

The two papers which follow were given in 1981 at a meeting of English ARC. The Revd. Leslie Houlden is lecturer in New Testament studies at King's College, London, and a member of the Church of England's Committee for Roman Catholic Relations. Sister Lorna Brockett, R.S.C.J., is a Roman Catholic religious and member of English ARC.

THE question is: would the interests of the Christian cause be furthered by the issuing of a statement of faith shared by Anglicans

and Roman Catholics in England? I suppose nobody would have in mind to produce a long, detailed statement, for use, for example, as a catechetical tool, but rather a brief, memorable document, much of whose strength would lie in the fact that it had been achieved at all.

Much depends on the perspective in which such an exercise is seen. I shall discuss it first in an ecclesiastical context, then with more general practical and theological considerations in mind.

The ecclesiastical context

The welcome given to the three ARCIC agreed statements makes me certain that very many members of both Churches would find such a statement heartening. Even if it managed to utter only the barest platitudes, this would still be so. It would be heartening to two distinct interests: the ecumenical and conservative. Those who long for the Church of England to unite with Rome or are devoted to the ecumenical cause as a whole would see an agreed basis of faith as a new kind of step forward, something broader and more down to earth than the inevitably somewhat rarified ARCIC statements. But there would be a wider appeal: to those strong forces in both Churches which are anxious to stiffen their authoritative doctrinal witness along traditional lines and to oppose liberal and pluralistic tendencies. These groups would only partly coincide, in that much of the more general ecumenical goodwill still comes from those of liberal disposition theologically (though my impression is that some of them are becoming less concerned than formerly with the movement towards visible unity). Otherwise, the welcome would be mainly from those of conservative outlook, much concerned with the institutional embodiment of the faith, and convinced that only a clearly enunciated faith forms a credible basis for the Christian mission. Of course, Anglicans of Protestant persuasion might not find it easy to reach agreement with the rest over such an agreed statement, but if it could be agreed they would give it their backing: they would, I think, find it desirable in principle.

In so far as they are interested, people outside the Churches might also welcome such a statement: here is clarity, here is something we may accept or reject, or at least discuss.

Moreover, a statement of this kind might in itself actually further the cause of unity. If people saw their Church authorities agreeing in public over a wide range of fundamental tenets of faith, they might feel stirred to greater local co-operation and to more support of steps towards unity at all levels. Alongside common approaches to liturgical reform and other matters, it would be one of those moves, limited in itself, which in the end promote the feeling: why, when we are so alike, are we not actually united? Such moves in due course

shift the balance of presumption. The promoters should naturally reckon that, the more such moves take place, the more implausible becomes resistance to, for example, shared Communion.

On the other hand, it may be fairly said that the shared creeds already provide exactly what is being suggested, an agreed basis of faith. But their usefulness for the purpose in mind is no doubt spoiled by habit.

Practical and theological desirability

It would be a pity to limit ourselves to an ecclesiastical perspective. Other factors have a bearing on actions such as the one we are considering: the present state of the Churches concerned; the place of religion and the Church in our society; the present nature of the theological enterprise. I make a number of comments.

1. While it is now a common-place to note that both our Churches now house a wide spectrum of theological positions, and (somewhat oddly juxtaposed) though both are going through a phase where firm definition of traditional belief is highly prized, the realities of life in the two bodies still keep them far apart in a number of relevant respects. In this regard, the ARCIC agreed statements seem to me to be (despite their considerable achievement) seriously misleading. Agreement was reached at the price of working largely within a biblical and patristic framework rather than terms in which lively theological debate is now conducted. Thus, they invite the criticisms that they are archaic in content and exercises in theological diplomacy (with concomitant disadvantages) in their very conception. This is not to say that they should be despised; it is to say merely that their usefulness is limited.

At the same time, despite recent developments in Roman Catholic seminary education, our clergy are still formed theologically in quite distinct ways (or such is my impression). However little they absorb its hard lessons, Anglicans are, for good or ill, trained along lines dominated by the historical-critical method, with a concentration on the Bible and historical doctrine — even when a firm doctrinal position underlies all; whereas, despite moves towards a similar approach, Roman Catholics appear to work within the setting of a body of dogma, which, however it may need hard thought in order to express it cogently, is to be treated as 'given'. The average ordinand and priest on the Anglican side is more likely to feel that there is uncertainty in the air, and less of an atmosphere of theological 'relaxedness' than his Roman Catholic counterpart experiences. It is not surprising that the range of theological opinion in the two Churches remains much wider among the Anglicans, and the style of diversity is different in the two cases. An agreed basis of faith might obscure these facts of life.

2. Of course such obscuring would not matter very much if a statement of this kind were desirable on other grounds. But there is much in the present theological situation to make this questionable. The pluralism of Christian belief from the very beginning and the extent to which its unchangingness is mythical are now so well established that it may be thought undesirable to take steps which conceal it. Rather, our duty may lie in the direction of fostering a Christian maturity which can learn to understand, use, and even welcome diversity, with its attendant difficulties. The pastoral need now may be to enable Christian allegiance to flourish in a setting where these facts are recognized.

3. In a society where, for all of us, religion is an option which we may accept or reject, in a way that it was not in the past, there is doubt whether its presentation in terms of relatively simple (and so inevitably over-simplified) lists of tenets is a salutary approach. The faithful may like to feel they have banners and rallying-cries, but the enquiring unbeliever needs to be helped towards faith as he, in his particularity, is able to see it. Brief formulas are blunt instruments. Even if people think they want them, they may not be for their good.

It is in any case very uncertain whether Christian faith is helpfully represented by any such list. Fr Michael Richards pointed out in The Times on 14 February 1981 that, theological agreement within and between the Churches being an impossibility, unity must be sought on grounds of shared 'faith' rather than unanimity of view about 'the faith': that is, with the accent on commitment to God as made known in Christ (I write in deliberately general terms) rather than on tenets subscribed to. The trouble with documents such as bases of faith is that they obscure this distinction, now more than ever perhaps one important to draw. While seen by some as functioning in the former way (i.e. as expressing commitment), they inescapably look like the latter (i.e. articles to be subscribed).

The diverse functioning of creeds in Christian life and history, their strengths and limitations, were well described in the Church of England Doctrine Commission's report 'Christian Believing', and its lessons have scarcely begun to be taken to heart. It appeared at a moment when the Church was not in a mood to absorb its uncongenial but hardly deniable truths about the varied styles of believing and its encouragement of a certain self-awareness in theological method as a path to Christian growth. Faith is such an amalgam of allegiance of the heart, spirituality, beliefs, attitudes and moral convictions that to give the impression, yet again, that it consists chiefly of the acceptance of a series of briefly expressed truths can only be misleading. Once again, the condition of the serious enquirer is not likely to be met in a way that is either good for him or, often, usable by him. The more lapidary they are, the less

such statements serve any discernible practical purpose in the context of evangelism or instruction.

4. In Churches where, in the long term if not in the short, rigorous theological authority is surely bound to be on the wane, at least if they are to survive in pluralistic and educated societies, it cannot be the right way forward, however attractive it may sometimes appear, to take steps that bear the mark of the old monolithic style. Christians must learn to discover what it is to be faithful in varied styles, with varied beliefs and modes of stating belief. One could say that they must learn to recognize what has in fact always been the case. It may be that we should then resist moves which would impede such learning. All this is quite apart from the more intriguing question: supposing we seek to adopt a basis of faith, whose beliefs shall it contain, and in whose thought-forms shall they be expressed?

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1. There seems to be *practical and pastoral reasons* in favour of producing a common statement. I wonder how many committed Christians in both our Churches have not heard of ARCIC statements. There seems to be a considerable gap between what is discussed by theologians and what goes on in this committee, and what percolates down to some clergy and congregations. A common statement might act as a reminder that progress in understanding has been achieved, and as an affirmation and validation of that achievement, and if given episcopal encouragement, it could be useful for those people who do not know about ecumenical progress, or who do not want to know.

There might be a particular value in having a common statement as part of the preparation for Pope John Paul II's visit to England. Such a statement could be an opportunity for ecumenical groups to explore each others' understanding, and could be a useful preparation for what one hopes may be a more listening, learning and ecumenical Papal visit than seems to have been the case so far. So I would see the value of such a statement as a means of education and exploration, a starting point for further study rather than a resting place.

2. Pluralism

As someone who had the good fortune to study theology in an ecumenical context, and who now has the privilege of working for an Anglican diocese, I am aware to some extent from my own experience of the greater tolerance of pluralism within the Anglican tradition. Nevertheless I think the point that pluralism also exists within the Roman Catholic tradition needs to be emphatically made, even if at present that fact is given a less than enthusiastic welcome by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I think too that the

divisions are not only between the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions, but also, to some extent, across them.

3. Agreed Statements: the end of the road?

There seems to be a dilemma: If we have a common statement, how can we do justice to the diversity that exists? If we don't have a common statement, how do we recognise the unity that exists?

Are consensus documents in fact the best way forward? What is the value of the WCC's programme of producing a contemporary statement of the common faith of Christians? Do we accept the statement of the Faith and Order Commission that 'Full ecclesial communion, then, requires that one comes to confess the faith in common in prayer, action and witness, but also in doctrinal formulas?'¹

I presume that there would be fairly general agreement with Michael Richard's view in *The Times* of February 16th, 1981, that full theological agreement is neither possible nor even desirable. The Faith and Order Commission believes that a unity of faith may require a diversity of traditions and emphases. If this is so, how far is it practicable for two Churches jointly to attempt the task defined by the Commission as 'to translate the confession of apostolic faith with a view to its own cultural context or its own historic situation?'²

But if we do not attempt that task, how are we, in Michael Richard's words, to 'recognise one another's faith'? Given that unity already exists in virtue of our baptism, how do we enable that fundamental unity to be recognised and expressed more fully?

4. Feasibility

Because I feel a little more positive than Leslie Houlden about the possible value of a common statement, I would like to make a comment about its practicality. If we were to have one, who would draw it up, and what sort of language would they use? Liturgical debates in recent years have underlined the truth of Nicholas Lash's remark that 'there is still a widespread tendency to assume that if we say what was once said, we necessarily believe what was once believed, and conversely, that somebody who is reluctant today to employ ancient statements has departed from ancient understanding'.³ Lash's emphasis on pluralism and on discontinuity as well as continuity in our experience of and discourse about God emphasises the fact that a common statement would be a difficult thing to achieve. Is it even worth trying? It would be seriously misleading if it were done in such a way as to focus attention on faith

1. Towards a Confession of the Common Faith, WCC 1980 p. 2.

2. *ibid.* p. 10.

3. Theology on Dover Beach, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980. p. 30.

as acceptance of certain statements and truths rather than as a way of life. A statement of belief should not be divorced from worship, witness and living. Is it inevitable that it should be seen as if it were?

5. Any genuine agreement, at least on the part of those drawing it up, must presumably be more than merely an exercise in theological diplomacy. It must surely involve a process of discovery, a different perception, a change of attitude, a 'conversion'. Is there any way of encouraging or enabling those who receive the statement to embark on a similar process?

It is perhaps true that action, such as the Roman Catholic Church's joining the BCC, would be a more significant step than a common statement. However, given that we are dealing with the possibility of a statement, would this, if it could be drawn up, be a help to further growth, rather than a hindrance? On balance, I am inclined to think that it would.

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