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Unity, Diversity, Super-Church?

THE DIRECTION OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

BY DAVID PATON

THE article that follows is an effort by an Anglican who is employed by the Church of England as an ecumenical worker to open up a conversation with Evangelical friends about the direction in which the ecumenical movement in general, and the World Council of Churches in particular, is moving, and the doubts and anxieties that are felt and voiced about it. I write as a convinced and even passionate "ecumenist" or even "ecumaniac"; but my personal convictions are irrelevant, except in so far as they have led me into paths which have sometimes enabled me to know people and situations in the ecumenical movement intimately and from within. What I shall attempt to do is to *describe* as objectively as I can what seems to be happening in the ecumenical movement and to be (so far as one can guess) likely to happen in the future. If this provokes dissent, question, or any other response in the mind of the reader, I hope that the response will be expressed. It is in general much to be wished that Evangelical anxieties should be openly expressed in the papers which are read by others and not only in definitely Evangelical publications. Anglicans especially need to read one another's writing and take part in one another's discussions much more than, as yet, we customarily do—though we have made some progress in recent decades. The inclusion of the Editor of *The Churchman* in the Church of England delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal last July was an important step forward.

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What does the ecumenical movement mean by unity? The nearest it has got to a precise definition is the now well known "New Delhi Statement" to be found on p. 55 of *New Delhi Speaks* (p. 116 of the *New Delhi Report*). It is as follows:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and His gift to His Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all, and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls His people.

This statement was not, of course, originated at New Delhi, but is the product of patient work in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches over several years, and represents what that

Commission was able to offer to the whole W.C.C. in the way of an "ecumenical consensus" on the meaning that all member Churches can agree to attach to the word "unity". It was offered, so to speak, to the W.C.C. Central Committee at St. Andrews in 1960, widely noticed in the churches as part of the preparation for the New Delhi Assembly, and has since then been even more widely studied—no least in the course of the British Council of Churches programme on "The Unity We Seek" whose focus is the National Faith and Order Conference at Nottingham in September next year. It is, so far, an "official" indication of how, in the ecumenical movement, unity is to be understood.

It will be seen at once, of course, that it is full of ambiguities—that is, it uses phrases which people of different views can all agree to. This is of course inevitable and should not occasion surprise among Anglicans who have all too often to go through the same sort of exercises to produce agreed statements. But an agreed statement that is in places ambiguous is not for that reason meaningless; and the meaning of this statement should be interpreted in the light of the exposition offered in the pages of the report that follow (*New Delhi Speaks* pp. 55-75, *New Delhi Report* pp. 117-134). Further indication, unofficial but important, of the way unity is understood in the ecumenical movement in Britain can be gained from study of the discussion booklets put out by the B.C.C. on certain key phrases in the New Delhi Statement. These are at present (one or two more are in preparation):

- I *God's Will and Gift* (J. G. Davies)
- II *Making It Visible* (G. B. Caird)
- III *All In Each Place* (A. H. Dammers)
- IV *Witness and Service to All* (R. C. Mackie)
- V *In All Places and All Ages* (R. E. Davies)
- VI *Joining in Common Prayer* (William Nicholls)

It is, I think, fair to say that the emphasis of this understanding of unity is on unity in the Gospel, in the Sacraments which express it, and in the Spirit who creates it. Nothing is said about organization, though some sort of organization is certainly implied in "corporate life" and "acting and speaking together".

A good many questions arise. Among them are the following: Firstly, if (as seems likely) that unity is not based on full dogmatic agreement, on what is it based? Secondly, is it understood to involve uniformity of practice and of worship? Thirdly, what kind of overall structure is thought to be implied? To these questions we shall now turn.

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The member churches of the W.C.C. include those which have an agreed and elaborated structure of theological dogma, and those which do not. The former class include churches which hold the different dogmatic theologies of (a) Eastern Orthodoxy, (b) Latin Catholicism before 1870, (c) traditional Lutheranism, and (d) traditional Calvinism, to name no more. It is evident that it is not dogmatic theology which holds the W.C.C. together. What does hold the Council together is indicated in the Basis, which runs:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Churches that are members of the W.C.C. are held together by the conviction that God has called them together. National Councils of Churches and local Councils of Churches may not be so aware as is the W.C.C. that this is the basis of their unity. Often they are relatively homogeneous and feel no need to reflect upon their unity, which seems "natural". But when reflection does begin anywhere in the ecumenical movement, this is the answer that is reached, because it is (at least as things now are) the only possible one. An unofficial but influential commentary on all this is Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft's book *The Pressure of our Common Calling* (London, 1959). The ecumenical movement consists of churches and Christians who in spite of the fact that they do not agree about how to understand God and His way with men, yet know that He has called them together in order that they may understand better one another and one another's convictions, and also that they may move into *common* convictions about God. The history of the movement is the history of this slow but definite process.

It is well known that there is disagreement among Christians about whether this is an adequate basis for unity, or whether a more articulated theological unity is not essential. That is a very important discussion indeed, *especially for Anglicans*, for if it touches the nature of our unity in the W.C.C., it touches equally the nature of our unity in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. There are "monochrome" Anglican churches: but the Church of England is not one of them, and in this respect (though certainly *not* in all respects!) it is the Church of England which is typical of the Anglican Communion. There have been attempts to prove that the Anglo-Catholic or the Evangelical understanding of the Anglican position is the true one, and all others are illegitimate. It may even be true that the majority of the devout laity use some little book of devotion which assumes one or other of these positions. But the fact is that, like it or not, in deanery, diocese, province, and church, we have to co-exist, and if possible work with, Anglicans of different convictions from our own. On what theological grounds can Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics justify their acceptance of each other in the same church and engage together (as they increasingly do) in theological discussion with other churches? It is already evident that the conversations with the Presbyterians will force us to face that issue together. One may observe in passing that one of the advantages of the ecumenical movement is that it compels honest participants to look critically at their weak spots. Thus, Presbyterians force us to look again at our theological tradition, which sometimes seems to them to be a tradition of indifference to both logic and truth.

In a sense therefore—and I mean this seriously but not polemically—do not Anglicans have to give the same *sort* of answer about the nature of their unity as is given by the member churches of the W.C.C. about theirs? And are they not committed to the same sort of common

exploration? These seem to be matters of *fact*, even if one deplors that things are thus.

It can, of course, be argued that our external unities—whether in the Church of England or in the W.C.C.—are irrelevant to serious spiritual purposes. There are those—perhaps they are many—who accept the structure of the Church of England as a necessity or a convenience or simply as merely *there*, and make use of it or ignore it as the dictates of their aims and policies may require. The external structure of the Church of England, as of other churches, and the external structures which link the churches, are external facts. They are there; but they do not greatly matter. The real unity is that which animates those gathered in a common spirit for some common purpose, as it might be at a Keswick Convention.

It is important for the "ecumenist" to realize the strength and importance of this view; and for the ecclesiastical official to recall that it is not confined to Evangelicals, but prominent in the history of the missionary movement—close to the heart (for example) of the enterprises that have risen out of Quakers with a "concern". The ecumenical movement indeed itself began and has always flourished among those who experienced among themselves a unity of the spirit which the life of their official churches did not provide, or actually impeded—a unity which they have ever since sought to make prevail in the life of those churches, "official", "external" though they be. The churches as they are in themselves and in relation with one another, do not exhaust the experience of church unity. The ecumenical movement is sustained by those who have experienced the reality of a united church both in and apart from their experience of their church. This experience would seem to be not so far removed from that of Evangelicals gathered in support of Dr. Billy Graham or of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. The difference—which is far from inconsiderable—lies in differing judgments about the relation of the "unity of the Spirit" to the "official church". If we eliminate as unscriptural the extremes of a doctrine of the true Church as invisible, and a doctrine which identifies the Church with one or other of several particular official churches, there is still a good deal of ground for discussion. Where, in effect, should we expect to find the reality of the united Church, and in what kind of relation to the established external church structure?

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Honest answers to the questions about the relation of unity to uniformity are not as easy to come by as might be thought. For example, if the ecumenist replies indignantly as he always does reply that "unity is quite different from uniformity", he may seem to be ignoring the all but universal human tendency to want everyone else to be like us. Moreover, if unity has *no* effect in drawing us together, what real content does unity have? Indeed, there are some united churches in which unity seems in many respects to have made very little perceptible difference at all.

The test case is usually worship. Because it is one which involves both liturgical and non-liturgical traditions, the most instructive

experience is that of the Church of South India. There, it seems, the worship of the ordinary local (that is, usually village) church is much as it ever was—in the “ex-Anglican” churches the Book of Common Prayer continues to be used in the manner learned long ago from C.M.S. or S.P.G. ; and so with “ex-Methodists”, “ex-Presbyterians”, “ex-Congregationalists”. But at synod meetings, in theological colleges, and so on, something else was needed, something which would draw the various traditions into one, something which would enable those united in one church to express their unity. They could only secure what they needed by going back behind their existing books and uses to first principles and agreeing on what at baptism, eucharist, ordination, and so on, they wanted to do, and how what they wanted to do could, in their circumstances, best be done. The results, liturgical services with many permissible variations, are now available (*The Church of South India: The Book of Common Worship*, London, 1963).

In discussion Bishop Michael Hollis, first Moderator of the Church of South India, has passionately repudiated the idea of an imposed uniformity. Only with difficulty could he be persuaded to agree that in time (a half century, say) it might come about naturally in the Church of South India that the use of the *Liturgy* would become universal because it commended itself to all as *the way for them in that church* to shew forth the Lord's death till He come. So far as the Church of South India is concerned, any uniformity is a long way off, will come slowly, and will come (if it comes at all) by the slow processes of natural agreement.

Any union scheme that is within the range of possibility is likely to involve more diversity and less uniformity than we have at present, at least for a time. Further, when the balance of likely opinion in the churches is considered, development is likely to be by way of a free convergence of judgment that some things are good and to be continued and developed, and others represent blind alleys. This is perhaps what is happening already in Christendom—as Presbyterians (not to speak of Anglicans) more frequently celebrate the Eucharist, and “Catholics” begin to take to Bible study. It is not likely, therefore, one would think, that the effect of reunion schemes will be to force people to adopt ways of worship and so on which are unfamiliar, distasteful, or repugnant to their consciences. The secret fear (I think) of Evangelicals is that they will be forced into Anglo-Catholicism ; and of Anglo-Catholics that they will be forced into Evangelicalism. On both sides, those who harbour such fears might be invited to consider dispassionately the actual evidence that can be adduced for and *against* these fears.

But, such is the power of sloth, one might still get an unthinking slide towards a faithless and unconsidered uniformity. It is therefore fortunate that Canon Max Warren and others have begun to ask us to think about the theological significance of *diversity*. Do we not, especially in the unity movement (but perhaps not only there) need to think about this, and also about how we may contribute to each other out of our diversity ?

In particular, I would wish, if I may, to ask Evangelicals to consider

how the use of the prayer meeting (and of lay men and women leading their fellows in prayer) may be shared with sections of the Church which are impoverished because they do not have it, but who find themselves unable at present to make use of this true means of grace because the *form* in which they meet it is too foreign. "Moderate Anglo-Catholics" took some of the spikier decoration off the retreat, and the quiet day, and made them available generally. I could wish from the bottom of my heart that the true prayer meeting was equally available.

Do we not also need to give positive consideration to the place of the local church, the congregation of faithful men gathered round Word and Sacrament in liturgical evolution? Is there not significance in the fact that in hardly any parish church is the Prayer Book used in precisely the same way—that in *all* "schools of thought" clergy and laity modify together according to their needs? Is not this practice not only compatible in principle with a general agreement on doctrine, and also to be positively welcomed as one of the ways in which the local fellowship may make the common prayer *their own*?

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Lastly, is the World Council a Super-Church in embryo, a trial run for one world-wide centralized bureaucratically controlled Church? The leaders of the W.C.C. always say "no", because they are painfully aware of the fact that if some sections of their membership would tolerate such a development, the majority would not, and are profoundly suspicious of any attempt to attribute any significance to the W.C.C. at all. (This was evident, especially among the Orthodox, at Montreal.) There is no evidence that I know of to suggest that the W.C.C. is a step on the road to a Papacy.

A cynic—or maybe a Christian who has pondered long on Jeremiah 17: 9—may put very little store in the protestations of the W.C.C. officers and staff that they wholly eschew any intention to become a super-church. But the unwillingness of the member churches to allow such a development is another and more reliable impediment. The worst that may come about—some would say, is coming about—is a centralized bureaucracy, with some power and influence, but limited theological significance. But here it would seem that the best safeguard is not to say, "The W.C.C. is becoming a self-perpetuating power structure: therefore let us have nothing to do with it", but rather to say, "The W.C.C. is in danger of succumbing to the tendency of all organizations to develop a dynamic of their own; therefore let the member churches reconsider the purposes for which they have come together in the W.C.C., re-affirm their convictions about it, and ensure that the structure of the W.C.C. reflects those convictions and serves those purposes". It so happens that in these years between the third and fourth assemblies of the W.C.C. such reconsideration is for various reasons inevitable. Considered reflections on the theme "What kind of a W.C.C. do we desire?" are likely to fall on genuinely grateful ears.

How then does the ecumenist see the course of future development? There has been very little discussion of the subject owing to its practical

irrelevance—the practical task is to find ways of doing the jobs that need doing with the limited tools now available. But, on the face of it, one would surely expect that there will be a choice between two possibilities. One is a W.C.C. or its successor that is a federation of strengthened confessional churches—Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, and so on. This seems, to be frank, both unscriptural in theory and probably repulsive in practice. The other (for which the precedent is Eastern Orthodox rather than Latin Catholic) is of a fellowship of united “autocephalous” national churches. This is the logical development Anglicans would be likely to wish for, and are for the most part working for.

This sort of issue was of course involved in its particular Anglican form at the meetings in Canada this last summer; and it will be found reflected in the documents included in *Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence in the Body of Christ*. The issues are focused in the proposal for the appointment of regional officers. These have been represented as a means of centralization. They are, on the contrary, intended to be a means of strengthening the various provinces of the Anglican Communion to discover in fellowship with the other Christians how to be the church of their nation or people that God wills. They *will* become such instruments of local and national unity, *if we will it*. Equally, the danger that the increasingly frequent (and very necessary) meetings of primates and metropolitans which are now foreshadowed might land us in a “collective papacy” will be most readily countered by the insistence that a province is not an archbishop but a “presbytery of dioceses”, a synodical fellowship of bishops, clergy, and lay men and women. This is merely to insist once more on the importance of the small, local group, and its prayer initiative.

To sum up, the danger of real theological indifferentism, of a convergence on a lifeless highest common factor (which would be not very high), of a bureaucratic centralization, seems on the evidence to be not very great. But in a sinful world they cannot safely be completely discounted. They are best guarded against—are they not?—not by withdrawal but by the active participation of men and women of deep theological conviction and of profound regard for the personal vocation of each individual and fellowship.
