

# Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

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## ECUMENICITY AT GRASS ROOTS

THERE have as yet been no formal and irrevocable decisions taken by the authoritative assemblies of the Churches concerned on the proposals set out in the Report, *Church Relations in England*. This may indicate a genuine desire for the mind of the denomination as a whole to find adequate expression in any decision of so great importance; and that is hardly possible unless both the arguments and the explicit proposals in the Report become really well known to most congregations. It is more likely that the hesitation so far shown in formulating an authoritative judgment springs from a very proper reluctance to admit that yet another possible way forward to visible unity in this country must now be signposted with the legend 'No Road'. There are few signs that the denominations represented in the conversations will find themselves able to accept the original proposal of the Archbishop, "to take episcopacy into their systems", if it is to be implemented in the ways suggested in the Report. It is indeed open to question whether the Report—at least in its detailed conclusions—is the most fitting answer to the question propounded by the Archbishop in the Cambridge sermon, "Cannot we grow to full communion with each other before we start to write a constitution?"<sup>1</sup>

Principal Cunliffe-Jones in a notable article in *The Congregational Quarterly*<sup>2</sup> which ought to be read, marked, learned and inwardly digested by Anglicans, has made explicit his belief that the Report is an inadequate and disappointing answer. The article reminds Anglicans that the major premiss upon which the Archbishop based his appeal has no justification in fact. The Archbishop asserted that "the non-episcopal Churches have accepted the principle that episcopacy must exist along with the other elements in a reunited Church", and addressed an urgent plea to the Free Churches to begin, without loss of their denominational identity, to implement this accepted principle. Principal Cunliffe-Jones supports his contention that the Archbishop made an incorrect assumption with the formidable evidence contained in the *Reply of the Free Church Federal Council* to the proposals contained in the pre-war *Outline of a Reunion Scheme*.<sup>3</sup> This document stated that although the Free Churches were not implacably opposed to episcopacy, they had not committed themselves to the acceptance of it, even in principle. There is no evidence to suggest that in the decade that has passed since this 'Reply' was published in 1941 any one of the denominations represented in the Federal Council has committed itself formally to this principle; while

<sup>1</sup> *Church Relations in England*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. XXIX, No. 4, Oct. 1951, pp. 303-315.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. A. Bell, *Documents on Christian Unity: Third Series* (1948). *Reply*, pp. 102-119; *Outline*, pp. 70-100.

there is ample evidence to demonstrate the doubts and hesitations still entertained about episcopacy by the majority of Nonconformist congregations. It may be a matter of regret that this should be so, but it would be the extreme of folly to proceed as though the principle in question had been accepted when it is evident that there is little readiness as yet to recognize it.

The article proceeds to the definition of the true objective which all those who engage in ecumenical conversations should keep before them. Their concern should be to learn the mind of Christ for His Church and to enable traditions now separated from one another to fulfil the will of the Lord more effectively than is possible in their isolation. But this involves a process whereby each must inexorably question and examine the other in order to find whether his action, his preaching and his doctrine are really rooted and grounded in Christ. Principal Cunliffe-Jones thinks that there has been much less of this questioning on the part of the Free Church representatives at these conversations than was necessary, for the proposals "amount to little more than that the Church of England fully acknowledges the Free Churches in so far as they become Anglican; and that we knew already". The Report gives little indication of the far reaching effects on the Church of England that such a process of growing together would inevitably require.

The third contention of the article is to be welcomed without reserve, for it points the way to advance at the level of congregational life. Principal Cunliffe-Jones believes that the most important part of the Cambridge sermon was its emphasis on the life of the Church as of even greater importance than its formal theology. He suggests that there are steps which could be taken and which would greatly assist the process of growing together desired by the Archbishop. What is needed is the greatest possible amount of sharing in a common life. All practices based on attitudes which we no longer have towards other Churches should be abolished. The time is long past when we could afford to show our resentments in the details of ecclesiastical procedure. Everything possible should be done to make us all aware of the great memories and heroic figures in each of our traditions. There is a great Anglican-Free Church inheritance of which we can all be made the heirs. It is possible to go much further than we have yet done in enabling people to understand and share in the worship of Churches other than their own. In no other way can prejudices be overcome, ignorance be removed and bonds of common sympathy and understanding be forged. There is need for some greater degree of knowledge (from the inside) of our customary ways of doing things in worship and common life. The growth of a common attitude to the manifold problems of our time and the development of a genuinely Christian impact on the community are essential parts of the process of growing together in Christ. These are things which can be done and ought to be done locally up to the limit of what is permissible and right in loyalty to our own Church membership. It is only as the common life of our Churches is developed in this way that most of the ordinary members of congregations will begin to experience the real anguish of sacramental separation from fellow Christians.

## CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC

THE practice, inaugurated in Cambridge more than a decade ago, of inviting a competent person to give a series of open lectures to the university under the auspices of the Faculty Board of Divinity, has led to the appearance of a number of notable works of Christian apologetic, designed to enable the ordinary intelligent person to discover the content of Christian faith. Among these volumes none is likely to occupy a higher place or to prove itself more useful than the published lectures<sup>1</sup> of Basil Willey, the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature. It is not a very profitable pastime to assess books in order of importance, but this volume belongs to that very select company for which a man ought to be ready to suffer the loss of most things if he can but possess himself of it. Its charm of style as well as the importance and profundity of what it has to say will command wide and appreciative attention.

Professor Willey describes himself as "representative of a fairly large class of persons to-day, the class of dwellers on the frontier of Christianity who would like, if they could, to be fully naturalised citizens". From this position he proceeds to enquire what it means to be a Christian in these latter days and on what foundations Christianity may now be supposed to rest. There are many shrewd observations which make the book a delight to ponder. Three brief comments may be allowed. First, in some illuminating chapters devoted to the exposition of Christian apologetic at important moments in the past, Professor Willey shows how certain beliefs like the Ptolemaic cosmography have seemed in some periods to be essential parts of a Christian world view and yet have in later times come to be regarded as hindrances and discarded. Christian apologists need to exercise much more care than they sometimes do to avoid the blame of creating unnecessary difficulties for those who find belief far from easy. Secondly, there is a grave danger of modern strategists cashing-in on our present discomfitures. "We must not thrust our heads into theological sand hills simply because the spectacle of the world's plight is too much for us."<sup>2</sup> Christianity must not be offered as a device for avoiding despair or for holding Marxism at bay, but as the truth about life and the world. Thirdly, Christians ought to feel (by trying to put themselves in the shoes of an adherent of one of the other great religions or of the majority of our fellow Europeans who regard Christianity as an exploded myth) that the responsibility they carry is not that of showing up the errors of others, but of showing how they themselves could possibly be right. If Christian apologists devote themselves to the question, How far and in what sense is a Christian position tenable to-day?, they will be addressing themselves to the felt need of a great number of thoughtful persons since "the effects of godlessness are now so frightfully apparent". But they must be on guard against the danger, not always successfully avoided by their

<sup>1</sup> *Christianity, Past and Present*, by Basil Willey (Cambridge University Press, 1952, pp. 150, 10/6).

*Op. cit.*, p. 10.

predecessors, of formulating arguments "more damaging to religion than the attacks of the infidels".<sup>1</sup>

### THEOLOGICAL CLASS DISTINCTIONS

IT is a principal tenet of Marxian Communism that the political, theological and philosophical doctrines that men may hold have no objective validity but reflect the economic condition and class status of those who hold them. On this view such doctrines are really instruments in the class war rather than valid, if imperfect, formulations of truth. At the Faith and Order Conference in Edinburgh in 1937 an American group had taken the Marxist challenge sufficiently to heart to produce a provocative report on 'Non-Theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union'. This important issue never received adequate attention at Edinburgh; but when the Faith and Order Commission met at Chichester in 1949 to begin serious preparation for the Lund Conference, it had before it an important letter from Professor C. H. Dodd on "unavowed motives in ecumenical discussion".<sup>2</sup> It has not been possible and perhaps was not altogether desirable to remit the subject to a separate commission for full examination. But attempts have been made to keep all those who have been preparing material for Lund, as well as the nominated delegates, keenly aware of the extent to which theological traditions have been conditioned by social and cultural facts. A good deal of material has been assembled with the aid of historians, economists and psychologists. Important conferences on the subject were held in America and in Switzerland during 1951. A selection of this material, together with the report of the Swiss Conference, has been issued as a Faith and Order paper,<sup>3</sup> which demands the most careful scrutiny from all those who are concerned with Christian unity.

The importance of this topic arises from that preoccupation with the truth of the Gospel which is the responsibility of every Church. It is because this truth is apprehended differently and formulated in ways which are unacceptable to many Christians that the deep and lasting divisions in Christendom have taken place. Even a slight acquaintance with Christian history will demonstrate the extent to which personal or group ambition, nationalism, racial and linguistic differences and plain sinful perversity have been the real causes of divisions which have subsequently been dignified with imposing theological justification.

The tendency to accept things as they are and the latent desire to justify ourselves by justifying the actions and opinions of our forefathers lead to the perpetuation of existing divisions and forms of the theological expression calculated to defend this state of affairs. Dislike of the unfamiliar, ignorance, denominational sentiment and pride are forces which affect all traditions and have acquired an immensely powerful, though often unrealized power in shaping our attitudes towards each other. Indeed, the ecumenical movement itself is feared

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Vide *The Churchman*, Vol. LXII, No. 4, Dec. 1949, pp. 227-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Social and Cultural Factors in Church Divisions* (S.C.M. Press, pp. 35, 2/6).

and resisted in some quarters because of the fear that traditions, habits and ways of thought will have to be modified if a denomination is drawn out of its isolation into the give and take of a wider confessional fellowship. Every Christian group is called to the painful but necessary activity of scrutinizing its theology, forms and institutions to see how far they have been corrupted by unworthy motives. Obedience to Christ cannot be anything more than a resounding phrase unless "the Churches, especially in the rank and file of their ordinary membership, search their consciences as to how far they are following the law of inertia instead of that will of God",<sup>1</sup> which makes such searching demands upon them.

### THE DECISIVE POINT IN CHRISTIAN STRATEGY

**T**HE astonishing successes achieved by the Churches in Great Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century have inevitably given rise to an ecclesiastical folk lore which assumes that the pattern of church life of that unique era in Anglo-Saxon religious history must have a permanent relevance to the Christian task in the world. One important element in that achievement was the prestige of preaching, exemplified by the not inconsiderable number of great preachers who attracted and held for long periods of time very large congregations. To 'sit under a preacher' was a familiar expression of piety in that age. The contrast between the general aspect of late Victorian church life and that of to-day is nowhere more marked than in the place accorded to preaching. Congregations are no longer content to listen week by week to elaborately prepared discourses that will require an hour apiece for their delivery. They neither look for nor are impressed by an oratorical performance. The preacher himself is beset by immensely strong temptations to belittle the significance of his task and to excuse his lack of success by exalting other aspects of his ministerial function.

Preaching, however, was not a discovery of the nineteenth century. At every epoch in the history of the Church, preaching has played a decisive part, both in the nurture of the faithful and in the fulfilment of the Christian mission in the world. It is a salutary reminder that every Christian tradition is committed to the belief that the Bible is in some sense the Word of God and that there is a Gospel because the Word became flesh. The communication of this Word to men and women who are perishing for lack of knowledge of it, must always require the use of words, even if it be admitted that words cannot stand alone but need the support of other media of expression for the accomplishment of their purpose. Preaching will always be in some way central to the life and mission of the Church.

It is probably true that in theological colleges and clergy schools more care is devoted to instruction in sermon preparation and delivery than at any moment in the past hundred years. Yet there is an alarming failure in communication between "the minority for whom the Christian Gospel is a vital and meaningful factor in their daily lives

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

and the great majority for whom it has little or no relevance at all".<sup>1</sup> These words are taken from the Warrack lectures delivered in 1951 to Scottish theological students by the chaplain to Edinburgh University, and they define the peculiar problem which confronts the preacher in the performance of his duty in the post-war world. This breakdown in communication, in the ability of men and women to share experiences and interests with one another in a meaningful fashion, is by no means confined to the pulpit; but the preacher, unlike the artist, can never be content to remain intelligible only to a select coterie of persons. His word is for all men or for nobody. He cannot avoid coming to grips with the problem of personal communication in a society which is dominated by an unprecedented technological revolution.

There is an abundance of books which offer advice to the would-be preacher on the craft of sermon construction, but most of them assume a social and ecclesiastical background in which the sermon maker is sufficiently free from distractions to produce a well finished article to which the congregation will give a ready and respectful hearing. This is a travesty of what actually takes place, as the young preacher speedily discovers to his dismay. It is the great merit of these lectures by David Read that in them he has deserted the well worn paths of homiletical advice and instead directed attention to this crucial issue in contemporary preaching. The meaning and possibility of communication is treated not as a technique which can easily be acquired, but as a vital human concern which is closely related to the nature of the Gospel itself.

The preacher, to be faithful to his vocation, must be aware of the pressures of our era which arise out of the "phenomenal progress of the sciences and their rapid application to our living conditions".<sup>2</sup> It is a new and revolutionary world in which he is called to preach the Gospel, and he must preach it to "bewildered, distracted, uncertain men and women conditioned to respond to scientific demonstrations, suspicious of obvious propaganda and unable to see much meaning in our religious propositions".<sup>3</sup> If obedience to the command to love God with the mind obliges the preacher to struggle to understand the characteristics of this age, obedience to the other great command to love his neighbour as himself requires him to be so identified with other men that he feels in himself the intolerable strain of these pressures. The attitude of calm detachment from the real struggles of ordinary men is a denial of Christian responsibility, for the preacher must live in that paradox inherent in the life of the Church, of being fully involved in the life of the world and yet distinguished from it as the citizen of a divine commonwealth. From this involvement in the concrete realities of life in a non-clerical world, the preacher learns to use spontaneously words and images which can make intelligible to his hearers the Word of God, and to relate his message both to the actual world of affairs and to the Word revealed in Christ and declared by the apostles.

<sup>1</sup> *The Communication of the Gospel* by D. H. C. Read (S.C.M. Press, pp. 96, 7/6), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.

## LOVE FOR HERETICS

THE sharp division between East and West which has become one of the familiar but tragic political facts of the contemporary European scene, is not without its ecclesiastical precedents, for the fundamental division of Christendom is the separation between East and West, a separation which reaches back into a remote past. That separation cannot be adequately explained by reference to the unfortunate disputes of Patriarch and Pope which culminated in the mutual excommunications of Rome and Constantinople in the year 1054.<sup>1</sup> Its roots are to be found in the earliest Christian centuries when divergence in liturgical practice and theological language signified a growing apart to the point where each tradition found it almost impossible to understand the other. In a recent important study of ecumenical problems by an Orthodox churchman of great knowledge and experience,<sup>2</sup> it has been remarked that this division is not on the formal basis of dogma, "but in the very nature of theological thought and ecclesiastical practice of the East and the West, and largely determines the dogmatic conceptions, liturgies and canons which colour the whole of their religious life".<sup>3</sup>

The East developed under the influence of the Hellenic spirit, which found its characteristic expression in philosophy, but the West was moulded by the Roman genius for jurisprudence. These influences over the centuries have determined the content of church consciousness and the distinctive ethos of the two traditions. Professor Zander adds the further comment that the familiar division into three main groups, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism, is misleading in so far as it carries the suggestion that Orthodoxy stands mid-way between the other two traditions. To say that Orthodoxy, "which was dogmatically and liturgically formed in the sixth and seventh centuries, lies mid-way between Catholicism inspired by the Middle Ages and Protestantism living by the heritage of the age of Reform, is as meaningless as to say that the sixth century lies mid-way between the thirteenth and the sixteenth."<sup>4</sup> The truth is that Catholicism and Protestantism, in spite of their conflict, have much in common and from the perspective of Orthodoxy "are both aspects of Western Christianity". Classical Protestantism in its anthropology and its soteriology has been profoundly influenced by the thought of Augustine and Anselm; but neither of these Latin doctors nor St. Thomas have exercised any influence on the thinking of the East.

The Orthodox, if they are to participate in ecumenical work, have thus three serious difficulties to encounter. In the first place the majority of Orthodox Churches fall within the eastern political sphere and are being conditioned to regard the ecumenical movement as one

<sup>1</sup> There is some disposition in recent writing to deny that these excommunications were formally published. Vide, G. Every, *The Byzantine Patriarchate* (1948).

<sup>2</sup> *Vision and Action: the Problems of Ecumenism*, by L. A. Zander, with Introduction by the Bishop of Chichester (Gollancz, pp. 224, 18/-).

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.

of the more subtle forms of western imperialism. When the Orthodox delegates assembled in Russia in 1948 to celebrate the fifth centenary of the patriarchate of Kiev, they issued a condemnation of the ecumenical movement and the setting up of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> The extent to which the member Churches of the World Council are involved in the defence of the western 'way of life' and conditioned to identify the political judgments of the western world with the will of God, serves to increase this sharp division in Christendom and to enlarge the area of misunderstanding. Secondly, the participation of Orthodox Churches in ecumenical work is made difficult because there is no common theological language between them and the western churchmen whom they meet. "Finding themselves in a different theological atmosphere they often have to withdraw to their ivory tower and only occasionally bear witness to the truth without taking active part in discussions of problems foreign to their spiritual life."<sup>2</sup> It is likely that the difficulties of ecumenical conversation would be greatly increased and the sense of constraint become more noticeable if the Orthodox took a greater and more active part in it. Yet until this happens the ecumenical movement will inevitably retain a predominantly western hue.

In the third place, the Orthodox are committed to the view that the fullness of Christian life and truth is to be found only in the Orthodox Church. It is alone the Church. "It is not a third denomination, side by side with Catholicism and Protestantism. It is the Ecumenical Church itself."<sup>3</sup> Yet provided that other Christians recognize this affirmation, many Orthodox, unless prevented by political considerations, are willing to be associated with the World Council as the means through which non-Orthodox may discover that the Orthodox were right after all! But this attitude, harsh and uncompromising as it appears at first sight, conceals the fundamental paradox of ecumenical activity which Professor Zander aptly defines as "love for heretics". The word heretic is used in this context to denote not mere defects or errors in thought into which a Christian may fall in good faith, but a person whose spiritual life is determined by the heresy he professes. One cannot be indifferent to a person who serves Christ and bears His name: to heretics who nevertheless are Christians. It is easier to forget that the heretic is a Christian and seek to proselytize him, or so to accept him as a brother in Christ as to trifle with the importance of belief. To insist on 'both and' instead of 'either or' is the peculiar tension in ecumenical relationships, and the temptation to escape from it is strong and persistent. But to accept the pain of this tension is to begin to understand what was meant by the declaration at Amsterdam: "We are divided, but Christ has made us His own: we intend to stay together".

<sup>1</sup> Vide *The Ecumenical Review* Vol. I, No. 2 (winter 1949), pp. 188-197.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> The Patriarch Sergius of Moscow (ob. 1945); cf. *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. I, No. 1, (autumn 1948), p. 90.