

The Response of the Free Church Observer

Elizabeth Templeton, a theologian and teacher in the Church of Scotland

'Let there be a tree', said God, once upon a time, 'which grows from the birds down'.

And the Church came into being. And its branches spread and its trunk grew downwards, till it rooted itself in the dusty ground. And theologians and clergy of many nations nested among its roots.

After a time, a dispute arose among them. 'This tree does not flourish as it should', they said to one another. 'We should pull up our roots, and move to richer soil, for one can see the quality of the earth here is abysmally poor. Other trees are improved by such transplanting. Let us have courage, and follow their example'. (For they saw from other trees that it was so.)

'No! No!' said others. 'We have seen trees wither and die when you tamper with their roots. There are bad years and good ones, and we must take the rough with the smooth. It would be colossal folly to pull up our roots, which give us all our sustenance. Let us wait, and things will improve'. (For they saw from other trees that it was so.)

Meanwhile, the noise of the debate reached some of the birds in the topmost branches, and they were puzzled. 'Do they not know', said one small sparrow, 'that we give this tree its life? Shall we not fly down, and stop them grubbing around in their roots?' 'No', replied a wise old pigeon. 'We can only sing when we are touched by the sunlight. But we must sing louder, so that they remember the possibilities of birdsong'. And he began to coo with all his might.

It is a great honour to be here, but I do not quite know who I speak for as to 'the unity we seek'. For I am, I suppose, in the context of this conference, a kind of cut-price bargain specimen of those who are mostly not here – female, lay, Presbyterian and (by the skin of my mother's teeth) post-war.

So I will try to respond to the Archbishop's searching paper by speaking for the 'we' who relate to you as 'outsiders'.

There are, of course, many even more outside, not only unable to find themselves in any Church, but actively sceptical about this alleged God of love we claim to represent. I speak for them 'by analogy'. Then there are those outsiders, whom many of you rub episcopal shoulders with at home, who, like me, begin their search for unity from a denominational base which is resolutely without bishops.

From such outside positions, any comment at all on the Archbishop's exploration of inter-Anglican unity may be incompetent and presumptuous, but I will, in the end, take the liberty of saying how, from my perspective, what happens to you 'on the inside' has a bearing on us 'on the outside'. So I risk speaking on the nature of the unity 'we' seek in all the Archbishop's three senses, though in the specific Anglican case I use 'we' in that honorary sense which my husband recognises when I say, 'Dear, we must put out the rubbish!'

Of course, in a sense, my first conviction is that there are *no* outsiders, or that all 'outsiderness' is to be regarded as provisional, since God's lively and inviting love is without bound. The Church exists to represent, cradle and anticipate the future of *all* our humanness, which is hidden, with the healing of creation, in the love and freedom of God.

Any unity we seek must be to enact and articulate that. It cannot then be the unity of a strong and exclusive club, which makes the outsider more outside, more alien, more at bay. Rather, it must be the kind of unity which allows those outside to recognise their own humanness, to glimpse their own future with delight and hope, to get a whiff of their own transformation, their own wholeness. To put it a little provocatively, the Church is the-world-ahead-of-itself. It is not a separate enclave, not separable. As Hooker so gently puts it in his 'Sermon on Pride': 'God hath created nothing simply for itself: but each thing in all things, and of everything each part in other have such interest, that in the whole world nothing is found whereunto any thing created can say, "I need thee not".'

This lovely and haunting understanding of the Church, making real and concrete the relatedness of all things in love and freedom is wonderfully deep in Anglican tradition, and will, I trust, be what sets the agenda for our attempts at inter-Church relations, as well as for our 'mission', our 'ethics' and our 'spirituality'.

That alone will stop us making of the Church yet another apartheid in creation. That alone will give us the courage to keep hearing all the outsiders. For we too rarely acknowledge, we who love this unity of the Church, that it exists in terrible combat with the *actual* Churches so many people encounter, stale, nervous, nostalgic, authoritarian, self-preoccupied in word and deed. Non-Christian credulity (and even Christian credulity) are strained sometimes past breaking point by the pretensions of such Churches to express the courtesy and refreshings of God.

Outsiders, too, are properly sceptical about much of our inter-Church activity, recognising in it, better than we may ourselves, the permanent lure of a Superchurch, corresponding to the Superman God of much popular religious longing, and created in his image for our exclusive self-preservation.

Such a Church would speak with one reassuringly unanimous, unambiguous voice on everything: doctrine, sexuality, politics, liturgy. It would have a uniform pattern of ministry. Its authority structures would define and quash heresy and insubordination. This Superchurch tempts many in all our Churches, offering instant relief from panic, from the pain of facing the complexity of life, and the diversity of human responses to it. It even tempts some in the world, battered as they are by the threat of nuclear winter, sexual catastrophe, economic disaster and ideological impasse.

Precisely because we learn from our 'outsiders' how unlovely we can be, it is important that we do not brush aside too quickly their questions about our desire for theological or structural convergence, for clear and unambiguous authority. For at our best we believe the unity we seek is *not* an ecclesiastical protection racket. But we must beware of ourselves at our worst.

One central theological question, which I find deeply embedded in all our internal and ecumenical debates about authority is what level of *provisionality* we can properly live with together, under a God who is for us, ahead of us, but not within our grasp. I felt this as almost the deepest theological issue when I was privileged to share in a conversation, five years ago, between Cardinal Ratzinger and a group of joint Roman Catholic and British Council of Churches representatives. Finally, in the course of explaining why magisterial encyclicals could not be described as 'approximations to the truth', the Cardinal argued that if God had not disclosed himself and his truth in *absolute, determinate* propositions, then salvation was at risk.

Many a good Calvinist would agree with him, but I do not. And the conversation focused for me the hardest underlying polarity in all our interdenominational *and* intra-denominational battles. There are among us those who believe that the invincibility of God's love discloses itself in some kind of absolute, safeguarded articulation, whether of Scripture, Church, tradition, clerical line-management, agreed reason, charismatic gifts, orthopraxis – or any combination of such elements. And there are those among us who believe that the invincibility of God's love discloses itself in the relativity and risk of all doctrine, exegesis, ethics, piety and ecclesiastical structure, which are the Church's serious exploratory play, and which exist at an unspecifiable distance from the face-to-face truth of God. What unity is possible in concrete existence between those on either side of this trans-denominational divide seems to me our toughest ecumenical question. If we can find a way through that one, I suspect that all our specific problems of doctrine, ministry and authority will come away as easily as afterbirth. But if we seek in any of our bilateral or multilateral shifts to mask, suppress or smother that divide, our so-called unity will be a disastrous untruth.

While that is my pre-eminent concern about the unity we seek at the inter-Church level, I have another shade of worry – the only point where I suspect I reflect my own denominations's self-consciousness. (Since I am well aware of Scottish Anglicanophobia, I hope I speak without Presbyterian huffiness.)

Clearly in the galloping ecumenical progress among Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Lutherans, episcopacy is cherished as a sign (some would say *the* sign) of the apostolicity and continuity of the whole Church. Now, I belong to a denomination which, with some others, like the Archbishop's atheist, not only *happens* not to have bishops, but is, so far, *determined* not to have them (though, of course, God may surprise even Free Church persons by his future!).

Certainly as a Presbyterian I sometimes entertain the question: 'Was I told the truth at my baptism, that I was now received into the one, living, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?' But it is not because we lack bishops that I entertain it, but because we lack, over and over again, love, grace and truthfulness. And surely of all our Churches, episcopal or not, that is true. Indeed, it was partly because at some key points in Church history prelates were so unconvincing as custodians of the gospel that the so-called Protestants thought it better to risk God without bishops than bishops without God! Or to put it more lightly, as Sydney Smith, that devout Anglican, suggests: 'I must believe in the Apostolic Succession, there being no other way of accounting for the descent of the Bishop of Exeter from Judas Iscariot'.

Now, much of this is mere historically fossilised resentment, and must be undone. But perhaps it must be gently said, even to a gathering of

bishops, that for some Christian bodies within the ecumenical movement, episcopacy itself is a theological problem. All our denominations have so much to learn, to understand, to forgive, to confess in mutuality, that I rather hope the episcopal Churches will not take off with the collective consciousness of a clump of front-runners, leaving what you perceive as a handicapped assortment of Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers and others hobbling around the back straight! I too celebrate the immense advances made in these rich bilateral encounters between Anglicans and older episcopal Churches. But I hope that it might be your particular gift, after four centuries of 'Reformed Catholicity', to bear into the heart of these encounters the significant absence of the non-episcopal Churches, and to interpret it.

In a way, I am merely reflecting on my experience of British Council of Churches or WSCF encounters, where the *lived* working assumption is that all member denominations are equal in their status as 'receiving contributors' to the truth. That, of course, may become bland, evasive, superficial or complacent. It needs constant theological scrutiny. But it is extraordinarily *healing* as a presupposition. If is, of course, also a procedural necessity. For such Federations have no *executive* authority structures over their members. But precisely that fact actually enacts the hope that the truth is among us, around us and ahead of us, that the truth is our custodian, not we the custodians of the truth. That relaxes us into the real mutuality of those who can risk being ecclesiastically in love.

Finally may I venture an outsider's longing about internal Anglican unity, as you face especially this testing and delicate issue of women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate.

In preparing for this Conference and reading something of your history as a communion, I have been constantly struck by the best generosity of your recurrent insistence that across parties, camps, styles and dogmas, you have need of one another. Both internally and in relation to other evolving Christian life-forms, you have been conspicuously unclassifiable, a kind of ecclesiastical duck-billed platypus, robustly mammal *and* vigorously egg-laying. That, I am sure, is to be celebrated and not deplored.

As a guest, I am sad to feel that you are under some pressure to renounce this remarkable openness of being, to tighten up the structures of dogma, ministry, pastoral discipline, to align definitively either with the lions or with the hens. For I find your costly openness a gift to the other Churches and a gift to the world.

How you sustain this now, whether you sustain it, seems central to this Lambeth Conference (though, of course, the survival of formal unity can never properly be used as a blackmailing pistol at the head of perceived truth).

My hope is, at least, that the women's ordination issue does not become

a *scapegoat* for all the questions that potentially divide you in your communion, though it may be a *focus* of them. It is, at best, that you can see the issue as gift, calling us all to earthed exploration of what Christ and culture mean for each other, how a human Church bears God to people, how sacrament and sexuality relate. For these are questions which reach into the wider world, where on the whole people couldn't care less about the ordination of anyone to anything, because they are too busy living and dying.

And if it is gift, it is gift not just because it opens up deep and wide theological questions, but because it also touches the levels of pain and passion which test what it means that we love our enemies.

The world is used to unity of all sorts, to solidarity in campaigns, unity in resistance, communities of party, creed, interest. But it is *not* used to such possibilities as this: that, for example, those who find the exclusion of women from the priesthood an intolerable apartheid and those who find their inclusion a violation of God's will should enter one another's suffering, wash one another's feet. Somewhere in there authority lies.

I suspect that only from such depth of exploration, which Churches rarely expose themselves to, will unity or authority emerge, at least in any sense which makes us credible as agents of God's healing to the nations.