The Threat to Authentic Christianity

A Time for Unity and Understanding in the Faith

By Guy Mayfield

We are on the threshold of rapidly moving events. Within the next decade or less a situation could develop in which the Evangelicals and the Catholics would find themselves as the only traditions within the Church of England which are unequivocally committed to the belief that authentic Christianity is founded on the revelation of God, that this revelation is given in the words and actions of Jesus Christ, and that these are recorded in the New Testament. The present situation is likely to deteriorate further before there can be hope of improvement, for between them the Evangelical and Catholic traditions have let things slip. If these two traditions permit the present climate of non-comprehension, misunderstanding, and even of mutual suspicion, to continue, they may well find themselves too weak to be heard with decisive effect. For the present the exponents of the "new theology" or the theology of re-interpretation, as it is sometimes called, pay some attention to the authority of revelation. But this need be only a passing phase. There could come a time when, due to the united silence of these two traditions, which guard the authority of revelation, it could be difficult for Anglican and other Christians to distinguish between authentic and pseudo-Christianity.

This situation is not peculiar to the Church of England, though it is being felt most acutely within it. In one form or another it is being experienced within other churches. Under God it provides a new and urgent occasion for Evangelicals and Catholics alike to explore the common ground now obscured from them by human weakness, by language, and by history. Neither tradition would wish to claim a monopoly in a sense of discontent at the continuing concealment of unities in matters of faith most challenged today by influential voices within the Church.

This sense of discontent does not arise from any sentimental belief that uniformity is necessarily an expression of unity. Still less does discontent spring from a belief that the Church of England is in essence a *via media* or a church of compromise. The main reason for discontent comes from the observation of the sanctified lives produced within the parochial system by both traditions. These Christocentric lives have been raised up, by grace, as a result of the disciplines contained within the spiritualities of both traditions. Such lives have not been produced despite these disciplines but because of them. Their abiding mark is not one of narrow conformity to a peculiar way but of likeness to Christ. If this is true of the present, it is true no less of the past. The impression left by the records of such great

sanctified lives as those of say, Charles Simeon, Henry Martyn, Edward Bouverie Pusey, and Charles Gore, is not one of conformity to apparently different traditions of spirituality, though conformity is undoubted, but of likeness to a common Master. To read their lives is like making the discovery of a newly launched ship. It floats triumphantly on the waters. The props and cradles which supported it in building have been left behind on shore. These remain for re-use and for examination but they seem less important than the vessel built up around them. The Christlikeness of these great lives comes from the cradle used by both traditions, the acknowledgment of the authority of the Scriptures as containing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Such an assertion may seem to beg the question even for those who would be the first to acknowledge that both traditions raise up Christlike lives. It is at this point that it becomes all too easy to evade an examination of the causes of this common Christocentricity by attributing merely sincerity to people whose pieties may be difficult to understand. It is simpler to attribute sincerity to those from whom we differ than to consider dispassionately whether in fact the symptoms of difference, which may be cherished, reflect deep causes of division. Sincerity in the Christian can only be practised without offence to unity when it is accompanied by an energetic exploration of truth. To be discontented with the attribution of sincerity and to beg instead for an exploration of common truth would be a great step towards the discovery or re-discovery of unity.

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The first shrouds to be removed from our concealed unities are those created by our common humanity—our sins and our use of words.

Two sins predominate (I can only write from an examination of my own conscience and experience). The first is that of pride. We have reason to be thankful that we are Evangelicals and Catholics and that our spirituality is founded upon one tradition or the other. But thankfulness should not degenerate into pride or self-esteem, for God's grace is free in operation. The fact, as I understand it, that God led me to Christ through the Catholic rather than through the Evangelical tradition is a matter of thanksgiving that I was led at all. I am only too conscious that the Evangelical is able to live, by grace, without the props which support me. I know that I am lame and need crutches. I am thankful that others do not need all the crutches I may rely on. But there should be no pride in this disability. For where there is pride, an Evangelical may be thought of as a Christian *manqué*, and a Catholic may be deemed a Christian superfluously laden with baggage, some of which is thought to contain superstition and obscurantism. There is no cause for thankfulness or pride in the fact that we may so misjudge each other. But until we stop masking our possible prides behind an attribution of sincerity, false judgements and imputations will persist about each other.

I write "each other" rather than "each other's doctrines" because I believe that the area of common doctrine and understanding is fenced from us by our failure to make entry by the right door. This door is not doctrine itself nor the irritating superficialities of liturgical difference. We need to begin at the centre of common experience and to

branch outwards and upwards from that. The centre of common experience is Christ, and the supreme moment for both traditions is the Cross.

The second sin is that of suspicion and lack of trust. Both of these are fostered by mutual ignorance of each other. Much of the suspicion is a result of pride and of the uncharitable ways in which controversy has been conducted in the past. But most of all is it nurtured by an absence of mutual explanation which promotes ignorance. We attach different meanings to the same words or terms. We read into each other's words or phrases not the sense understood by the other but a meaning we have been taught to impute. These imputations die hard. A Catholic exposition of the nature of the gift received in Holy Communion and explanation why a belief in transubstantiation is rejected may leave suspicions. It is evidence of how far we are from understanding each other that the reply, made with courtesy, comes back; " Nevertheless because of your tradition you are committed to a belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation though you may not recognize this ".

Catholics are equally at fault. Through lack of a common language, and through prejudiced teaching, the suspicion may still linger that an Evangelical, without realising it, is committed to a doctrine of " real absence ", or that an Evangelical when he explains what he understands by the inspiration of the Scriptures is tied to the acceptance of an unintelligent literalism.

These chains which we have forged for ourselves will not be broken until we are discontented merely to admire each other's sincerity. Words and phrases in use by each tradition at times become little more than doctrinal shorthand in which the symbols are highly charged with emotion. " Conversion," " justification by faith ", " the priesthood of all believers ", " priesthood ", " sacrifice ", " sanctification ", " sacramental grace " are all examples of words and phrases which at present may serve to divide because they remain unexpounded in common terms. But, again at the risk of seeming to beg questions, words are the media, the only media, by which the experience of God's redemptive action is expressed. At best they are homespun and rough and ready, as are all attempts by human beings to communicate with each other and to convey to each other the experience of God beyond consciousness. God is not to be contained finally within the imprecisions of human words. The escape from this impasse is not by any means to be left to theologians. Discussions which begin with common Christocentric experience may lead to a better understanding and therefore to trust, for Christ is the only touchstone. As the objective should be the disclosure of unity in Christ in the face of the challenge of pseudo-Christianity, and not the formulation of generalizations, the initiative may best lie with groups within the parochial system, clergy and laity, prepared by prayer, corporate and private. To start at the base of the pyramid of experience of Christ, where variety is almost infinite, is a realistic but not a formidable undertaking, for, as Pusey wrote:

> I am, however, more and more convinced that there is less difference between right minded persons on both sides than these often suppose ; that differences which seemed considerable are really so

only in *the way of stating them*; that people who would express themselves differently, and think each other's mode of expressing themselves very faulty, mean the same *truths*—under different modes of expression.

Some experience of this method of approach on what may be called a non-technical and parochial level suggests that there are common landmarks to be recognized. The devout and mature Christian may reach a stage when it becomes important that he should distinguish as clearly as possible within himself between belief, unbelief, and disbelief. There are doctrines which he is bound to accept *de fide*. There are others about which he may exercise unbelief. In contrast to these, there are teachings which he is bound to reject and in which to disbelieve, because they are unscriptual and repugnant to the word of God. These distinctions are important to Anglicans whose church allows room for the use of reason and conscience. Nevertheless the Anglican has his frontiers, and these are most simply described in the famous quadrilateral statement of the Lambeth Conference of 1888 which proclaimed the acceptance of :

A. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as containing all things necessary to salvation and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith ;

B. The Apostles' Creed as being the baptismal symbol ; the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith :

C. The two sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—administered with the unfailing use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by Him ;

D. The historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church.

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Thus the Anglican in accepting the authority of the Holy Scriptures is conforming to the authority of the living God revealed in Christ. For him the Bible is not a dead book though it was written and compiled once and for all. Yet Evangelicals and Catholics appear to each other to be people whose traditions have become a wall between the living God and themselves. Both are bound to the acceptance of Christ's promise to lead them into all truth, yet this is not apparent to each other. For example, the Anglican is bound to accept that the Scriptures are inspired, yet there is no doctrine defining the mode of inspiration. There is no advantage to recall old wrongs on one side or the other, but it may be useful to make bare mention of one popular writer in the Catholic tradition whose explanation of the alleged Evangelical belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures in terms of gross obscurantism has passed unchallenged. The writer if he had been able to take part in an exploration of what both traditions maintain would have found common ground.

In this matter of authority, as in other doctrines, confusion and prejudice are created because it is seldom sufficiently understood that both traditions may make very different approaches to a common

doctrine. The Catholic tends to adopt a reserve in the face of a mystery of the faith. He regards this reserve as being essentially Anglican. In this respect his approach is unlike that of the Roman Catholic who, as it seems to members of other churches, is prepared to push the course of logic and reasoning into areas of faith not understandable by man. The Anglican, according to the Catholic tradition of the Church of England is primarily concerned with the discovery of the content of faith rather than with an exposition as to a particular mode in which a doctrine shall be held. He is shy of attempts to penetrate the mystery of faith, for these, as it seems, in his judgment, bring him within the realm of speculation and of unscriptural errors. Thus to a Catholic some evangelical expositions of the inspiration of the Scriptures leave him with the uneasy feeling that logic and reason are being pushed further than Scripture itself warrants.

A similar situation as it affects the Evangelical is created by the Catholic use of prayers for the departed. The Catholic would sternly deny any connection, real or implied, between such prayers and a doctrine of purgatory. The example is important because it exemplifies the differences of approach. The Catholic understands that these prayers are not repugnant to the Scriptures. He finds evidence of their use for centuries before there was a doctrine of purgatory. So he understands that he is at liberty to pray for the departed, that the use of such prayers are not *de fide* and are not necessary for salvation. He is perplexed by Evangelical objection to them until one ground is explained—the anxiety to preserve the supremacy of Christ's once and for all sacrifice. He can then at least understand an attitude of unbelief in such prayers, for to the Catholic as to the Evangelical the Cross of Christ must be exalted.

Or, to come to the scene where the crunch is most felt and heard : both traditions unwittingly irritate and perplex each other by what their members may do or abstain from doing in church. It is always a pity when the argument begins in terms of rubrics for both traditions are agreed that the rubrics are not inspired. There is perhaps a better approach. Both traditions are composed of members who are sinners subject to the limitations of time and space. They are therefore incapable of showing perfectly and without some distortion what they believe. There is no such being as the purely spiritual or intellectual Christian. Outward expression of spirituality inevitably falls far short of the purity of the doctrine itself.

Let it be assumed for this immediate purpose that both are agreed that the presence of Christ vouchsafed in or through Holy Communion is spiritual, objective, not localized, and discerned by faith. The Catholic may express this belief in visible gesture and action. The Evangelical also translates this belief in terms of time and space, but, as it seems to others, with an almost equal absence of gesture and action. Both are making accommodations to the conditions of humanity; belief and experience cannot remain intellectual ; they call for expression. But it does not follow that the expression should be uniform, still less does it follow that lack of uniformity implies doctrinal error. In the end the members of both traditions, if they value wrongly their physical actions or the absence of them, lay themselves open to an imputation of

superstition. It is possible that where there is a wrong valuation both may seem to God to be pots calling kettles black. Some admissions could usefully be made by both traditions. If they have been withheld, the reason is not one of deliberate prejudice but rather lack of understanding.

Physical actions and matter are not in the Catholic's understanding vehicles of spiritual doctrine. He receives the benefit of holy communion by faith. Yet he in turn is unfair to the Evangelical who, when he confesses that he receives by faith, is told that his belief is therefore subjective and emotional. The Catholic understands that when he uses vestments which another church identifies with an unacceptable doctrine of sacrifice he is not thereby identified with the doctrine because he uses similar pieces of matter. On the other hand the Catholic is unfair to the Evangelical if he imputes to him a lack of coherent doctrine because a surplice and scarf are worn. The recognition that differences of physical expression exist in other churches, and that these differences do not carry objectionable doctrinal imputations, is made by both traditions. We have yet to make similar admissions about each other.

We have not begun to be fair to each other, for we tend to shelter within the shadows of our history rather than to come out into the common light. Within these shadows are the relics of old bitterness, rivalries, and jealousies. We cannot be content to blame history for this. We are sinners. We seek salvation through Christ. It is best to start to face each other at the point where by grace we all began—Christ and the experience of him as Lord and Saviour.

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To start at this point will lead to a better way of looking at each other as members of the Church of England. It is urgent that we see each other afresh in this context which is made up of the three Anglican traditions : the two already discussed and the Central Churchman. The Evangelical and the Catholic contain the church and provide its walls. They have their origins not in the controversies of the Reformation and later but in the deepest spiritual responses which human beings make when they are called by Christ. (To trace these two traditions beyond the Reformation period is a fascinating exercise which helps to clear one's sight.) The two traditions are found elsewhere in Christendom : in Rome, in Orthodoxy, and in the Free Churches. But with us all three traditions have flourished with exceptional vigour. It is a truth especially developed within the Church of England that the experience and spirituality of the whole church is far wider than that of any one tradition ; the range of any members' spirituality is far exceeded by the experience and richness of the whole. Each member's apprehensions and needs are limited, may be far more limited than he cares to admit. But because we are members of a living body, the understanding of the Gospel and therefore of the spirituality of the Church is continually being renewed through the experience which all have of God in Christ.

We live in a ferment, for God is alive, not dead. The ferment

of spirituality has been contained within the Church of England primarily but not exclusively by the two great traditions. Neither of them exists to possess the church. We are allowed to find footroom within it so far as we are possessed by Christ. By reason of history, national character, and even of climate, these two traditions have nurtured and in turn have been patiently nurtured by the third tradition, that of the Central Churchman. The particular dangers which may threaten the Evangelical and the Catholic affect no less gravely the spirituality of the Central Churchman. His position is critical because he has maintained a close but varying relationship to the other two. Hitherto the Central Churchman has been poised between the two other traditions. He has sought to stand aside from theological controversy. He has looked for a spirituality which is disengaged from the partisanships of former years. In the past the differences and disputes have been used on occasion not only by the two traditions themselves but by other Anglicans to draw exaggerations and caricatures of each other. In the last century and the early years of this one legal disputes and recourse to the courts not only created confusion and ill-will, to the satisfaction of people who wished to exacerbate division, but they served also to do great harm in another direction to the Evangelical and Catholic traditions. They caused them to be identified as "extremists" and to be deemed almost lodgers within the church. The Central Churchman adopted a position more or less midway between the traditions, as it seemed to him, not because he was a compromiser —he has great forebears within the church of England—but because his teeth were set on edge. By grace or instinct informed by grace he has shown a gentle bias against whichever tradition seemed to be temporarily dominant. Thus he tended towards a Catholic bias when at the beginning of the century the Evangelical tradition appeared to be somewhat dominant. After the first world war when the Catholic tradition was dominant and in some respects exotic, his bias was Evangelical.

A new situation grew up at the end of the second world war. The Catholic tradition declined at least in some of the forms with which it had been identified. At the same time, though the Evangelical tradition became more vigorous at least in the potential, it appeared to those outside it to become turned in on itself and withdrawn. Indeed the vigour of both traditions has been weakened by present preoccupations of the church which have been almost obsessively concerned with administration and reform, and reorganization. Since the war neither tradition has been able effectively to warn the church of the dangerous consequences of allowing the need for reform and reorganization to displace the most urgent need of all, that of evangelization. In consequence reform and reorganization have seldom been submitted to the proof of doctrine. They have become ends in themselves in not a few instances.

Through the lack of vigilance which comes from lack of understanding in unity, the materialist influences of secular society which turned the welfare state into the affluent state were permitted to invade the church and to leave their marks upon all three traditions. Today we are all of us out of touch as never before with the people to whom we have been

sent by God. We are all of us in danger of being relegated to being merely an esteemed part of the English way of life—like the Lord Mayor's Show or the ravens in the Tower of London. The Evangelical and Catholic traditions have suffered in consequence, but the Central Churchman has suffered even more, for without the flint of the two other traditions on which sparks may be struck by him, his fire has burned low. Left largely to himself he has been unable to reply either to the challenge of pseudo-Christianity or to make an authoritative protest. The doctrines which he holds in common with the other traditions are being questioned more stridently than before. If the replies are to be effective, they should come from affirmations clearly held as to the nature and authority of the very foundation of Christian belief. It is not the fault of the Central Churchman that he has been unable to provide these unequivocal answers. The fault lies with the two traditions from which he derives the mode of his spirituality. If they are silent either because they are preoccupied within themselves or because they are at loggerheads with each other, no voice loud enough to be heard in our Babel is likely to be raised.

The longer this period lasts, the more liable will the Central Churchman and members on the fringes of both the other traditions be left to listen to and to receive uncritically the utterances of noisy prophets who attempt to demythologize Christianity or, to put it in another way, to unstick Christianity from revelation. On the other hand should Evangelicals and Catholics resolve that within the fields of parochial life they will re-dig the wells that the Philistines are blocking, the Central Churchman and many others will find common cause with them. New tensions are being created within the Church of England. These will replace the familiar ones provided hitherto by the Evangelicals and Catholics *vis-à-vis* each other. In the immediate future the tensions will be drawn between those who accept revelation as the basis of the authority of the Christian faith and those who do not ; the tensions will be those created by pseudo-Christianity opposing Christianity. All Anglicans rightly believing, have but a short step forward to take to the common ground from which they can in unity and with authority proclaim their faith in common terms.