

A BRIEF APOLOGY FOR 'AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH' (VENICE 1976)*

by

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The Venice statement on Authority in the Church, agreed in 1976 by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission and published with the consent not only of Lambeth but also of the Vatican (which at Rome normally implies at least absence of disapproval), could be paid no greater compliment than to be taken seriously by both Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians. For the latter Father C.J. Dumont OP has already published a remarkably sympathetic analysis in the Information Service (no.32 1976/III) of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity. With minor queries on detail his welcome is warm, but tempered by surprise at the document's predominantly inductive method of argument. He notes that this may astonish Roman Catholic bishops and theologians accustomed to defending papal primacy from deductive considerations, who may wonder how the Commission can have reached its conclusions by such paradoxical routes. More seriously, Fr. Dumont observes that the document's method does not really leave room to make it clear that Roman Catholic belief in the Pope's Petrine office rests on 'intimate conviction', on something quite incommunicable by any inductive reasoning from holy scripture or the facts of church history, but known only 'by an intimate and immediate conviction of faith.' Prima facie, this criticism appears to be saying that Roman Catholics are Roman Catholics are Roman Catholics; i.e. that there is a mysterious circle of faith within which the truth of papal primacy is simply received together with the wonderful and sacred mystery of the Church itself; that if one happens to be outside that circle, the arguments of inductive reasoning may be useful to bring one within range of the ultimate leap of supernatural faith, but 'the final adherence to the teaching of the Catholic Church on this point will always have to be an adherence of faith with the irreducible mystery that this carries with it.' I deeply respect this statement, but submit that it looks like a conversation-stopper.

On the Anglican side, 'rigorous theological criticism' is offered to readers of the May number of Theology by Hugh Montefiore, Bishop suffragan of Kingston. His critique is direct and frank, his disapproval without touch of sarcasm or scorn, his central difficulties set out with clarity. That in the excitement of rapidly composed polemic he makes errors in historical fact and attention to texts can be largely set on one side. This debate is too serious to be settled by easy point-scoring on minor details. Even if in material points the Commission may justly complain of having been examined with less than the fullest care and benevolence, it will surely have cause to thank him for stating his dissent on matters close to the nub of the problem with candour and forthrightness. The rest of this brief apology replies to his principal criticisms.

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Bishop Montefiore has not hinted that this is what he thinks. I observe only that it may be the suspected presence of this latent unformulated assumption in some past proposals for intercommunion that has made it, at least in ecumenical experience hitherto, a singularly ineffective road to the establishment of one communion and fellowship. It is one thing to say that a greater degree of theological pluralism than is officially acknowledged by Roman Catholic authorities is fully compatible with the maintenance of unity and communion. On this I am not in disagreement with Bishop Montefiore. It is quite another thing if we are asking, or are somehow heard as if we were asking, Roman Catholic theologians to adopt a relativistic or sceptical doctrine of a multitude of ecclesial groups, all equally right or equally wrong, none of which mirrors or approximates to the true form of Christ's holy catholic Church, if only because it is in effect asking them to shed their most distinctive contribution to ecumenical advance: unity is of the esse of the Church, and the catholic form is the providential instrument to this end.

The Anglican/Roman Catholic Commission has not gone about its task as if the limited goal were a charitable get-together through the hospitality of intercommunion between bodies agreeing to differ benevolently about matters of weight, some of which appear of the very substance of the faith. Like a platoon of sappers told to clear the rusty barbed wire and landmines from an old and utterly depressing battlefield, ARCIC has sought rather to examine, and where possible to remove, obstacles to communion. No more no less. Of these obstacles three have been preeminent: polemics about eucharistic presence and sacrifice; the consequent debate whether or not an Anglican celebrant at the eucharist does something essentially different from what is done by a Roman Catholic celebrant and stands in a quite different relationship to the catholic tradition; and the recognition (or otherwise) of a universal primate for the universal Church and the definition of the nature of his responsibility and authority in teaching and in discipline in relation to the various sources and norms of Christian authority.

There will always be differences among theologians and theological schools, whether Roman or Anglican or Orthodox or whatever, and likewise debates about the limits of pluralism. Roman Catholics are just as aware as Anglicans that unity is not in the least identical with uniformity. One has only to remember the stress on 'legitimate diversity' in Vatican II's acknowledgement that between East and West theological differences are 'complementary, not contradictory' (Unitatis Redintegratio 17). In an age when (as the sensitive and sometimes maligned report Christian Believing plentifully illustrates) it is easier to clarify the subjective act of faith than the objective content of what is believed, pluralism flourishes in both communions in equal measure. Nevertheless, if one is setting out to reformulate an objective theological basis for unity, the requirement of 'unity of faith' is not a sign of obtuseness. A request for 'immediate intercommunion' needs to be safeguarded and qualified by reasoned mutual confidence that Anglicans and Roman Catholics, though their theological school-traditions may have travelled different paths, can agree at the level of faith about the reality of the eucharist, the

function of the ministry, and the form of the Church. The request is in fact for communion, without the ambiguous and often loaded 'inter', because there is one Lord, one faith, one Church.

To use such naive language will seem to invite the full terrors of Bishop Montefiore's charge that the Venice statement on authority sets out an ideal, not an empirical actuality or possibility, to say nothing of probability. The Commission, he complains, confuses what ought to be the case with what is the case. Is this complaint really as damaging as it may seem to those who have never tried to construct a doctrine of the Church in coherent terms? A satisfactory exposition of the essential being of the Church can hardly be attempted at all if the data available exclude any element of the ideal and heavenly and are strictly confined to the not too militant community of frail believers whose treasure is in very earthen vessels.

It is self-evident that the Venice statement sets forth what the Church in general, and within the Church primacy, ought to be. The point is underlined expressly in the Co-Chairmen's preface: '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.' And the antithesis between what ought to be and what is emerges several times in the course of the document itself. But at the back of the not very pertinent complaint about ought and is there lies perhaps a deeper difference. The greatest of all differences between Bishop Montefiore and ARCIC seems to lie in the dimension of the Holy Spirit's living presence and continued activity within the community of God's people in time and space. The virtual absence of this dimension from his discussion of these thorny problems, other than as a sanctification of tolerance amid dissension, gives a static look to his view of the ecumenical task, so as to make it almost an apotheosis of a dialogue of the deaf conducted by people occupying such different premisses that real conversation is not to be expected, still less any movement of rational minds. The texts of the three agreed statements, especially that on Authority, are not, I think, reconcilable with the view mistakenly and unreasonably attributed to the Commission, as if it were trying to enforce either rigidly inflexible and ancient formulations of past orthodoxy or concepts of divine revelation oblivious to the labours of biblical scholars. On the other hand, the three statements certainly presuppose that in the gospel entrusted to the Church there is a given communication from God, a revelation in and through Jesus Christ received through the Spirit in the Church. It is not surprising that harsher criticisms than those offered by Bishop Montefiore have been coming from those who wish to reinterpret the idea of revelation to bring it wholly within the criteria of the natural reason for which nothing very unexpected occurs.

Bishop Montefiore's criticism here may spring in part from a confusion over the awkward word 'indefectible', which para. 18 of the Venice document allows in passing as a legitimate epithet of the Church if intended to express faith that God in his faithfulness will not desert the Church. The criticism seems to assume that as an epithet of the Church 'indefectible' means 'not liable to defect'. Deficio primarily means to fail, succumb to exhaustion, die out, suffer eclipse. Perhaps it was a little imprudent of the Commission even to mention a rare Latin technical term, imprecise and open to

misconstruction. The notion of indefectibility in the Church has never said anything about the absence of spots and blemishes in the empirical Church, but is a shorthand term for affirming that the Christian gospel is always a true word to man and that in God's mercy the true Church of Christ will not cease to be, even if its empirical manifestations may become as corrupt as those portrayed in Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory, a novel which is perhaps a classic statement of indefectibility.

Such affirmations of confidence in the Church as bearer of divine truth are sure to be unacceptable to those who have come to regard the historical Christian tradition as a more or less helpful illusion which has had some beneficial effects on mankind's welfare but must now be replaced by something quite different. Para. 15 of the Venice document asserts the perennial need for restatement, and reflects a strong awareness of the problems of 'cultural' relativism (even if Treeltsch is not referred to). At the same time, one restates because one believes what one is restating to be of universal significance with a future before it, not because one concedes that for a time something resembling traditional Christian faith is still psychologically necessary for that diminishing minority in the present century which has had a Christian upbringing and education and therefore finds mental pain in abandoning it altogether. This is the real point at issue in the language of paras. 18 and 19. It is an instructive sign of the times that this part of the Venice document has received so rough a ride.

The classical orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and of the Person of Christ are discussed by Hooker (EP 5, 54, 10) with reference to the 'four most famous general councils'. Elsewhere (8, 2, 17) he refers to the 1559 Act of Parliament forbidding judges ecclesiastical to adjudge for heresy any doctrine not already so condemned by scripture 'or by the first four general councils or by some other general council wherein the same hath been declared heresy by the express words' of scripture. Hooker also speaks of general councils as God's gift to the Church, highly esteemed in the ancient Church until pride, ambition, and tyranny made them scenes of faction; even so abuse does not do away with the use, and a true council, with faction set aside, would be Hooker's ideal way of resolving the sixteenth century disputes (1, 10, 14). Lancelot Andrewes takes it for granted that the first seven ecumenical councils receive universal recognition in both East and West, all general synods after the seventh being patriarchal councils of the western Church (Tortura Torti, ed. LACT pp. 423-5, and Sermons V p.157). These texts do not support Bishop Montefiore's contention that Hooker and Andrewes set aside the authority of ecumenical councils other than the first four. That the first four enjoy primacy because of their subject-matter is non-controversial.

To acknowledge the authority of ecumenical councils such as Nicaea and Chalcedon is to grant that a Christian theologian setting out to restate the doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation does not begin from the beginning as if he were at total liberty to reject the faith which underlies their definitions. cf. J.R.Lucas in Christian Believing, p.71. The wise caution of Article 21 observes indeed that 'general councils...may err and sometimes have

erred, even in things pertaining to God.' It is a mistake to quote this famous sentence as if it were one that no Roman Catholic or Orthodox theologian could conceivably agree to. To Cardinal Bellarmine it would have seemed a self-evident proposition. Ancient church history offers classical instances: Ariminum (359), Ephesus (449), the iconoclast council of 754, possessed the juridical apparatus and public title of ecumenicity. But their claims were not received by the Church. Bellarmine could conveniently say that an ecumenical council is to be accepted as secure when and in so far as it has received papal ratification. In the measure to which Roman confirmation is a vital part of the process of reception by the faithful, through which the decisions of a council gain recognition in the universal Church, this is not a proposition inherently offensive to an Anglican.

The impression conveyed by Bishop Montefiore's article is that a too popular and blurred picture is being presented both of the Anglican assessment of ecumenical councils and of the doctrine of papal authority defined at Vatican I in 1870. The 1870 statement that papal definitions, when made under the stringent conditions written into the constitution, are 'irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church', is not understood by Roman Catholic theologians as encouraging the Pope to say anything he may feel inspired to utter without consultation and due inquiry into the mind of the Church, nor to mean that ex cathedra pronouncements are incapable of later restatement. The anti-Gallican proposition is generally interpreted to say that when, in his office as universal pastor to all Christians and speaking with full responsibility on faith or morals, the Pope has given a definition (in which he is negatively assisted from leading the Church into error, then he does not need to ask a subsequent general council to convene to confer on his judgement full juridical ratification. (The remarks Fr. Yarnold and I made in the pamphlet Truth and Authority, SPCK/CTS 1977, p.29, summarise the position on this point.) But the faith he is expressing must be that of the universal Church, and the authority he possesses in this act of definition is not apart from the Church; for the 1870 decree declares that when speaking on such rare occasions his authority is precisely that of the Church and none other. Accordingly the Venice statement's denial that he can speak 'independently of his fellow bishops and the Church' (para. 24 c) is not a rash imprudence, or a clause that the Anglican members of ARCIC had to squeeze out of their Catholic colleagues. Nor was this true of the crucial footnote to para. 24c, interpreting the problematic term 'infallibility' to have no other sense when applied to the pope as teacher of all Christian people than when used of the teaching of the Church as safeguarded through the definitions of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and therefore implying that papal definitions are just as subject as those of ecumenical councils to historical relativism and the need for restatement described in para. 15.

The temptation must be resisted to discuss here all the points where Bishop Montefiore may appear to be almost picking a quarrel with the Venice statement, but where exact scrutiny would suggest that ARCIC has been more careful than is represented. For example, much is made of the criticism that ARCIC does not say much about the active role of laymen in the clarification of the truth, whereas

Venice para. 6 starts from the proposition 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 tenor of the document as a whole might be summarised by saying that in the Church authority largely grows from the bottom upwards, a feature which faintly puzzles Fr, Dumont. However, this brief apology can conclude positively. A note struck by Bishop Montefiore's conclusion carries the welcome implication that the concept of a national Church is fully compatible with that of the universal Church (a thesis that would have delighted the late Father Dvornik). In so far as Anglicanism may still be felt by some within the provinces of Canterbury and York to be characteristically English and even to retain vestigial links with the Crown e.g. through the Archbishop of Canterbury's part in coronations, this point may bear on the local UK discussion of ARCIC's questions. And to speak as Bishop Montefiore does of Roman Catholic and Anglican being able to recognise each other while preserving their individuality and independent character is not light-years distant from the notable words of Pope Paul VI's reference to the Anglican Communion in his homily at the canonization of the English and Welsh Martyrs on 25 October 1970: 'There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and the worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church ... is able to embrace her ever beloved Sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ.'