' and represent (in different degrees) a marked change of temper in the theological circles from which they come. At the same time, the Christian 'Resistance' in Europe is admitted to have had a powerful theology of action and no living theologian has affected political decisions more than Karl Barth, whose theology in the 1930's was supposed to be summarized in the doggerel parody, 'Sit down, O men of God: you cannot do a thing.' But the fact remains that the considerable block of American 'Free Church' opinion was ill at ease in this 'catholic'—'protestant' antithesis, in a way which did not seem to embarrass such English Free Church theologians as Dr. Newton Flew (Methodist), Dr. John Marsh (Congregationalist) or Dr. William Robinson (Churches of Christ). It would be foolish for any one who knows the American Free Churches a little as does the writer to speculate how far they have, for example, re-discovered their great orthodox forbears as effectively as English Congregationalists have re-discovered P. T. Forsyth; how far the greater prevalence in America of crude forms of biblicist-fundamentalism inhibit what Bernard Manning in England could joyfully call 'Orthodox dissent' lest its mere use of traditional words caused it to be mistaken for sheer obscurantism; how far the explanation lies as much, if not more, in a distinctively American conception of a Free Church, pioneering, frontier-spirited, not a 'gathered Church' *dissenting* from an Established Church so much as a free democratic institution vigilantly guarding its separation from the State. The Horton amendment appeared to reflect a primarily American reaction to the 'catholic-protestant' antithesis and, though it was defeated, it is to be hoped that the issue it raised will be more thoroughly explored.

A different ground of criticism was voiced by the Bishop of London, that some Churches contrive to be *both* 'catholic' and 'protestant'. He cited the Anglican and Swedish Churches. Let the Church of Sweden answer for itself. To Anglicans, this Report presents a serious challenge. In response to the Bishop of London's intervention, these words were added to the draft before it was finally accepted, "some are deeply convinced that Catholic and Protestant (or Evangelical) can be held together within a single Church". Together with various other qualifying phrases, they preface the attempt to define "our deepest difference".

"Historically, it has been loosely described as the difference between 'catholic' and 'protestant', though we have learned to mistrust any over-simple formula to describe it.

The essence of our situation is that, from each side of the division, we see the

<sup>1</sup> This is certainly the assumption of the writers of the Anglo-Catholic pamphlet *Catholicity*; published by the Dacre Press.

Christian faith and life as a self-consistent whole, but our two conceptions of the whole are inconsistent with each other.

It is impossible to describe either tendency or emphasis briefly without doing it an injustice. Each contains within it a wide variety of emphasis and many 'schools of thought'. But in each case we confront a whole corporate tradition of the understanding of Christian faith and life. We may illustrate this by saying that the emphasis usually called 'catholic' contains a primary insistence upon the visible continuity of the Church in the apostolic succession of the episcopate. The one usually called 'protestant' primarily emphasises the initiative of the Word of God and the response of faith, focused in the doctrine of justification *sola fide*. But the first group also stresses faith, and the second also stresses continuity of the visible church in some form. Moreover, this difference of emphasis cuts across many of our confessional boundaries. Conversation and understanding between these traditions are often made even more difficult by the presence in each of many who are accustomed only to their own forms of expression, are ignorant of others' traditions and often hold beliefs about their separated fellow Christians which are a travesty of the true situation. Yet even when the conversation is between those who deeply trust and understand each other, there remains a hard core of disagreement between different total ways of apprehending the Church of Christ.

Each of these views sees every part of the Church's life in the setting of the whole, so that even where the parts seem to be similar they are set in a context which, as yet, we find irreconcilable with the whole context of the other. As so often in the past, we have not been able to present to each other the *wholeness* of our belief in ways that are mutually acceptable.<sup>1</sup>

The Section here was trying to formulate a deeply-felt difference. The discussion was never allowed to forget that the whole of Rome and most of Orthodoxy were not physically present; Old Catholics, Anglo-Catholics and a handful of Orthodox were conscious of speaking on behalf of millions of Christians who are part of the total picture when a phrase like "the Universal Church" is used. Yet the baffling element, again and again, was that when 'catholics' tried to define 'protestants' or 'protestants' to define 'catholics', neither side could find words which the other would admit to be a fair description of themselves. The passage, just quoted, beginning, "We may illustrate this . . ." was as near as the Section could get to definition, a definition *almost* cancelled out by going on to say that each side also 'stresses' the 'primary insistence' of the other. Almost cancels, but not quite. We cannot quite agree but we cannot satisfactorily define why we disagree.

It is at this point that the Report, *if its basic division is valid*, is of such importance for Anglicans. It follows *either* that any Anglican Church is not truly a Church, but simply an illegitimate union of contradictions which elsewhere are regarded as grounds for rejecting organic unity *or else* that the contradictions held within Anglicanism do not in truth constitute grounds for refusal to unite in an organic church life. The consequences, either way, are enormous. Anglicans naturally are unwilling to admit that their various national and regional units have no right to be called 'Churches'. Indeed, it is becoming a common-place of Anglican ecumenical writing that Anglicanism has a unique contribution to make to church-unity precisely because it already comprehends such diversity. But others, protestant and catholic alike, remain sadly unmoved by the assurance that 'the Coming Great Church' is but Anglicanism writ larger still. They

<sup>1</sup> *Message and Reports*, pp. 22-23.

remain unmoved because they remain unconvinced that Anglicanism has adduced either a satisfying theological ground for its unity or a satisfying theological ground for refusing to define such a ground. Members of Anglican churches, not least the Church of England, the mother of them all, must push this uncomfortable enquiry much further.

For there are other possibilities. If the Church of England is truly a Church in a theologically satisfying sense, then most of the barriers normally regarded as closing the way to Church unity have in fact been jumped (or tunnelled) within her own territory. On what grounds then, can she refuse organic union with those who do but repeat the varieties within herself? The question becomes more pressing when we examine the differences which Section I lists as differences to be overcome.

After affirming, in two sections relating to the nature of the Church and to her mission, the broad and deep beliefs which we hold in common—affirmations well worth reading whenever we are tempted to forget the strong bonds that bind Christians together in face of the world which knows not Christ—the Report goes on to examine disagreements which are revealed by a closer examination of these agreements.

- A 1. "The relation between the old and new Israel and the relation of the visible church to "the new creation" in Christ. It appears from our discussion that some of our differences concerning the Church and the ministry have their roots here.
2. The relation, in the saving acts of God in Christ, between objective redemption and personal salvation, between scripture and tradition, between the Church as once founded and the Church as Christ's contemporary act.
3. The place of the ministry in the Church and the nature of its authority and continuity, the number and interpretation of the sacraments, the relation of baptism to faith and confirmation, the relation of the universal to the local church; the nature of visible unity and the meaning of schism.
- B 1. The relation between the Godward vocation of the Church in worship and her manward vocation in witness and service.
2. The degree to which the Kingdom of God can be said to be already realised within the Church.
3. The nature of the Church's responsibility for the common life of men and their temporal institutions."<sup>1</sup>

These differences are expressed in such a condensed form that it may be hard for those who were not participants in the discussion which they summarize to grasp their full content. Even so, it is surely apparent that almost all of them would divide theologians along lines which do not necessarily coincide with existing 'confessional' boundaries. 'The relation between the old and new Israel' for example, and the subsequent 'relation of the visible Church to the "new creation" in Christ', conceals a deep and vigorous division of opinion between biblical exegetes, but it would be hard to make it coincide with a division between denominations or even broadly between 'catholics' and 'protestants'. The relation between scripture and tradition is being vigorously re-examined by catholics who write as 'biblical theologians' and by protestants whose very biblical theology has led to a new attention to the authority of the canon. Only A3

<sup>1</sup> *Message and Reports*, p. 24.

appears at first glance to correspond at all closely to the 'catholic-protestant' antithesis—yet it might be quoted as a concise list of the most hotly argued theological problems *within* the Church of England!

There is no doubt that these six points catalogue the questions which a representative group of theologians agree to be urgent and indeed exciting and vital matters for discussion. But many of them are hotly debated *within* traditions which are organically united in their Church life; if the Church of England is a Church, they are all debated without thereby becoming grounds for schism. So the Church of England simply exhibits in more marked degree a situation which *all* confessions to some degree share—those *disputanda* which, in one context, can be argued within a single organic unity are, *in another context*, held to justify the continuance of division. Whatever the merits of this list as an agenda for theological discussion in pursuit of truth, it cannot be regarded as an adequate explanation of the perpetuation of disunity.

If this is a legitimate deduction from the analysis of disagreements, it certainly calls for the application of the dialectical method in unity-discussion advocated by Karl Barth, that we should examine our agreements to discover the disagreements they conceal and that we should examine our disagreements to discover the agreements they conceal. That method governs the pattern of this Report.

We begin with acknowledging the agreement we discovered (not *because of* Amsterdam but simply *at* Amsterdam it became clear) that "we are one in Jesus Christ" and that 'it is our common concern for (His) Church which draws us together, and in that concern we discover our unity in relation to her Lord and Head.' Examining that agreement in full and relentless loyalty to our deepest convictions, in the deep dogmatic seriousness which is the essential pre-requisite of truly ecumenical discussion, we discover our 'deepest difference', that between the 'catholic' and the 'protestant' conceptions of the Church. Closer examination of that difference reveals that certain great affirmations *must* be made in common, not as diplomatically phrased formulae but with all the urgency and solemnity of confession; we *must* profess *Credo unam, sanctam, catholicam, apostolicam ecclesiam*. But we have no sooner said it than we know we are meaning different things by it. We examine the differences which our common confession conceals; we list them under six heads. We must now examine the agreement which lies hidden in those disagreements—and the result is disconcerting. We have seen that, owing to the *trans*-confessional nature of many of them, they do not suffice wholly to justify our stubborn continuance in confessional divisions. Part IV of the report is headed "The Unity in our Difference" and says:

"Although we cannot fully meet, our Lord will not allow us to turn away from one another. We cannot ignore one another, for the very intensity of our difference testifies to a common conviction which we drew from Him. The Body of Christ is a unity which makes it impossible for us either to forget each other or to be content with agreement upon isolated parts of our belief whilst we leave the other parts unreconciled.

Yet we have found God, in His mercy, penetrating the barriers of our fundamental division and enabling us to speak, in the common language of the divine revelation witnessed to in the Scriptures, about the points at which we find we

meet. Wherever we find ourselves thus speaking together of our unity, we also find ourselves faced by some stubborn problems. In dealing with them, we discover disagreements which are to be traced back into our different ways of understanding the whole and, beneath those disagreements, we find again an agreement in a unity which drew us together and will not let us go."<sup>1</sup>

Is this simply where we came in? Are we back at the key sentences of paragraph I of the Report, "We are one in Jesus Christ, . . . it is our common concern for (His) Church which draws us together"—and which will not let us go?

Part VI of the Report attempts to discuss the nature of the World Council of Churches.<sup>2</sup> This part is the weakest in the Report, but the writer believes that it conceals the next, as yet unexplored, movement of the dialectic. We search for the unity which underlies our tabulated disagreements. "Although we cannot meet, our Lord will not allow us to turn away from one another." Instead, "we have covenanted with one another in constituting this World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together."<sup>3</sup> Section I at Amsterdam was, by this stage of the dialectic of its discussion, tired and at the end of its time limit. Part VI of the Report was inadequately prepared and inadequately discussed, and so is properly modest and brief in its conclusions.

"We thank God for the ecumenical movement because we believe it is a movement in the direction which He wills. It has helped us to recognise our unity in Christ. We acknowledge that He is powerfully at work amongst us to lead us further to goals which we but dimly discern. We do not fully understand some of the things He has already done amongst us or their implications for our familiar ways. It is not always easy to reconcile our confessional and ecumenical loyalties. We also have much to gain from the encounter of the old-fashioned Christian traditions with the vigorous, growing churches whose own traditions are still being formed. We bring these, and all other difficulties between us, into the World Council of Churches, in order that we may steadily face them together.

But we embark upon our work in the World Council of Churches in penitence for what we are, in hope for what we shall be. At this inaugural Assembly, we ask for the continual prayer of all participating churches that God may guide it in His wisdom, saving us both from false claims and from faithless timidity."<sup>4</sup>

It is there that the conversation must continue. It is there that some of our unanswered questions may be resolved. It is difficult even to see what all those questions are, but at least these loose ends are left over from this analysis of the Report. The writer submits them to the unfinished ecumenical conversation to decide whether they are even the right questions.

(1) Does the division into 'catholic' and 'protestant' at all adequately describe spiritual and theological realities? Are they such stubborn realities that no form can for long sustain them together—so that the Church of England must find it is no true *Church* of living stones but an anomaly held together by the crumbling cement of

<sup>1</sup> *Message and Reports*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Part V is in effect an excursus entitled 'The Glory of the Church and the Shame of the Churches'. Its place in the Report was suggested by a similar theme at this point in the structure of the preliminary volume *q.v.* But it glosses the earlier reference to a known unity in Christ by a doxology for God's grace in our division and shame, a thanksgiving which moves us to cry '*Christe eleison*'.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the *Message of the Assembly*.

<sup>4</sup> *Message and Reports*, pp. 27, 28.



historical accidents? Or does the very difficulty of even formulating our differences to each other's satisfaction mean that the differences are reconciled by a force which eventually even Rome cannot resist?

(2) Does the lack of coincidence between our formulated differences and our 'confessional' divisions indicate that our present Church boundaries less and less correspond with the spiritual realities? If so, will the consequence be simply a re-grouping around fresh convictions which will unite old foes and part old companions? Or does it rather indicate that the old conceptions of 'confessional' unity (more articulate to-day than for centuries) are *all* being undermined by questionings going on within each of them, questionings which, inasmuch as they are prompted by Him Who is the Truth, contain the promise of a *renewal* which may come to us, to find that we have achieved unity as a by-product?

(3) Does persistence in denominational division, in spite of dogmatic reasons in fact too weak to justify it, mean that organic unity is also being prevented by reasons which we do not admit? Do such other forces which served to unite bodies containing doctrinal differences which elsewhere are made a reason for division (e.g. the forces which hold the Church of England together) afford a hint to the forces which might unite others who have not resolved their doctrinal difficulties? What are those forces—political, national, economic, psychological?—and how are they at work to-day?

(4) Does the World Council of Churches testify to an action of God, among those who acknowledge Him as Incarnate in Christ and present in the Holy Spirit, which has already done more to humble our pride than we are ready to admit and which, in ways that we cannot yet see, will raise us up again through His power? Is the World Council, fumbling and imperfect though it is, the meeting-place which we must not abandon because in it God is facing us with questions which He will not answer elsewhere?

---

## The Amsterdam Assembly : Sections II-IV

BY THE REV. CECIL NORTHCOTT, M.A.

**I**T is extremely important to underline a salient fact regarding the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches. This Assembly is not just another assembly to be reported on but an experience to be entered into. The debate which began in the sections in Amsterdam was a sample of the debate which should proceed in all areas of the Church's life.

### I

The second section of the Assembly dealt with the theme "The Church's Witness to God's Design". In other words, it was the missionary and evangelistic section. All the way through the discussion