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Rome and Charles Davis

BY C. J. L. NAPIER

THE present crisis of authority in the Roman Catholic Church, the seriousness of which can be judged by the frequent references to it by the Pope himself,¹ was highlighted in a dramatic way at the end of 1966 by the departure from the Church of Father Charles Davis, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Heythrop College, Editor of the *Clergy Review*, and unquestionably the best known and most widely respected Roman Catholic theologian in Great Britain. There is a real parallel, or anti-parallel, between the departure of Newman from Anglicanism to Rome and that of Davis from Rome over a century later, both from the point of view of the doctrinal rethinking involved and of the psychological impact on the general body of the faithful. And yet there is clearly little comfort to be gained from the 'Davis affair' for any kind of Protestant triumphalism. As the Bishop of Liverpool has recently commented, 'When Professor Davis withdrew from the Roman Catholic Church, he raised issues far wider than his personal relationship with that Church'.² It is the purpose of this article to examine some of these issues, as now expounded by Davis himself in his book *A Question of Conscience*³, and to consider their possible relevance for Anglican Evangelical thinking in particular.

Davis' action, in both of its aspects (that of rejection of the Church of his upbringing, and refusal to join any other Christian denomination) has been widely and no doubt rightly interpreted as prophetic in the general sense of this term. Its significance for his contemporaries goes far beyond the particularity of an individual personal decision, and more than this it constitutes a call to a like kind of decision on the part of others in a matter of ultimate importance. The call is to what Davis, in an expression borrowed from Harvey Cox, describes as 'creative deisaffiliation' vis-à-vis the institutions and structures which the Church has inherited from a now bygone 'Christendom'. What exactly this 'attitude' might mean in terms of practical decisions in our present situation is not very much more than hinted at in the book, but presumably it means something very like the attitude of Christ and the Apostles towards the Church of the Old Covenant, or that of the Reformers towards the Papal Church of their time; or that of John Wesley towards the 18th century Anglican Establishment. It is not, therefore, in the first place, a call to 'come out from among them'. But it is quite definitely a call to give up the hopeless attempt to renovate or reform the old structures, an insistence that Christians will never be able to bear an effectual or valid witness in the contemporary world unless they are prepared in effect to start again from scratch, and take the consequences as far as their present affiliation to the traditional structures is concerned.

Evangelicals will scarcely wish to question such a line of thought on the level of principle, though they may wish to question its application. Indeed there is a substantial amount of common ground

between the critique of the historic Churches made by Davis, and the arguments of those Evangelicals, mostly non-Anglicans, who are pressing for the formation of a single, united Evangelical Church. Unfortunately the principle *ecclesia semper reformanda* tends to function like a blow-torch, which we are happy to turn in any direction but our own. But even if he may decline to follow his example, anyone who is in the least degree sensitive to the almost infinite possibilities for complacency and self-delusion within the boundaries of the visible Church will find Davis' *Question of Conscience* very much his own. In particular the striking coherence and continuity between the author's arguments against the Church of Rome on the one hand, and against contemporary ecclesiastical institutionalism in general on the other, provides food for serious thought. The historically minded reader will be led to look afresh, for example, at Luther's controversy with the *Schwärmer*, and at that of the Independents against the Anglicans and Presbyterians in the 17th century, and to wonder whether our major 'Churches of the Reformation' have not in fact allowed themselves to be seriously re-catholicised by an insidious creeping institutionalism. The apotheosis of this process is aptly symbolised by the widespread construction in this country during the last hundred years of neo-gothic Methodist, Baptist, Congregational and Evangelical Anglican Churches. Hobbes declared that the Church of Rome was 'no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned on the grave thereof: for so did the Papacy, start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that great Heathen Power'⁴. It is beginning to look as if the same might fairly be said of our own Churches in relation to the medieval papal system, when one considers their centralized bureaucratic administration, their hierarchical ministerial caste, their swarms of salaried employees, their immense financial wealth, their numerous, costly and expensively appointed buildings and institutions, and much else besides. It would be naive and unhistorical to become unduly morally indignant about these things, which have in the main been appropriate to the era of 'Christendom', the only way, in the context, in which the Church could get her message across to real people, and sustain them in the faith. The Independents no doubt were before their time, and suffered accordingly. The question is whether today what was once a means to an end, has not now become an unmanageable obstacle to that same end. This is not a matter of academic theorising. As Davis points out, the first relevant fact in assessing the Church as a social structure is the number of people who have left it. Perhaps even more significant is the number of those who, while retaining their formal membership of the Church and even attending worship regularly, are in fact *émigrés de l'intérieur*, for whom the message, the leadership, the organisations of the Church are in no real sense a source of spiritual salvation and human transformation. Many Evangelicals appear to believe that all that is required is an adjustment of the content of the message to meet that of the Biblical revelation. In fact the message itself, if applied imaginatively (by this we mean the equivalent of 'spiritually' in the Pauline terminology) to our contemporary situation requires a far-reaching critique with respect both to the things that we are at present

doing and above all to those that we are not doing because the former leave us no time, money or energy to spare.

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A Question of Conscience begins with a moving and utterly convincing account of the author's spiritual pilgrimage which led him out of the Church of Rome and into marriage with Miss Florence Henderson. The inevitable suspicion that his decision was the outcome either of spiritual shallowness or intellectual confusion or both is abundantly disproved by the clarity, serenity and seriousness of what he has to say. He is well aware of the inevitable degree of rationalisation involved in the way we interpret our own actions, the deep motives of which are never wholly rational. Indeed the first thing to underline here is the evident importance for Davis of what he calls 'self-appropriation'. The effect of the Gospel is or ought to be to release man from his actual state of radical alienation from himself and to enable him, as an adoptive child of God in Christ, to take responsible possession of his own life in the freedom wherewith Christ has set him free. Far from achieving this, the effect of a worldly, institutionalised Church during the 'Christian centuries' has in fact been to create new and positively exquisite forms of bondage. Nietzsche, Feuerbach and Marx saw this very well, and they may readily be excused for thinking (with dire consequences for the Church today) that alienation was the inevitable result of Christianity as such.

Secondly, it must be emphasised that Davis left the Church of Rome not because he was basically a radical thinker but because he was a conservative. Unlike many conservatives, both Catholic and Evangelical, he was and is as a theologian both creative and contemporary. Nevertheless his starting point and ultimate concern was and is (despite some of the appearances) God's revelation, the Gospel and the reality of the Church, and only thereafter man and the world. In a significant passage, which will be echoed by many who find themselves in discussion with ecumenically minded and theologically progressive Roman Catholics, Davis says that he 'could not get Roman Catholics to commit themselves to any definite belief or to any interpretation of authoritative statements clear enough to form the basis of a discussion about the Roman faith. . . . They have escaped from the pressures of a rigidly dogmatic Church by remaining uncommitted in regard to any definite doctrinal statement. I have failed to see any principle underlying their attitude. Its cause would seem to be that, unable to accept all the teaching of the Church, they have no clear reason for accepting any of it.' In other words, many Roman Catholics do not leave the Church because they do not care, because of a radical doctrinal indifferentism which is the inevitable outcome of a system which attributes infallibility to fallible human authorities. This is further expounded later in the book where the author points out that papal infallibility has in fact 'distorted the understanding of the indefectibility of the Christian faith by attaching that indefectibility indissolubly to the *juridical* authority of particular declarations'.⁵ Ultimately the reason why Davis could not remain a Roman Catholic and work to reform the Church from within, as he was urged to do by so many of

his friends and collaborators, was the same straightforwardness which has always been such an attractive characteristic of his theological thinking. 'What I reject', he says, . . . 'is the Roman Catholic Church in its present form as a structured community. And, as far as my theological understanding goes, *the key features of that structure are authoritatively imposed upon the faith of all its members under pain of anathema*'.⁶ The Protestant is of course in a very different position here. However much he may deplore the structures of his own particular Church as they are at present, he is by no means committed to them in the same way on the level of principle. 'Creative disaffiliation' may not therefore, for him, lead quite so ineluctably to an outward and formal break with the institution as such, the essential fallibility of which he has always presupposed.

Davis has in fact neither an individualistic view of the Church, nor a purely negative attitude towards institutions, whose necessity he fully recognises. There is no space here to expound his view of the Church, which he unfolds in the context of an examination of the nature of Christian faith on the basis of John 12: 32; 1 Cor. 12: 12-13 and Eph. 4: 4-6: 'Essential to faith in Christ is the acceptance of a new community amongst men . . . the visible body of Christians, the Church, is that new community precisely as made manifest both in its nature and in its origin and continuous dependence upon Christ'.⁷ 'We have to join ourselves to the general community of Christians, which exists as an historical and present fact, and to the whole Christian tradition, which also exists as an historical and present fact'.⁸ He says that the reason he has not joined any other denomination is that 'a Christian aware of the present situation will recognize the relativity and incompleteness of the traditions of all the Churches. He will want to place himself in the Christian historical experience as a whole in all its diversity'.⁹ It may be objected that experience would seem to show that this is *not* in fact possible without some kind of commitment, in the long run, to a historic denomination. It is a question of the way in which human community actually functions, and Davis' own analogy of the liberating and enriching potential resulting from the commitment of marriage would seem to point the same way. Protestantism is not a rival, and therefore equally incomplete and questionable ecclesiastical system to that of the Church of Rome, even if that is what in effect it has too often become. In reality Davis' conception of the Church as he expounds it here is substantially very close to that of the Reformers themselves. It is both inclusive and exclusive on the grounds of Scripture and the Spirit of God alone, and not of any human traditions of interpretation, even Protestant ones. On the other hand it must be admitted that one does not, by merely devaluing the authority of corrupt institutions, thereby wholly neutralise their destructive and alienating power and it is precisely here that the problem arises for many Evangelical Protestants. 'What I hold is that the present social structure of the Church is no longer a living institution, in as much as it no longer adequately embodies Christian experience'.¹⁰ 'The fundamental shape of the Church . . . is determined by its mission, which is its purpose or *raison d'être*. The mission of bringing the Good News of Christ to men is not a function

added to the Church, which it can neglect while remaining essentially intact as the Church of Christ. It determines its essence, so that the Church is by definition the body of men who are the visible witnesses of Christ in the world.¹¹ The answer would seem to be, not that we should delude ourselves into thinking that we can do without institutions, or that the Church will not in some sense or another inevitably be an institution, but that we must seek to develop institutions which will be so unpretentious in their very nature that they will be transparent to the message which the Church exists by definition to bear. The heart of this message is that it concerns an initiative of GOD, as over against the radical incapacity to save of every human effort, however impressive. The trouble with ecclesiastical institutions is that they tend by their very existence to belie this *alpha et omega* of the Gospel. And since human beings are in fact far more weightily influenced by the inherent symbolism of things than by rational argument, no amount of correct teaching and preaching of the Gospel in words can counteract this influence. A simple example of this would be the frightening extent to which the success or failure of the Church's mission is in the Church of England, humanly speaking, dependent upon the personality of the incumbent. This would not *ipso facto* be remedied by the substitution of a corporate for an individual ministry, nor even by the introduction of a predominantly non-professional ministry in place of the present salaried caste system, although both of these measures would undoubtedly provide more freedom of movement. The root of the matter goes deeper still. Because the Church *exists* to proclaim its message, and does in fact proclaim a message of sorts by its very existence, whether the Church appears to ordinary people as first and foremost a community of sacrificial love, or as an organisation of people who are very anxious to get you to come to their services and meetings, becomes a matter of supreme importance. And it would seem today as if until we can get this right, we had better leave off doing literally everything else.

The above is simply an attempt to state in other words what is the basic thesis of the central part of Davis' book, which is that modern atheism and agnosticism have their roots in Christianity itself, and are at least in part the effect of the inadequate concept of God fostered by Christendom. God has been built in to the *status quo* by the Church to such an extent that with the disappearance of the *status quo* faith in God has also to a large extent disappeared and Christians themselves are left with a problem of God. This is not just a problem for philosophical theology, but a cultural problem, and consists in the now urgent necessity of purifying our concept of God from those elements which tie it to the world view and culture of Christendom. 'But even such a purification will not of itself solve the problem of relating modern culture to the Christian faith. Modern man has developed his culture largely under the aegis of secularism or radical immanentism. He will not be easily converted. To convert the post-Christian is not the same as to convert the pagan. And the Christian Church will have to die in its present state before it rises again.'¹²

A further implication of this same thesis is for our understanding of what is commonly called ecumenism. It would scarcely be unfair to

say that the motive force behind most of the contemporary official initiatives in this field would indeed appear to be what Davis defines as 'the desire for an over-arching organisation embracing the totality of Christian tradition, life and mission'.¹³ Davis maintains that this desire for a unified Christian social structure is mistaken, and that it springs from a threefold misunderstanding. Firstly, from a nostalgia for a static, hierarchical view of reality and society which is now irretrievably past; secondly, from a failure to recognize that the only all-embracing framework for the saving mission of Christ and the work of Christians is mankind and human history, not the visible Church; and thirdly, from a misconception about the relation which exists between the visible Church and the world. The visible Church is not an exclusive area of the sacred, marked off from a profane world, but the human community itself as rendered manifest in its nature, destiny and dependence from Christ's salvation.¹⁴

This last point is one which Evangelicals might wish to discuss further with the author, and it is certainly not the only one. Take away the distinctively Roman Catholic elements from a modern 'conservative-progressive' Roman theologian, and one clearly does not automatically arrive at a Protestant Evangelical! Davis' few remarks about Biblical authority are inadequate and unconvincing to say the least. His rather naïve optimism about the 'human community' and the possibilities inherent in free and untrammelled communication among men of good-will, and his comparative silence about sin, evil, judgement, and the desperate nature of the human predicament without Christ may relate to this and to the influence on him of contemporary theological fashion. In one place, the solution which Christ brings is even equated with 'interpersonal communion amongst men'.¹⁵ There is a certain implicit Pelagianism in some of his affirmations which will not surprise those who have always considered this to be a characteristic of Roman Catholic theology. Perhaps there are dregs of Catholicism remaining even in Charles Davis?

NOTES

- ¹ cf. *Herder Correspondence*, March 1968, p.94.
- ² cf. *Church of England Newspaper*, Feb. 2nd, 1968, p.1.
- ³ Hodder and Stoughton, 1967, 30s.
- ⁴ *Leviathan*, Chapter XLVII
- ⁵ p.145-6.
- ⁶ p.60. Italics not in the original.
- ⁷ p.57.
- ⁸ p.175.
- ⁹ p.169.
- ¹⁰ p.76.
- ¹¹ p.102.
- ¹² cf. pp.187-8.
- ¹³ pp.225-6.
- ¹⁴ p.226.
- ¹⁵ p.57.