

# Editorial

## Towards visible unity

The Church of England is a doctrinally pluralistic body created by the vicissitudes of a particular history. It would be a matter of the greatest difficulty to forge agreement between the poles which exist within it—for example, on ministry—in a way that would give grounds for advancing visible unity, if that unity did not happen already to exist. Its visible unity is guaranteed not so much by theological agreement as by a certain tolerance of differing historical and doctrinal understandings, most of which can claim some authentic strand within the broader tradition. Because the Church of England lacks a high theological coherence and is an amalgam of, at some points, incompatible views, it finds the task of emerging from unity discussions with a common mind peculiarly difficult. On the face of it, the task is comparatively simple: to find a formula by which it can enter a closer relationship with others who are generally no more, and sometimes much less, distant from its mainstream than are various groups who have long established themselves as facets of its total identity. In reality it is exceedingly difficult, because the whole operation brings into the open the variety of theological understanding. The initial reactions to the latest proposals (Churches' Council for Covenanting [CCC], *Towards Visible Unity: Proposals for a Covenant*, London 1980) would seem to indicate the probability of another failure. One third of the Anglican members on the CCC could not agree with the proposals and, though this may be deeply frustrating to its supporters, it was certainly wise to include the potentially dissident members 'precisely because of the particular outlook and attitude' they were 'known to share' (ibid., 'A Memorandum of Dissent', p 83). Discussion has to continue, of course, but with the degree of reluctance the General Synod showed in even taking note of the report, it is not possible to be optimistic about its success. Yet serious problems will arise if no way is found round the present apparent *impasse*, for that would seem to imply—as the six positive Anglican members of the CCC write of the present initiative—'the abandonment by the Church of England of a line of approach to visible unity which has been followed for sixty years' (*On Behalf of the Covenant*, CIO: London n.d., p 2)

Yet surely a way should be found? If it would be beyond the skills of any covenanting councils to create a body as varied as the Church of England, it does actually exist, and most of those who engage in its wider councils have at least some appreciation of the positive values of its diversity, whatever their own allegiance. Even the most apparently divergent can agree, as *Growing into Union* demonstrated

(C.O. Buchanan et al., *Growing into Union: Proposals for Forming a United Church in England*, SPCK: London 1970). There have already been important theological meetings such as the High Leigh Conference on Anglican Views of Ministry (cf. General Synod, Board for Mission and Unity, *Evidence on Ecumenism*, GS Misc. 76, pp 14-21), but perhaps further conversations should take place, particularly between the wings of the Church of England, on the whole question of episcopacy—with the covenanting proposals very much in mind. If meaningful agreement could be reached across this theological divide, there would seem to be no greater difficulty in finding an understanding with the United Reformed Church and with the more functional view of episcopacy lying behind the contentious proposal that those who carry out 'functions analogous to those of bishops', should, after the covenanting, serve as 'colleagues with bishops', though not ordained as such (CCC, op. cit., 5.4.4.3.). There is no guarantee that such conversations would produce results, but they might, just because intra-family discussions can sometimes reach a greater *rapprochement* than those between families even when, by an objective analysis, the degree of division may be exactly the same. If there is any value in being a 'bridge church', it is not only in having a base on both sides but also in having a span which can be seen to connect.

## John Paul II

Several articles in this issue are devoted to various aspects of Roman Catholicism. In this ecumenical century much traditional hostility between Roman Catholics and Protestants has evaporated and, though union still seems very distant, a level of co-operation, impossible to conceive in the past, is now common. All but the most fundamentalist Protestants and the most triumphalist Roman Catholics have, in some measure, been involved in this change. Evangelical Anglicans, for example, firmly committed themselves at Nottingham to 'support and encourage opportunities for dialogue . . . at all levels.' The Nottingham Statement was at pains to say that there was much to welcome in the developments amongst their Roman Catholic 'fellow-Christians', particularly the movement for renewal and 'the growing emphasis upon the Bible as normative for Christian faith and conduct' (*The Nottingham Statement: The Official Statement of the Second National Evangelical Anglican Congress, Held in April 1977*, CPAS: London 1977, p 44). It encouraged co-operation which would 'bring the goal of full-communion nearer', though, at the same time, it drew attention to many crucial areas where doctrinal clarification and amplification were necessary (*ibid.*, p 45).

Since then John Paul II has burst on the scene and swept aside the cautious and unexciting theological and diplomatic balancing of Paul

VI, and established himself—partly because of his sheer charisma, humanity, energy and spiritual conviction, partly because of the mystique of his office and partly because of the great spiritual vacuum created by the moral and political uncertainty and insecurity of the western world—as a figure of world-wide importance. He has a fascinating and compelling personality, but the general euphoria which has surrounded him should not obscure the fact that, in several ways, he seems to be making more difficult that dialogue which Nottingham, amongst many others, was so desirous of developing. Some of the emerging emphasis of his pontificate seem bound to slow down the momentum of ecumenical advance, and it is perhaps worth examining a number of these.

There is firstly his understanding of the papacy. The claim to primacy, and the concept of infallibility which surrounds it, is a very great stumbling block to both Orthodox and Protestant churches. John Paul II has been formally careful not to overstress the parts of this heritage most objectionable to non-Roman Catholics, particularly when he has been in their company. Thus when he preached in the Orthodox cathedral in Constantinople last November, he spoke of Peter as the 'chorus-leader of the apostles' and 'as a brother among brothers' (quoted in John Whale, ed., *The Pope from Poland: An Assessment*, Collins: London 1980, p 256). Nonetheless there seems little doubt that his charismatic, populist style of leadership, forged in the conservative nationalist Catholicism of Poland, has so far tended in an authoritarian direction. Collegiality, so important in the understanding of Vatican II, has not been emphasized. At worst it has been ignored, as when he issued his very conservative 'Letter to Priests' in April 1979 (cf. *ibid.*, p 114). At best it seems to have been understood to mean 'that the bishops backed up and sustained the pope' (*ibid.*, p 240). 'Has he not', asks Hans Küng, 'presented himself less as a brother among brethren than as a monarch over his subjects . . . ?' (*The Observer*, 23 December 1979, p 11). If he is a monarch he is one with a popular base. Authority which is populist, as our century has demonstrated, has a particular danger. That is, as a *Church Times* editorial on John Paul II argued, 'of yielding to the temptation to treat crowds as crowds—not as free, intelligent, human beings needing most deeply to be persuaded rather than dazzled', a danger well illustrated in Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor (*Church Times*, 11 January 1980, p 10). In particular, such popular authority could move the emphasis away from the rediscovery of the theological and practical significance of 'the priesthood of all believers' to a dogmatic rule based on skill in deploying the slightly hysterical, and very confused, aspirations of the masses.

There is secondly his understanding of the function of theology. It is Peter Hebbewate's contention, in his analysis of the treatment of Schillebeeckx and Küng, that the present pope is concerned largely in

guarding the deposit of the church and that this has removed the Vatican II emphasis on interpreting the doctrine of the past in the context of the present, and has therefore called in question the function of any theologians who do more than reassert and reorganize the heritage of the past (Peter Hebblewaite, *The New Inquisition? Schillebeeckx and Küng*, Collins: London 1980, ch. 6). In keeping with this, the function of the theologian must be subordinate to the *magisterium*. Thus Pope John Paul II chose to emphasize, in an address to the Gregorian University at the end of last year, that its professors had always been characterized by 'a loyal and docile openness to the suggestions of the *magisterium*, in conformity with the specific spirit of the Society of Jesus . . .' (quoted, *ibid.*, p 121). Thus, too, he appears to be downgrading the International Theological Commission—set up by Paul VI to draw together Roman Catholic scholars of international distinction to advise the papacy—and reasserting the role of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. It is this last body which has been involved in the examination of Schillebeeckx and Küng. Critical Roman Catholics are not slow to point out its historic connections with the Inquisition and, though some Anglicans might envy a church which can be seen to discipline and control its theologians, most will feel reservations about some of the issues which have been highlighted, the way particular individuals have been treated, and the apparent encouragement of a static, conservative, centralized and clericalized Roman Catholicism.

There is thirdly his understanding of the content of theology. Undoubtedly his steadfast loyalty to the great credal affirmations of Christianity must command admiration, as must his warning of how easily Christ can be reshaped 'to suit mankind in this era of progress and to make him fit in with the programme of modern civilization—which is a programme of consumerism and not of transcendental ends' (quoted, *ibid.*, p 111). Yet if such loyalty is to subordinate and devalue the task of interpretation, and if it is to be marked by a rediscovery of those aspects of Roman Catholic dogma and spirituality which cause most embarrassment to those who have a rather different concept of the function of biblical authority, it is not good news. The importance of his Marian devotions, for example, must inevitably cause problems to most Protestants. It is not just that he reflects with great enthusiasm what is to them a somewhat alien tradition, but that this tradition seems to be a prime motivating factor in his spirituality and is apprehended with a dismaying credulity. 'For John Paul II no Marian shrine' is 'too insignificant, none too dubious for notice: if not a visit, then at least a mention.' (Whale, *op. cit.*, p 231) The effect is seen with some clarity in his recent visit to Ireland. Its centre-piece was a visit to the shrine of the 'Mother of God' at Knock, to honour the centenary of an 'appearance' of Mary which remains a matter of official doubt. Added to the general

conservatism of his statements on most subjects during his visit, the role of Knock, concludes Whale, was to confirm Ireland 'not merely in a rigid but in a credulous Catholicism.' (ibid., p 191)

John Paul II has established his stature as a world figure and it would be churlish indeed to deny his achievement in focusing attention in an immensely attractive way on significant aspects of the Christian presence and message in the modern world—the underlining of the size of one sub-section of this presence is in itself significant. It may yet be that those elements in his personality which are most difficult to appreciate and accept because they appear to threaten the advances of Vatican II and to make ecumenical dialogue more difficult, will be modified. All who have valued such advances should certainly pray for modification. Yet the omens are not good. As Whale warns, previous popes who have 'benefited from popular adulation' have had 'their reactionary tendencies confirmed and strengthened' (ibid., p 11).

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## Opinion

### **Theology seeking an experience**

Dr Packer in his recent articles quotes the popular expression, 'The charismatic movement has been called "an experience seeking a theology"', and adds that it is as much 'lacking' and 'needing' a theology as 'seeking' one. We could equally well describe the charismatic movement as 'a theology seeking an experience', for church life today too often has a theology 'lacking' and 'needing' an experience. Dr Packer has pointed to the need for theology to be lived out, and this is what the renewal is pointing to, particularly in the area of the power/ability of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. However theologically diverse, the movement is not so diverse regarding the theology of the central content of the Spirit's ability in the church. This is theology seeking an experience.

### **Healing**

Dr Packer argues that charismatic healing ministries cannot be convincingly equated with the healing gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians, and he writes that 'healing was then instant' and that 'there is no record that they ever attempted to heal without success.' Has he not fallen into the trap of undervaluing contemporary healing ministry simply because it is not always instant and successful?

There are two main reasons why the healing ministry may not be