

spaciousness of international relations symbolized by the universal primate.

*Ushaw College, Durham*

CUTHBERT RAND

### **The Agreed Statement on Authority: A Methodist Comment**

The question of authority is an extremely difficult one. Such is the cussedness of man at this stage of the human pilgrimage that those 'under authority' may either rebel against an authority that is right in both its substance and its manner or accept with servility an authority abusively claimed or exercised; and those who 'wield authority' may either behave tyrannically in the cause of untruth or shrink from their responsibilities when authoritative decision and action is needed. Christians believe that ultimate authority lies with God the benevolent Creator, whose purpose for humanity is that we should freely 'glorify God and enjoy him for ever'; in God's intention the divine rule and human salvation coincide; God's service is our perfect freedom. Christians further believe that in Jesus Christ we have the definitive revelation of God's purpose for men both as to its content and as to its mode of achievement. While coercive political authority may be the instrument of God's 'left hand' in the restraint of sin, the man at God's right hand is one who took the way of self-giving love. True dominion is not domineering. Divine authority invites free cooperation in the realization of God's loving purpose. To match up to the Church's calling as a witness to the gospel, 'authority in the Church' must follow the pattern of God in Christ. In that way it will participate in the divine authority. The goal is eschatological. Any present exercise is an imperfect approximation.

It would have been worth the while of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission to sketch with rather more detail than is done in paragraph 1 that kind of broad theological background to its third Agreed Statement: Authority in the Church (Venice 1976). Instead the document leaves the impression of a somewhat narrowly 'ecclesiastical' treatment of an awkward problem in 'ecumenical' relations. Perhaps the Commission's terms of reference and its constitution made that inevitable. But ecclesiastical and ecumenical questions cannot properly be removed from the broader theological and cultural context.

In contemporary theology, the question of the 'norms' of the Christian faith is rightly seen as fundamental and is widely debated. What is the value for us today of any person or event in the past — whether the earthly life of Jesus or the twenty mixed centuries of Christian history? Should we not rather be directed towards the future in whose making we seek, under God, to share? Or again: In a pluralist world, where are we to stand in order to decide whether the varied voices claiming to speak (God's) truth blend in a rich harmony or rather constitute a cacophony of contradictions? I am not suggesting a simple 'revolutionary' answer which would abandon the past for the future or the absolute for the relative. That would be incompatible with the Christian belief that Jesus, a man who lived in a particular culture at a particular time in the past, is in some sense the 'definitive' revelation of God. But nor does the answer come as easily as the ARCIC Statement seems to presuppose.

On the plane of contemporary culture and society, there is an apparently universal 'crisis of authority'. This is being experienced at all points on the scale: the geopolitical, the national, the local, the smallest social unit, the individual. There is no wind of this in the ARCIC Statement. Yet the Church as institution is not exempt. While it would have been inappropriate for the Commission to pursue a journalistic path, one might have expected the Statement to bear in a sharper form the living marks of a period that has seen the mixed reception given to *Humanae vitae*, Hans Küng's *Infallible?*, and the case of Archbishop Lefebvre (the English version of Yves Congar's pamphlet on the case is appropriately entitled *Challenge to the Church*) — and in which the report of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission on *Christian Believing* has provided a formal theoretical basis for that well-known Anglican 'comprehensiveness' which has recently so perplexed the Catholic co-chairman of ARCIC (cf. Bishop Clark's letter to *The Times*, 24 May 1977).

But enough of the Statement as it might have been. Let me now venture a few personal comments on the text as it is, in its ecclesiastical and ecumenical orientation.

The general impression once again is that 'whatever is, is right'. There is still a confusion between the ideal and the actual-historical in the life of Christianity. This criticism had been widely made of the ARCIC Statement on Ministry and Ordination. The co-chairmen's preface to the Statement on Authority shows the Commission to have become sensitive to this point: 'There is much in the document, as in our other documents, which presents the ideal of the Church as willed by Christ. History shows how the Church has often failed to achieve this ideal. An awareness of this distinction between the ideal and the

actual is important both for the reading of the document and for the understanding of the method we have pursued.'

Now it is true that paragraph 7 makes the important concession that 'the authorities in the Church cannot adequately reflect Christ's authority because they are still subject to the limitations and sinfulness of human nature. Awareness of this inadequacy is a continual summons to reform.' But the Statement fails to descend from this general principle to particular historical cases. It omits to mention that a *necessary* Reformation is widely held to have in fact occurred in the sixteenth century. The 'Protestant Reformation' affected only part of western Christendom, and the regrettable cost was a further major division in Christendom. The recurrent fact of *schism* throughout the history of Christianity receives no more than incidental mention (paragraphs 13 and 22). Any attempt to take the fact into serious *theological* account is lacking. Yet the factual existence of *conflicting* 'authorities' ought to have been reckoned with in any *a posteriori* theory of authority (an *a priori* theory is of little use). Some divisions at least have taken place over questions of truth, and it follows that one side, if not both, must have been wrong. Wider questions of ecclesiology are involved here: Schism *within* the Church? But is that not contrary to the nature of the Church? Schism, then, *from* the Church? But how to decide which is the continuing body? Some consideration of these questions needs to be built into any theological account of 'authority in the Church'. Perhaps the Commission should be asked to produce a fourth Statement — a concrete Ecclesiology which takes the vicissitudes of history into account.<sup>1</sup>

Let us meanwhile look at a couple of cases where authority is in question. First: indulgences. The medieval Roman Church practised the system with papal authority, and the practice has not even now altogether ceased. Yet Luther, claiming the authority of Scripture, saw in indulgences the outcrop of a fundamentally wrong understanding of salvation that bore disastrous existential consequences; and Article XXII of the Anglican Articles of Religion joins in the condemnation of 'the Romish doctrine concerning . . . pardons' on grounds of Scripture. What does such a conflict mean in connection with the 'nature, exercise, and implications' of authority (to take up the sub-title of the ARCIC Statement)?

Or a second case: the Marian dogmas proclaimed to be *de fide* by the Roman Catholic Church acting unilaterally. The Orthodox oppose the doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception. Most Protestants reject Marian tendencies altogether as an over-emphasis on the human role in redemption. Do Anglicans consider the Marian

dogmas to be further examples of the point made in Article XIX: 'The Church of Rome hath erred, not only in (its) living and manner of ceremonies, but also in matters of faith'? And how do the dogmas appear in the light of Article XX's declaration that the Church ought not besides Holy Writ to 'enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of salvation'? Here again is some kind of conflict of authority. Yet if it turned out that such doctrines were among the 'accepted beliefs' which may one day 'be shown to be inadequate, mistaken, or even inconsistent with the gospel' (paragraph 18), what would become of the Roman Catholic Church's claim that 'the pope's dogmatic definitions . . . are preserved from error' (paragraph 24c)? These are not mere ripples on an otherwise placid surface. One might have hoped for substantial account to have been taken of them in the basic reflection on authority, whereas in fact the Statement limits them to being particular problems which it is hoped may be tackled on the basis of a now achieved fundamental consensus. 'Anglicans find grave difficulty in the affirmation that the pope can be infallible in his teaching. . . . Special difficulties are created by the recent Marian dogmas, because Anglicans doubt the appropriateness, or even the possibility, of defining them as essential to the faith of believers': such grave difficulties are properly matter for *fundamental* reflection, not for a mention at the end of the Statement. The conditions, and even the possibility, of any infallible statement in matters of faith and morals (hardly anything is said about 'morals' in the Statement) need a thorough examination. In recent years a start has been made on a fresh investigation of the semantic status of Church definitions: the work must be pursued (cf. paragraph 15). The ARCIC Statement recognizes 'conflict and debate' in matters of saving truth (paragraph 18). It further recognizes that 'when conflict endangers unity or threatens to distort the gospel, the Church must have effective means for resolving it' (paragraph 18). But the Statement has no theological account to give of the fact of cases in which, as a matter of history, no resolution of the conflict has taken place. Is it not a 'docetic' ecclesiology which fails to take the Church-splitting *failures* of history adequately into account? Despite a slight hint in its last sentence, the last section of paragraph 18 seems limited to the failures of individuals while leaving 'the Church' intact. Similarly, paragraph 12 acknowledges that 'the conduct of the occupant of this (primatial) *sedē* (of Rome) has been unworthy of his office' — but the papal primacy remains intact as an institution. A Protestant would want a theological evaluation of the *discontinuities* of Church history in relation to the claimed continuance of Christ with his Church in the

Spirit (paragraph 3; end of paragraph 18). Does Christ not remain *judge* of his Church? x

Now a few comments on individual points, following the train of the Statement.

In paragraph 2 one might have expected more awareness of the diversity and even contradictoriness which some contemporary New Testament scholarship finds in the New Testament documents. The problem of the unity of the New Testament canon is a real one. Ernst Käsemann may not be right in asserting that the New Testament provides a basis for competitive denominationalism, but his case needs an answer.

The recognition in paragraph 4 of the 'authority of holiness' is welcome: 'By the inner quality of their life (some individuals) win a respect which allows them to speak in Christ's name with authority.' But informal, unofficial, personal authority may also from time to time take on a *prophetic* aspect. Such holy and prophetic individuals may clash with officially instituted authority. What is the theological significance of such a conflict, and what is the proper practical response in face of it? Methodists naturally think of John Wesley, whose obedience to the imperative of evangelism eventually led to the breach between the Methodist people and the Church of England.

The notion of 'responsibility' is introduced in paragraph 5, and the word often recurs in the Statement. It is entirely desirable that those who are instituted to official authority in the Church should see themselves as Ezekiel's watchmen, as those who must one day render account to God. Responsibility *to* the Lord *for* one's brothers should be the mark of Christian authority.

It is good also that paragraph 6 should recognize that 'the perception of God's will for his Church does not belong only to the ordained ministry but is shared by all its members'. 'The community, for its part, must respond to *and assess* the insights and teaching of the ordained ministers.' There is thus no simple division into *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*, as though they were two separate categories; and yet there is proper recognition that some are commissioned to articulate the faith in an official way. The 'interaction of bishop and people' (paragraph 18) is clearly meant to include *both* active *and* passive elements on *each* side. The 'reception' of conciliar decisions by the faithful is allowed to be a factor in the 'conciliar mode of authority' (paragraph 16). Conciliar 'decisions are authoritative when they express the common faith and mind of the Church' (paragraph 9). The same is said of papal definitions: 'For the Roman Catholic Church the pope's dogmatic definitions, which, fulfilling the criteria of infallibility, are preserved from error, do no

more but no less than express the mind of the Church on issues concerning the divine revelation' (paragraph 24c). Will Vatican I perhaps one day be 'received' by Orthodox, Protestants and even Roman Catholics in a sense somewhat different than that consciously intended by the assembled bishops? But what is the meaning and importance of 'intention': 'Although the categories of thought and the mode of expression may be superseded, restatement always builds upon, and does not contradict, the truth *intended* by the original definition' (paragraph 15)?

In paragraph 19 the 'central truths of salvation' are distinguished from lesser matters. This is entirely welcome. Methodists will recognize Wesley's distinction between 'essential doctrines' and the liberty of 'opinion' which is allowed on matters which 'do not strike at the root of Christianity'. Our various Churches need to work seriously on the distribution of items between the centre and the periphery of the Christian faith. Can we agree as to which items are central? And then can we agree on our holding of those items? If we can, then what is to stop the establishment of communion?

A Methodist welcomes the ARCIC Statement's stress at many points on collegial and conciliar forms of *episcopate*. British Methodism ought also to pay heed to the values which Roman Catholics and Anglicans find in the personal exercise of oversight by bishops. Nor need Methodists refuse the principle of primacy: we want a say in the ecumenical debate which is now opening on its understanding and exercise. An important lead has been taken by the United States Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue.

Finally let me record a strange omission. The ARCIC Statement nowhere uses the word 'conscience'. It declares that 'by reference to (the) common faith each person tests the truth of his own belief' (paragraph 2). But the question of an unresolved conflict is no more treated at the level of the individual's belief than it was faced at the level of more general theological debate. Theory and practice in this matter ought to have found a place in a Statement on 'Authority in the Church'.

If there is a touch of tartness in some of my remarks, the purpose is to sharpen the debate. If it is judged excessive, I apologise. My 'observations and criticisms' are made in the 'constructive and fraternal spirit' which the Commission rightly calls for.

*The Queen's College,  
Birmingham*

GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT

1. The issues to be faced are well presented from a Roman Catholic angle by Avery Dulles, S.J., 'The Church, the Churches, and the Catholic Church' in *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), pp. 199-234.