

The Venice Statement and the General Synod of the Church of England (February 1977)

The English reception of the Venice Statement during the month before its debate in the General Synod was generally one of surprise but satisfaction. Good coverage was given to the Statement in the "Times" (including the first leader, as well as the text itself), the "Telegraph" and the "Guardian" (including an article by Bishop Butler). A lengthy correspondence began in the "Times" with contributions from the Bishops of Manchester, Truro and Norwich. The latter preferred a Canterbury primacy to a Roman and perpetuated a popular misunderstanding of the document as speaking of the present form of Roman primacy. In the ecclesiastical press response was warm, but more cautious. Note was made of areas of disagreement, and Professor Lampe was already firing warning shots across the bows in the "Church of England Newspaper". The correspondence column of the "Tablet" saw the beginning of a very long airing of the subject which eventually turned to the question of intercommunion (with contributions from Bishop Moorman).

The reaction of the General Synod of the Church of England to the Venice Statement, though not decisive for the Anglican Communion will be important. The debate was memorable and in replying to it the Bishop of Chelmsford commented: "I think that this has been one of the best theological debates I have ever heard in the Synod". This may reflect his very able introduction on moving the original motion welcoming and commending the Statement to the dioceses, as Chairman of the Committee for Roman Catholic Relations.¹

In the Bishop of Chelmsford's summary of the Statement admission was made that the inerrancy of ecumenical councils had at first sight appeared to him to be at variance with Article XXI. He found the Henry Chadwick/Edward Yarnold commentary a help here. The Bishop was anxious to stress that no-one part of the document should be taken out of the context of the whole. He also insisted that the three Agreed Statements must be seen together, and in the overall perspective of the Malta Report and its suggestion of 'unity by stages'.

Professor D.R. Jones was the first to speak from the floor and asked that the Synod should "not be grudging or timid in its response". He saw the influence of Newman (a very Oxford and Anglican spirit) in the document. He nevertheless entered a strong caveat on the question of the inerrancy of ecumenical councils. He wished to receive and welcome the three Agreed Statements, but at the same time reaffirm the substance of Article XXI.

Professor G.W. Lampe followed with a major speech of criticism (the full text of which has already been circulated as ARCIC 159/A). He viewed the document as a failure because it was not about authority in the Church, but about those who exercise authority, and because it left too many vital questions unanswered. Nevertheless he found the first 18 paragraphs wonderfully encouraging, only criticising the use of koinonia as community rather than participation, and for an apparent neglect of other ancient apostolic sees than Rome. He then made the following interesting statement: "as far as the Roman primacy

¹ Only members of the Synod may normally speak. Bishop Knapp-Fisher was present with the Anglican Co-Secretary.

itself goes, the form in which it is set out in the early paragraphs makes it acceptable to all of us, there is no question about that". He objected to describing the Church as indefec ble though agreeing with the meaning of paragraph 18. In 19 he objected to a distinction he saw drawn between defined dogma and other formulations, and felt the Anglican representatives had neglected Article XXI. In 20 he detected that the Pope could define dogma as well as councils and saw 24(c) as conforming this view. He felt that the unfinished business of paragraph 24 put a question mark against the earlier encouraging paragraphs. He ended with a positive plea for intercommunion.

After a Lt.-Colonel had misunderstood both Professor Lampe and the Agreed Statement, Mr. Maurice Chandler noted that paragraphs 10 and 11 did treat of other Apostolic Sees than Rome. He too spoke favourably of intercommunion.

The Bishop of Kingston then spoke against the motion. (The speech was substantially the same as his longer article in the May edition of "Theology" circulated as ARCIC 159/C and to which Henry Chadwick has replied in "A Brief Apology" circulated as ARCIC 161.) Chiefly the Bishop failed to recognise the Anglican concept of authority in the document. He saw the Statement depicting the Church as a perfect body. He found no definition of ecumenical councils, and undue prominence given to credal formulations. Furthermore there was no proper doctrine of the laity, nor could an Anglican bishop (apparently) require compliance.

Canon Boulton spoke to an amendment which had the effect of endorsing the conclusion of the Agreed Statement that the three documents justified and required a closer sharing "in life, worship and mission". He was anxious that the three Statements should eventually be underwritten by the two churches. He agreed with Archbishop McAdoo that 'the initiative is now passing from the theologians to the office-holders'. His amendment was ultimately accepted.

The Bishop of St. Albans spoke from an Anglican/Orthodox viewpoint and made three points (contributed by Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, though without specific acknowledgement. The original is circulated as ARCIC 159/B.) There was no real treatment of intermediate primacies, the Patriarchates, and Autocephalous Churches. Little was said of Apostolic Succession and the continuity of the Church. There was no reference to the Eucharist and ecclesiology.

Mr. T. Dye criticised the Commission for its use of episcopate as a gift of the Spirit. He also felt that no account had been taken of presbyters and laity in the councils of the Church.

Professor J. Atkinson felt that the document was church centred rather than God centred. He wanted the Church to be judged by Scripture and recalled the debate between Erasmus and Luther. God might even reject the Church as he did Israel.

The Revd. C. Manchester especially welcomed the stress on the Lordship of Christ and proposed an amendment to this effect. This was ultimately carried.

After a request for shared communion in retreats by a lay member, Professor J.R. Porter spoke at length in defence of the Statement. He disassociated himself from the view of authority expressed by Professor Lampe and the Bishop of Kingston, and wondered whether all had been reading the same document. He

pointed to the distinction between the ideal and actual drawn by the Co-Chairmen. He rebutted the accusation of an absence of reference to the role of the laity by drawing attention to paragraph 6. He was not clear whether Professor Atkinson had actually been criticising the document, but drew attention to paragraph 2 to allay his fears. Professor Porter then turned to the point widely raised about the nature of conciliar decrees. He endorsed paragraph 16 and rejected the view that everything was open-ended and that the Church never knew where it stood. There could be occasions when the Church in its councils, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, spoke authoritatively and defined doctrine. He then noted the qualification of paragraph 19. Professor Porter strongly commended paragraph 15 and insisted that the treatment of conciliar definitions did not contradict Article XXI. Finally he affirmed the indefectibility of the church against Professor Atkinson.

The Bishop of Guildford linked the discussion with the Ten Propositions of the Churches' Unity Commission (debated the previous day). He stressed the importance of mission found at the end of the Agreed Statement and taken up in the amended commendation before the Synod. He linked it with the Partners in Mission Consultation within the Anglican Communion. The Bishop then stressed that by the year 2000 70% of the membership of the Roman Catholic Church would be from Africa, Asia and South America. He noted that the composition of ARCIC was "western" and felt that some of its inadequacies might be for that reason.

The Dean of Ripon hoped that the Synod would not damn the Statment with faint praise. He spoke of the great changes in both churches in recent years. He asked for thought, prayer, and discussion on the indefectibility of the Church and the special place of the see of Peter.

Miss R.C. Howard was grateful for the criticisms of Professor Jones, Professor Lampe and the Bishop of Kingston. She also felt the document was not about authority but about authority as it lead to the question of papacy. She recognised that three important areas had been selected for discussion, but thought that there were others of greater importance which Anglicans and Roman Catholicshad in common. She noted also that the Roman Catholic Church was deeply involved in discussion with Methodists, Lutherans and others. On the Statement itself she considered that paragraph 16 might contradict paragraphs 9 and 19 and wondered whether there was double-think within the document.

The Archdeacon of Macclesfield drew attention to the modest claim of the Commission to have put problems in a proper perspective. He warned against residual English anti-Popery. He urged the maximum joint discussion of the Statement and noted the seriousness with which Roman Catholics were taking the agreement.

Mr. G. Duffield moved an amendment to the effect that discussion in small groups should be encouraged and Prebendary P.H. Husbands supported this.

The Revd. R.F. Smith hoped that the Statement would not be 'left on the table'. He also hoped that it would be discussed by Anglicans and Roman Catholics together.

Canon Stevens thought that Article XXI need not be the last word: "General Councils may not be gathered together without the commendment and will of Princes". He was not in favour of instant 'intercommunion'.

In reply to the debate the Bishop of Chelmsford expressed his gratitude to Professor Porter's drawing attention to the distinction between the ideal and actual made by the Co-Chairman. He insisted that all assertions in the document were carefully qualified. The Bishop was also grateful to the Bishop of St. Albans for raising an Orthodox question mark. But he reminded the Synod that there had been a previous document on the Eucharist. He also drew attention to paragraph 15 in which there was a stress on the Eucharist and to the Canterbury Statement for reference to the Apostolic Succession. Mention was also made of the changing balance of population in both churches referred to by the Bishop of Guildford. The amended motion was put and carried with all but unanimity in all three houses of bishops, clergy, and laity as follows:

"That this Synod, noting the willingness of both Churches to develop their understanding of ways in which the authority of Christ as Lord is transmitted in his Church,

- (i) welcomes the recent publication by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission of the agreed statement on Authority;
- (ii) commends it for study and discussion in the dioceses especially in smallish groups where unhurried discussions can take place; and
- (iii) endorsing the view that this statement (together with those on the Eucharist and Ministry) 'not only justifies but requires action to bring about a closer sharing between our two communions in life, worship and mission' respectfully requests their Graces to seek ways and means to implement such action."

Some of the Dramatis Personae

The Bishop of Chelmsford, the Rt.Revd. John Trillo, is Chairman of the General Synod Committee for Roman Catholic Relations and Co-Chairman of English ARC.

The Revd.Canon D.R. Jones is Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham.

The Revd.Canon Geoffrey Lampe is Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge.

The Suffragan Bishop of Kingston-upon-Thames, the Rt.Revd.Hugh Montefiore, is an elected member of the House of Bishops (from amongst the bishops suffragan) and was a member of the Archbishops' Doctrine Commission (presently in abeyance).

The Revd.Canon Peter Boulton was formerly a member of the Standing Committee of the General Synod and is a Church of England member of the Anglican Consultative Council.

The Bishop of St.Albans, the Rt.Revd. Robert Runcie, is Co-Chairman of the Anglican/Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions.

The Revd.Canon James Atkinson is a member of the Committee for Roman Catholic Relations and is Professor of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield.

The Revd.Canon J.R.Porter is Professor of Theology at Exeter University.

The Bishop of Guildford, the Rt.Revd. David Brown (formerly Canon Missioner of Khartoum Cathedral) is Chairman of the Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod.

Miss Christian Howard was until recently a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC.

The Archdeacon of Macclesfield, the Ven. Francis House, is a member of the Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod.

CHRISTOPHER HILL