

Editorial

IT is unfortunate when Christianity is taking the offensive in Britain, after years of apparently unrewarding effort, that the Church of England should be in danger of an inter-necine struggle. Canon Law Revision may too easily lead to violent controversy such as surrounded the Deposited Prayer Book a quarter of a century ago, although it is true that the recent South India question was settled with nothing more explosive than the departure of a couple of Anglo-Catholic authors to Rome.

Many who love the Church of England will be praying that those in authority should postpone the whole question of Revision until a more convenient time. The Canon Laws, such as they are, have lasted over three hundred years. A few more decades of them will hardly hurt us, while we spend the time and energy on more pressing matters.

But Revision must, it seems, be faced. And Evangelicals have been well served recently in their desire to understand the position and be guided as to the future. The Oxford Conference was marked by the high tone of the addresses and discussion. The Findings of the Conference show that the Evangelical approach will not be obscurantist or ill-considered, and that the final form of the new Canons will be loyally observed. The Conference investigated the whole problem of policy and action. Mr. Savage's paper is published as the leading article of this number. His warning should be taken to heart: "Evangelicals must know their facts. It is no good quoting canons out of their context, quoting a draft now outdated, and worse still, misquoting them . . . Nor must we hastily condemn the revisers when all they have done is to repeat the 1604 canon. . . ." We must also share his hope that "all canons over which there is serious disagreement will be postponed until we grow together over them".

Mr. Savage urges "Hard work rather than hot air!" The Church Society have done great service in publishing *Canon Law and the Church of England*¹, edited by the Rev. P. E. Hughes, until recently secretary of the Society. Many readers of THE CHURCHMAN already will have studied this pamphlet, which came out when the September number was in the press. Those who have not done so should obtain it at once, for it is an indispensable guide to the present proposals.

Mr. Hughes writes a brilliant introductory essay. As the *Church of England Newspaper* commented, "One reviewer has pointed out that after Mr. Hughes' introduction the other articles are superfluous. It would be nearer the truth to say that after Mr. Hughes has shattered Canon Law with his hammer the other contributors bring up their steam rollers to pulverize the fragments." Dr. Dewick provides a fair and therefore devastating assessment of the proposed Revision in the light of prospects of Reunion. "There are several Canons," he writes, "which in their present form would put almost insuperable obstacles in the way of closer union between the Church of England and the

¹ *Canon Law and the Church of England*, edited by Philip E. Hughes, Church Book Room Press, pp. 64, 6/- (paper).

Evangelical Free Churches". Mr. Finney gives an admirable account of the position of the laity in the counsels of the Church, and is followed by the Rev. Richard Coates on the Vesture of Ministers, the Provost of Sheffield on the Marriage Canons, and Mr. J. F. Wallace on the question of Lawful Authority and the Ecclesiastical Courts. The Rev. M. Guthrie Clark writes a concluding paper on the Doctrine of the Church and Holy Scripture.

A study of the proposed Revision, with the aid of these admirable essays, seems to suggest four principal conclusions. The first is that the new Canons, as they now stand, would tend to the creation of a priestly caste. The Church of England minister would, willy nilly, find himself being transformed from a Brother into a Father. Secondly, as Mr. Hughes has pointed out, "England will have two popes, one in Canterbury and one in York. And under them the diocesan bishops will be petty popes possessing practically plenipotentary powers . . . a very serious move in the direction of the formation of a 'Police Church'".

But this leads to a third conclusion: the danger that many Canons, revised and at long last given the force of law, will tend to become dead letters. Many of the 1604 Canons are dead letters, but it is a different matter when a Revised Canon is proclaimed to all the world; it must then be observed or the whole matter is brought into contempt. But will all be observed? To take the *reductio ad absurdum*: Canon 82, couched in language ("archaic and bulbous") with which Mr. Hughes rightly makes fine play, more or less orders the parson to wear his "dog-collar" in season and out. But there are many ministers who for reasons satisfactory to themselves more often than not wear a lay collar. Are they to be disciplined by their diocesan? Is he to spend time and energy in seeing that they are wearing what the Canons say they should? And it is not only such trivial matters which are likely to be ignored or slurred over, bringing both Canons and the Church into derision.

Finally, the proposed Revision offers one very disquieting comment on the ecclesiastical mind. Canon 17 (The Vesture of Ministers) after allowing a diversity of vestments lays down that the Church "does not attach any particular doctrinal significance to the diversities of vesture permitted in this Canon. . . ." As Mr. Coates says in his essay (p. 31) "The attempt is made to remove the whole question from the realm of controversy by pretending that it is possible to legislate in a vacuum". What is far worse, the Revisers would seem to suggest that if you call black white it *is* white. And that is plain dishonesty.

The significance of this extends far beyond Canon 17. For although many of the proposed Canons cannot be quarrelled with, it is hard not to feel that those who are the driving force behind the Revision hope to some extent to push in their ideas by the back door. But whatever the future may bring, we must remember, as Mr. Savage in his Oxford paper reminds us, that "the battle is not to the strong or to the many. God still hears and answers prayer, and we humbly and confidently look to Him to direct His Church by His Holy Spirit at every decisive moment".