

Venice and the freedom of theology

1. The Venice Statement on Authority has been criticised [by Professor Geoffrey Lampe in his speech at the English Synod, now printed in Theology, September 1977, pp. 362-365] for its failure to begin by justifying in some detail belief in a revelation of God in Christ mediated through the Spirit in the Church; a gospel to which the scriptures bear a unique and unchanging witness; a saving word of God which the Church, especially but not only in the first centuries of its history, found it necessary to protect by creeds and definitions such as those of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451). By its terms of reference ARCIC is commissioned to examine those doctrines which in the past have been understood to be differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion of such dogmatic weight as to be barriers to one communion and fellowship. The belief that in Christ, through his Church, men may hear the word of God has not hitherto been generally reckoned to be among these divisive obstacles, which most students of historical theology would locate in the nature of the Church and the sacrament of the Eucharist. ARCIC has taken it for granted that between our two churches there is an enormous area of shared belief and practice, and that its duty is to examine the points of tension. The Venice Statement seeks a fresh (and cool) route to one of the most contentious issues, namely the claims of the see of Rome to a primacy possessing both a teaching office and a universal jurisdiction, but proposes to approach this primacy without first having to vindicate belief in the possibility of revelation in Christ the Word of God mediated

through the Church in dependence on the scriptures. Perhaps the criticism of ARCIC on this point reflects fear that such language attributes so transcendent and divine a quality to the Bible and to the definitions of Church Councils that their truth is put beyond all human inquiry.

2. The Venice Statement does not treat everything in the dogmatic tradition as relatively useful for its time but irrelevant lumber now. This tradition belongs to the historical experience of the Christian community, and to be cut away from this past would deeply affect the Church's self-consciousness and identity. The method of the Venice statement is in large part historical. In para. 15 it approaches the thorny problem of doctrinal development in a way that reflects awareness of 'cultural relativism', under which concepts that appear self evidently valid at one period of human history come to suffer a loss of currency-value at another, so that (for example) formulations of belief cast in the terminology of Neoplatonic philosophy, used in the Chalcedonian definition of the Person of Christ, need to be restated when that particular philosophical terminology has ceased to be part of the intellectual lingua franca. This, however, does not entail the simple conclusion that the Chalcedonian definition was erroneous: its exclusion of Eutyches' version of monophysitism is a decision endorsed by the consent of Christendom (Eutyches being rejected also by the so-called monophysite or pre-Chalcedonian churches of the East). No doubt it would be academically stimulating to read a modern statement of the case for thinking the doctrines of Arius or Eutyches to present a truer view than the Nicene and Chalcedonian

positions, either on the basis of the presuppositions of their time or on those of contemporary thought. But to be a member of the Church is to be associated with a community whose shape and historical trajectory have been formed by the rejection of these doctrines. There is no threat to the intellectual freedom of the theologian or the historian if the Church continues ~~quickly~~ to affirm that, in saying No to these deviations, the Councils(were)'exclud^{ing}(ing) what is erroneous' (Venice statement, para. 19).

3. To say so much is neither to deny the (non-controversial) proposition that 'General Councils may err', nor to affirm that they are necessarily inerrant whenever they can underpin their dogmatic decisions with selected biblical texts. Professor Lampe is right in regarding the latter conception as unhistorical and pre-critical. His criticism on this point is directed not at ARCIC but at the Anglican Article XXI. But it does not follow that the Article should be amended to say that General Councils must be mistaken, and ought to take account of the inherent impossibility in reaching any conclusion at all on matters beyond the grasp of finite human reason even when assisted by the Holy Spirit. It is possible for the Church to continue to regard the decisions of Nicaea and Chalcedon as having protected the Church from error without disputing that all human formulae are liable to error and to misinterpretation; that at their best they remain limited and conditioned by their historical setting; that the acceptance of the 'finality' of a certain range of definitions in matters standing high in the hierarchy of truths does not mean that they do not need careful scrutiny (indeed if they are not

carefully and critically studied, the faith underlying them cannot be effectively restated). Nor is it disputed that in the community of the Church faith may take many forms of expression.

4. The Venice statement's discussion of primacy seeks to elicit from the scriptures and from the historical experience of the Christian community the pastoral ideal of a primate as giving constructive leadership: in his province if he is metropolitan, in his patriarchate if he occupies a patriarchal see, in still wider responsibilities if he is called to primacy in the universal church. It is cardinal to the structure of ARCIC's argument that this last step is not a jump to an entirely different category of primate. It is therefore missing the point of the document to speak as if in this progress up from the local church to the province, to the patriarchate, and finally to the universal leadership of the See of Peter and Paul, the move to the last stage is an illegitimate conjuring trick. The question at issue is whether or not, by so approaching papal primacy 'from the bottom upwards', (that is from concepts of primacy that are in the main 'conciliarist') a basis can be seen for affirming not only that the universal church needs a primate to express its universality or catholicity, but also that this primate has a special responsibility in constructive leadership to all the Church as president of the college of bishops, whose universal primacy is part of God's providential purpose for the whole company of all faithful people.