

4.9.77 : 2.45 p.m.

CRITICISMS OF VENICE

1. An objection has been made to our approach to the subjects of authority and unity on the precise ground that it is a theological approach. On the one hand it is said that these matters are ineffable and therefore not subject to intellectual treatment. From another point of view it is argued that the practical claims in the field of mission are too urgent for the response to them to be made dependent on protracted theological dialogue.

The Commission, for its part, agrees that the ultimate Object of religion is a mystery transcending human comprehension. But Christianity teaches that the Word of God became flesh, and that thus the mystery has embodied itself in a message which human minds can receive. The further communication of this message involves language and therefore discourse, and theology subserves the task of communication. The Commission fully accepts, however, that theology does not, and cannot, exhaust and articulate the full truth of the message.

Secondly, it is our conviction that those who by-pass or postpone the question of truth, which in the Christian religion becomes a question of theology, will live to regret it. We believe that we have been proceeding towards doctrinal agreement in three immediate areas and it may be, as suggested in the conclusion of the Venice Statement, that the progress already made by us may both justify and call for action to bring about closer relations between our two Communions in life, worship and mission.

2. It is further argued that our theological approach, though useful, will not take our Communion all the way to organic unity, because in the end the Catholic affirmation of papal primacy rests on an intimate conviction of faith and is not merely the conclusion of a particular theology.

The Commission would prefer to say that the Catholic affirmation about papal primacy (Vatican I, 1870) is rooted in, but is not identical with, a specific conviction about the Church and her teaching mission. For an individual, recognition of this dependence may come like a flash of insight, and may even appear to have the character of a revelation. But our Commission was set up to facilitate reconciliation between two Christian Communion, each with its own traditions and official formularies. It seems to us that the desired reconciliation must be prepared by communication, discourse and dialogue. It is doubtless impossible at present to foresee the final step, but we are confident that our work can help our two Communion forward towards the final step. Cf. Para. 26 of the Venice Statement.

3. Regret has been expressed that the experience and witness of Eastern Christianity have been overlooked by the authors of the Venice Statement. We wish to assure our critics that the reverse is the case. The witness of the East was of enormous assistance to us in organising our approach to the question of primacy. When in the Venice Statement we speak of "principal" or "prominent" sees and the primacy of their bishops, we are, in fact, referring to the patriarchates of the Eastern Churches as well as to metropolitanical and primatial sees in our own two Communion. There are other

forms of episcopal presidency which have developed more recently, e.g. ~~the~~ presiding bishops and presidents of national conferences of bishops.

4. It has been suggested that in paragraphs 3, 4 and 5 the word "authority" is used equivocally. On this we observe that there is a genuine distinction between intrinsic authority, e.g. of holiness, and extrinsic or official authority, as of the ordained ministry. But we see each of these as a form in which the authority of God's love in Christ is mediated. It remains true that those whose authority is ^{extrinsic} ~~official~~ have a power of ^{official} discipline for the good of the community and the promotion of its mission, which does not belong to ^{intrinsic} ~~those whose~~ authority is ~~intrinsic~~.

5. Regret has been expressed that the Venice Statement did not begin by justifying ~~the~~ Christian belief in ^{the} revelation of God in Christ mediated through the Spirit in the Church, a revelation protected by creeds and definitions such as those of 325 and 451. We should point out that such belief is not an area of disagreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, as those two bodies have officially expressed themselves in their formularies. We were not asked to elaborate a general apologia for the Christian religion.

6. It has been suggested that there is a difference in kind between subordinate realisations of the primacy principle in the Church, and its realisation at the level of the papacy. Our reply would be that despite necessary and important distinctions between local (or regional) primacies and universal primacy, the basic principle itself is homogeneous in all its

actualisations. It may be pointed out that in Roman Catholic doctrine the primacy of the Pope is itself episcopal in character. We should add that, while the Venice Statement has a lot to say about primacy, it nevertheless, in paragraph 22, affirms that primacy and conciliarity are complementary at every level in the Church, and it implies that to emphasise either of them at the expense of the other is to risk a serious imbalance. We venture to think that such warnings deserve the attention of both our Communions.

7. A fear has been expressed that para. 19 of the Venice Statement implies or may imply infallibility in the sense that at any moment the Church, through council or pope, may produce some new and strange dogmas, or that no official pronouncement by the Church can ever be mistaken or inadequate. As the footnote to para. 24 makes clear, we regard para. 15 as sketching succinctly the reality of faith that is called by the problematic and sometimes misleading term 'infallibility'. In para. 19 we apply this reality to conciliar action. In paragraph 15 of the Statement we ~~would particularly~~ emphasise the distinction between forms of words, ^{which are} ~~always~~ liable to ~~become misleading, and the judgment of truth, to embody~~ ^{those formulations were constructed} ~~those~~ formulations were constructed. ^{to embody}

8. The Commission remains acutely aware of the unsettled business detailed in paragraph 24 of the Statement. Our immediate purpose has been to deal with certain criticisms of the remainder of the Statement, but we hope to take the difficulties mentioned in paragraph 24 as main items for future study. In the meantime it may be helpful to observe, briefly, with reference to the first of these difficulties:

On the position of Peter, ^{to} we quote the statement of Father Yarnold and Dr. Chadwick :

"(a) First, to provide sufficient ground for affirming a Petrine or universal primacy exercised by the bishops of Rome, it is not necessary to interpret the Petrine texts of the New Testament in the particular manner characteristic of past apologetic. Naturally the Venice Statement does not deny that the New Testament attributes to St. Peter the leading role among the apostles;⁶ nor does the Commission's agreed view mean that St. Peter's position is irrelevant to the papal position today, or that the continuous line of tradition associated with Roman authority is to be apologized for. Acceptance of the Roman primacy does not depend upon applying to the pope everything which the NT says of St Peter."

⁶ See Peter in the New Testament: a collaborative assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars, ed. R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, and John Reumann (1973).