

Christian Unity and Institutionalism¹

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In a notable speech at the Vatican Council on November 20 last,² the Archbishop of Westminster undertook, in the name of the hierarchy of England and Wales, to promote a fuller and more frequent dialogue with all Christians in this country of whatever denomination. The occasion was the opening debate on the Constitution *de Oecumenismo*. The Archbishop said that the hierarchy, for whom he spoke, gives its ready approval to this document and receives it with joy. It gives us the guidance of the Church's supreme authority, which we have been awaiting, and clearly shows us its mind. Without this our ecumenical work could not make progress.

Soon after the publication of this speech it was announced from Lambeth Palace that the Archbishop of Canterbury had set up a Commission on Roman Catholic Relations, to be composed of experts from strategic areas throughout the whole of the country. They will be responsible, from the Anglican side, for the arrangement of dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. It can hardly be doubted that there has been a causal connection between the Vatican speech and the Lambeth announcement, and we may hope therefore for the setting up, on our side, of a similar body to co-operate in organising this work.

It will not be out of place then to consider, on as wide a basis as possible and in a spirit of experiment, not only what are the most suitable topics, at the theological level, to embark on in dialogue, but, and this is more important, what are the presuppositions on either side with which eirenic discussion of these topics will inevitably be approached. Broadly speaking the topics should be concerned with fundamentals; the nature of revealed truth and the manner of its mediation to men; the nature of

¹*The Oecumenical Movement and the Unity of the Church*, by Thomas Sartory, O.S.B.; Basil Blackwell; 35s.

Institutionalism and Church Unity; a symposium prepared by the Study Commission on Institutionalism, Commission on Faith and Order, World Council of Churches, edited by Nils Ehrenstrom and Walter G. Muelder; S.C.M.; 35s.

²*Tablet*, Nov. 30, 1963, p. 1300.

faith and its relation to God's Word written and spoken; the nature of Tradition and its relation to the inspired Scriptures; the nature of biblical inspiration; the relation of creeds, conciliar definitions and theological propositions to the *res revelata*, the manifold word of God in Christ, in the prophets and in the salvation history; the teaching authority of the Church.

This article is concerned mainly with encounter at what may be called the high theological level. This surely is the foundation on which all fruitful dialogue must be built. Arising and spreading out from this, at other levels reaching down to the parochial level, will be ecumenical encounter, in a wider sense, based also on friendship and understanding. This wider engagement will involve not only theological encounter, though at a different level, but sociological action based on religious principles, for collaboration in works of charity, pastoral concern and many other forms of social service. It will also, we may hope, create the right conditions for co-operation in prayer and bible study. In this, common prayer and reading the Scriptures can be undertaken, without direct preoccupation with unity problems as such, but as a joint enterprise the aim of which is a mutual deepening of the spiritual life. The spontaneous effect could be a move together, under the Holy Spirit's power, towards unity in Christ.

It is fair to say that, at least on our side, there is very little practical experience of strict theological dialogue with other Christians. In consequence both priests and lay people, with few exceptions, need some preparation and self-training before engaging in it. A good deal of thinking, planning and organisation will have to go into making available what is often very necessary new knowledge concerning things under debate from differing points of view both among theologians everywhere and in the Vatican Council itself. At the end of his speech to the Vatican Council Archbishop Heenan in a memorable passage, which will often be quoted, said: 'In the name of the whole hierarchy of England and Wales, we readily declare our intention of doing everything, short of denying our faith, to bring about the union of Christians', a courageous and heartening undertaking.

In using these words when he gave it the Archbishop must have had in mind some pregnant passages in the sermon with which Pope John opened the first session of the Council. The Pope had there affirmed³ that the greatest concern of the Oecumenical Council was this, that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more

³ *Tablet*, Oct. 20, 1962, p. 997.

effectively. The implication in this is, surely, the conviction that the best safeguard of truth is that it should be taught effectively by being made alive. He went on to emphasise that for this doctrine to influence the numerous fields of human activity, in the individual, the family and the whole social order, there are two necessities. The Church must never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from antiquity. At the same time it must unremittingly keep its eyes on the present, to look for new conditions and new ways of life now appearing in the modern world, which have opened up new avenues to the Catholic apostolate. Our duty is not only to guard our precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to the work that our own era demands of us. We must press on along the path the Church has followed for twenty centuries.

What the Christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit of the whole world is looking for from this Council, the Pope continued, is a step forward towards a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciences in faithful conformity with the authentic doctrine. This doctrine must be studied and expounded however by the methods of research and through literary forms which belong to modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the *depositum fidei* is one thing, Pope John added, the way in which it is presented is another. It is this that must be given, with patience if necessary, very great consideration. The yard-stick of the steps taken will be a teaching *magisterium* predominantly pastoral in character.

For the majority of Catholics, bishops, priests and laity, this is a demand, by the highest authority, an octogenarian Pope, for what amounts to a change of attitude, which, if not actually revolutionary, requires an immense evolutionary adaptation; in theological outlook, in ways of worship, in future religious education and, above all, in our attitude to other Christians. It is a demand made in the name of the eternal truth, as it is in Christ Jesus the Lord, the same yesterday, today and for ever, who yet came that he might make all things new. The implication of the demand is that the preaching, teaching and living of this truth must be *alive*, or it will become completely, as to some extent it has become, the dead body of truth.

The working out of the new thought which is bringing about this evolutionary change and renewal of which Pope John was speaking is very clearly portrayed in a passage from the writings of Lord Acton, the historian:

There is an outward shell of variable opinions constantly forming round the inward core of irreversible dogma, by its contact with

human science or philosophy, as a coating of oxide forms round a mass of metal, where it comes in contact with the shifting atmosphere. The Church must always put herself in harmony with existing ideas, and speak to each age and nation in its own language. A kind of amalgam between the eternal faith and temporal opinion is thus in constant progress of generation, and by it Christians explain to themselves the bearings of their religion, so far as their knowledge allows. No wonder if, morally, this amalgam should be valued by its eternal rather than by its temporary element, and that its ideas should come to be regarded as almost equally sacred with the dogmas on which they are partly built. But as opinion changes, as principles become developed, and as habits alter, one element of the amalgam is constantly losing its vitality, and the true dogma is left in unnatural union with exploded opinion. From time to time a very extensive revision is required, hateful to conservative habits and feelings; a crisis occurs, and a new alliance has to be formed between religion and knowledge, between the Church and society.⁴

During most of his life Acton was under suspicion, in the eyes of some, of being a Catholic so minimising, as it was called at the time, that he could hardly be regarded as a Catholic at all. He was an historian of vast learning and liberal judgement. The maximisers of the period were in outlook much what is sometimes today called conservative, or essentialist. They tended to regard the Church as an institution rather than an organism. They saw it as possessing the deposit of faith in such a way that, in its passage through history, its doctrine was unaffected by history's pressures and stresses, the growth of knowledge and the developing application of principles owing to that growth.⁵

Revealed truth in its ultimate reality is immutable. The theological propositions which embody revealed truth are subject to development, they manifest the Church's growing insight into the depths of the mysteries of faith, which God makes known to men by his word, and which human knowledge can never fully penetrate. Even the Church's *de fide* definitions and credal statements, though always true, and protective of the truth they embody, do not in fact, and cannot, exhaust its whole content. They can be completed or have their emphasis altered by further decisions of the Church's *magisterium*. There are,

⁴Sir John Acton, 1863, quoted in Herder—Correspondence, Oct. 1963, p. 3.

⁵For a fuller and very enlightening account of the opposition of these two types of mind in the Vatican Council, see the first essay in *Vatican II—A Struggle of Minds* by the Dutch theologian E. H. Schillebeeckx, O.P.; Gill, Dublin, 1963, paper-back edition.

moreover, theological conclusions, drawn by human reasoning from *de fide* doctrine, which are in fact so partial and subject to change that what is held as certain in them in one age can be held as less so or even wholly discarded in another. For instance the proposition that babies, dying unbaptised before the age of reason, can never enjoy the vision of God, once universally taught as certainly true, is today freely discussed, doubted and called in question, to the great advantage of a deeper understanding of the faith as a whole.⁶

What Acton, in the passage we have quoted, calls the amalgam between the eternal faith and temporal opinion has undergone or is undergoing changes. These are the result of the progress and impact of historical and scientific knowledge upon a number of doctrines received hitherto in a perspective of limited human knowledge and experience. These doctrines, have come, in time, because of that impact, to be seen in a very different perspective, wider and less limited. For instance the inward core of the dogma 'outside the Church there is no salvation', is still as binding in faith as it was in St Cyprian's day. Nowadays, however, it is viewed in a context of greatly extended knowledge of the age of man and the demographical extent of the human race. So much indeed has change of perspective altered the application and increased the inclusiveness of the doctrine that a twentieth-century priest, in Boston, U.S.A., was condemned by the Church for teaching the dogma in the same terms and with the same exclusiveness as St Cyprian, who first formulated it in the third century.⁷

Our perspectives too in the creation stories of the book of Genesis, though the substance of the dogma it teaches remains the same, have been greatly changed by a new understanding, through modern scholarship, of primitive literary forms. This is equally true of the recognised possibility, not to say certainty, of the theory of the evolutionary process and the part it has played throughout the whole course of the creation of our universe. A hundred and fifty years ago the doctrine of the special creation of Adam and Eve was taught and accepted universally as true,

⁶See *From Limbo to Heaven, An Essay on Redemption*, by Vincent Wilkin, S.J., Sheed and Ward, paper-back edition, 1961.

⁷For the doctrinal portion of the Letter of the Congregation of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston, 1949, explaining the Church's doctrine in its developed perspective and in condemnation of the Boston priest's insistence on the old perspective, see *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Aug. 1953, p. 132, or *Approaches to Christian Unity* by C. J. Dumont, O.P., Appendix II, p. 224, London 1959. For a good survey of the whole matter see *The Wide World My Parish*, by Yves Congar, O.P., ch. 10; Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961.

and any denial of it would have been treated as heretical by Protestant and Catholic alike. The universality of the Flood also was believed in a literal sense until scientific discovery made this and many other literalist positions untenable. Yet the inspiration of Holy Scripture and its inerrancy remain *de fide*, though now seen in very different perspective.⁸

There are three instances in which the debates of the Vatican Council have been concerned with doctrines upon which the mind of the Church is at present divided. In all these doctrines the final decision, if and when it is made, will be of great importance to the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian Churches. The first doctrine is concerned with freedom of religion, in particular with the problem of sincere but erroneous conscience. There are two main views on this question. The older one is based upon the axiom that error can have no rights, except where relative and terminable rights may be conceded to it, the concession being a necessity in a society which insists on toleration. The more modern view, in the sense of its more recent emergence into prominence, maintains the indefeasible right and duty of every man, in respect of his very humanity, to follow his conscience, even when it is in inculpable error. The chapter on Religious Freedom in the Constitution *de Oecumenismo*, now before the Council, bases its declaration of religious freedom on the inviolability of human conscience as such.⁹ Conscience may not be coerced by any power, physical, moral or legal, the only limitations on this being when what the following of conscience involves is contrary to the public good or interferes with the rights of others. Here again we have Acton's amalgam of eternal faith and temporal opinion in process of being transferred, under the supreme authority of a General Council, from an older and less adequate perspective to a very different one, more in accordance with the true status of conscience. This confirmation of the inviolability of human conscience, if endorsed by the Council, may have a very considerable impact on the mixed marriage problem.¹⁰

⁸A full discussion of these and similar questions in the light of modern biblical scholarship will be found in *God's Living Word* by Alexander Jones, especially chapter 12, *The Inspired Word*; also in *The Two Edged Sword* by J. L. McKenzie, S.J., especially ch. 1, *The Sacred Books*, and ch. 5, *Cosmic Origins*. Both books from Geoffrey Chapman, 1961.

⁹In this it claims the support of Pope John's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*; see the English Translation, p. 10, C.T.S., 1962.

¹⁰An excellent discussion of the problem of freedom of religion will be found in *Christian Unity*, Maynooth Union Summer School 1961, *Religious Freedom and the State*, by Dr E. McDonagh, The Furrow Trust, 1962.

We may pass over here very briefly the other two doctrines now under debate in the Vatican Council, and about which theological opinion is divided; the relation of Scripture to Tradition as the means by which revelation is mediated, and the relation of the papacy and the episcopate in the teaching office of the Church. Both are of high importance in the ecumenical dialogue. The first for our understanding of the primacy of Scripture in the eyes of Protestants, the second for the elucidation of our conception of the apostolic episcopate in the eyes of the Eastern Orthodox. The latter are very much nearer to us in that we are at one, as against Reformation Christianity, on the basic nature of the Church as an entity, unique, visible and indivisible. Beyond this there are considerable diversities, but they are more in emphasis than in complete incompatibility of doctrine, the most formidable being our disagreement about the place of the papacy within the episcopate.¹¹

The two books, the details of which stand at the head of this article, will both be found of great use to priests and laity in preparing themselves for the rigours of theological dialogue. The first, *The Oecumenical Movement and the Unity of the Church*¹² is a theological account, by Father Thomas Sartory, the director of the Una Sancta Movement in Germany, of what ecumenical dialogue involves. Anyone with the elements of a theological grounding in the Faith, who studies and absorbs this very able book, will find himself well enough equipped to enter into dialogue with Anglicans or Free-Churchmen, at a level of sufficient instruction upon which experience can build. The first or historical part of the book gives an outline history of the Ecumenical Movement itself. The second or systematic part enters very fully into the theology of ecumenism and

¹¹On the relation between Scripture and Tradition see *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, by Louis Bouyer, Ch. 6, The Sovereign Authority of Scripture, Harvill Press, 1956. For the opposite view see *Unitas*, Winter, 1963, Non-Written Apostolic Traditions, by Charles Boyer, S.J. On the relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches see *The Eastern Churches and Catholic Unity*, ed. Maximos IV Sayegh, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Herder-Nelson, 1963. Also *Christian Unity*, Maynooth Summer School, The Eastern Churches, by Fr Pól Ó Súilleabháin, O.F.M.

¹²Another book, similar to this, though by no means identical with it in scope and outlook, may be mentioned here. It is *Unity—A History and Some Reflections*, by Maurice Villain, Harvill Press, 1963. The study of both these together would provide as complete an introduction to ecumenism as could be desired, while either would be adequate to start with. For further study on particular points a number of books have been cited in the footnotes. These have been, as far as possible, such as are recently published, in English, easily accessible and moderate in price; many of them are obtainable in paper-back editions.

more especially into the radical difference between Historic and Protestant Christianity in regard to their respective conceptions of the nature of the Church; Rome and Constantinople, with the rest of the East, on one side, and the Churches sprung from the Reformation on the other.

It will be found that the roots of this divergence begin in differing emphases on the part played by the humanity of Christ, and the nature of its instrumentality, in reconciling fallen man with God. In consequence of this, different conceptions of revealed truth and of grace emerge. Beginning here, the divergence passes to the means God has chosen to mediate both his revelation and the loving power by which he exercises his saving will in our regard.¹³ Father Sartory's book has the advantage of a bibliography which will help even those who are not anxious to read German or French. It is true that his concern is chiefly with Lutheranism, but that is, in fact, no handicap, even in dialogue with Anglicans. Where the nature of the Church is concerned the Church of England is bound by its own history and ecclesiological conceptions to stand, at this point, at least in the last resort, on the Reformation side.

The second book will introduce its readers to a very different world, the inner world of the work and procedures of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. For the Catholic reader, who is unfamiliar with this world, it will be a salutary experience, though not intellectually a very easy one. Much of the language is technical, with a technicality, sometimes near to jargon, bred of a fifty years tradition of ecumenical discussion. But it should be persevered with, and will be found profitable, if only in the realisation of what a complex world this is. After the World Conference on Faith and Order, held at Lund in 1952, it was resolved to set up two committees, European and North American, to discuss *Tradition and Institutionalism*. The terms of reference in regard to these two subjects were wide. After more than six years work an interim Report was published for presentation to the next World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal in 1962. Its title was *The Old and New in the Church*.¹⁴

The book, *Institutionalism and Church Unity*, a symposium of wide ranging essays, was designed to supply material for the second subject

¹³Further reading on these lines will be found in *Christ, Our Lady and the Church, A Study in Eirenic Theology*, by Yves Congar, O.P., Longmans, 1957. Also for the indivisibility of the Church, *The Idea of the Church*, by B. C. Butler, 1956, and *One and Apostolic*, by Adrian Hastings, 1964, Darton, Longman and Todd.

¹⁴S.C.M. Press, 1961.

of the Report, Institutionalism in the Churches. It is not widely known among Catholics that a great number of organic unions have taken place, under ecumenical influence, during the last forty years, among Protestant Churches. These unions are achieved mainly on the basis of Scripture and the acceptance of faith in Christ as God and Saviour. Against this background less emphasis is laid on the pressures and influences in the formation and life of Churches that are theological, concerned with matters of belief, than on those that are non-theological, but racial, national, geographical, social and even economic. The history of these unions illustrates how among Protestants themselves, who are not and never have been doctrinally divided, even non-theological differences can be serious obstacles in the building up of organic unity. The book should be read in connection with the Report it provided a part basis for. It touches only occasionally and indirectly upon Orthodox and Catholic unity problems, but none the less it can be read with profit by members of both these Churches.

The study of the ecumenical situations of other Christians can point us, very often, to a clearer realisation of our own. The essentialists or conservatives of our day, like the maximisers of Lord Acton's, cause trouble to the pastorally and ecumenically minded and to the historically minded as well. They are loth to recognise that the Church may, and sometimes does, appear unattractive to the outsider, not only because there are truths it must teach that are unattractive, but, more often, because there are in it opinions and attitudes, held as essential, which in fact turn out, in the light of wider perspectives, to be half-truths, so over-emphasised by war psychology and partisanship, that they have become in effect untrue.

It was this that aroused Cardinal Newman's fears at the time of the first Vatican Council and made him a strong inopportunist. His *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* was a work of pioneering in a particular line of historical theology, the facts of which are now universally recognised, though not the conclusions he drew from them. He would have endorsed Acton's penetrating analysis of the relation between dogma and history quoted above. So indeed would Pope John, for it is this that he was setting out as the primary aim of the Council in his opening sermon. It is unfortunately true that speculative scholastic theology is, all too often, thought out and taught in a vacuum, caused by failure to deal adequately with the Church's guardianship and proclamation of the deposit of faith as subject to the historical process of which its life in time is a part. This is especially so of the kind of theology

which finds a place in the manuals prepared for the use of seminary students. It is due in part at least to the fact that the Scriptures, containing the Salvation history of the People of God, are studied in semi-isolation from the course of dogma and morals. They come to be looked upon, in consequence, not as the source of divine truth, but as quarries for texts confirmatory of truths known already from other sources.

This is no condemnation of the scholastic method as such; even an elementary knowledge of the *Summa* of St Thomas, taught as he designed it to be taught, shows this. Our present situation is much more due to a system of teaching which has to a large extent atomised and desiccated its subject matter, by divorcing it from its roots in history and Scripture, and also from worship. Dogmatic definition, credal affirmation and sometimes even theological conclusions based on insufficient premises, come under this treatment to be virtually identified with the *res revelata*, the substance of God's Word to men. This is reduced, confined and packed into a frame-work of neat and accurate formulas, and all too often so used as a substitute for the proclamation of the living gospel of Christ. Creeds, doctrinal formulas and catechisms can easily be turned by such a process into obstacles, instead of the aids and safeguards they are designed to be, to a deeper penetration by grace into the mysteries of our redemption, which cease on that account, because notionally only and not really apprehended, to be fully formative of Christian consciences.¹⁵

Two things are vital in our unity work. One is awareness of this danger amongst ourselves and doubtless too among other Christians. It must be part of a wider awareness of the very many individual pressures of circumstance and history that have shaped and sometimes

¹⁵The Newman Association, with a much extended dialogue in view, with other Christians, at university and professional level, is making considerable progress in organising tutorial groups, in which theological studies are based upon the Scriptures, the source of all revelation from which tradition grew. This reference back to the origins of our belief enables members of a group to understand systematic theology, as the interpretation of the sources of revelation, in its proper focus. It also enables them to carry on a fruitful dialogue with other Christians, to whom the Scriptures are the touchstone of belief. The traditional Catholic approach, in terms of natural law and scholastic idiom, has little meaning for non-Catholics. The standard text-book for these study groups is the *Bible de Jérusalem*, which will be obtainable in translation next year at latest. The function of the tutor is to indicate the method of using the Bible, to guide discussion and to advise on further reading. In the near future we shall need a growing number of priests theologically and biblically competent to give this guidance.

distorted, in their day to day life, the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches and the Reformation Churches, each in their separated existences as institutions. The other is the realisation, to be kept always in mind, of the radical difference between ourselves and our separated brethren in the West, a difference only a gift of faith can overcome. Unless the unity of the Church is, and it must be, analogous to that of a living organism, unless its inner life is maintained, consistent with itself at every stage, by a visible organic structure, undivided and indivisible, it can possess no ultimate and absolute criterion of truth. Apart from this organic unity the Church can have no single mind and voice to judge and proclaim as genuine its developing insights into the revelation committed to its care.

Crime and Punishment in the United States

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The first discovery one makes about America—and this affects the subject of crime just as much as any other—is the great variety that exists from state to state, and how strong is the resistance to any encroachment of federal government on state rights, which certainly include disposing of the vast majority of criminal offences committed. The importance of local loyalties is real and enduring. They have their roots in American history: have indeed made America what it is. And this is most certainly true, not only of the state laws themselves (the differences in the matter of divorce from state to state is an obvious example) but of the enforcement of the law and the treatment of offenders. Indeed Mr James Bennett, Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, can say 'the penal statutes of this country are a mishmash of conflict and variation'.

That is why any statistical account of crime in America must be inadequate. The annual report issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, which gives a detailed analysis of crimes committed