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Editorial

The Anglican-Methodist Union Debacle

THE results of the crucial voting on 8 July 1969 are by now well known, but the background is not so well known, and some things that went on give us cause for hesitation before we get caught up in the emotional whirl and rush headlong down the ecumenical trail. Let us start with the events of 8 July.

It began for us with a short conversation with an official at Lambeth Palace during the course of which that official, a senior man of many years standing and experience, said that it was 'anti-Christian to criticise the Archbishop on a day like this'. Somehow that saying summed up the mood. Officialdom was determined to get this scheme through; every trick and pressure method was in order; in debate no holds were barred. The Bishop of Ely inaugurated the debate with a lengthy speech. At the outset he laboured the point that he had not been put up to make his speech (a comment which caused a knowing smile from a seasoned press veteran next to us), but made it *ex animo*. The Bishop sought to minimise criticism, and in particular the plain rejection of the scheme by the House of Laity. His duplicated text circulated in advance to the press cited a letter in *The Times* from six members of the House of Laity, all ardent supporters of the scheme, in which they sought to nullify the Laity voting. The Bishop apparently wanted to use this, and *The Times* newspaper seized on this citing the Bishop quoting itself approvingly. Unfortunately for *The Times*, the Bishop omitted that section of his speech in actual delivery (no doubt *The Times* man was having his morning coffee). The Bishop had little choice, for the Convocation members had in their hands a printed open letter signed by more than a third of the House of Laity, including some who voted for the scheme, reaffirming the House's decision and repudiating the six.

The star turn of the afternoon was the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech. It was a pathetic affair, juggling every figure he could to save a scheme which he had backed but which was palpably sinking. We cite parts of it verbatim simply to show to what extents emotional pleas for union schemes can drive a man, even an archbishop. Dr. Ramsey: 'I cannot find any guidance in the resolutions of the House of Laity.

Two contradictory resolutions were passed at a meeting from which a third of the members were absent. I note however the overwhelming evidence of the laity in the Diocesan Conferences that they want the proposals to go forward. I cannot doubt that if the proposals do go forward there will be between now and the bringing of the legislation to Parliament fresh expressions of support from the laity of a no less impressive kind.'

The open letter made plain that the laity were not such fools as the Archbishop imagined. Having voted the scheme through by a very few votes, they realised that such a scheme was not viable and would be deeply divisive, so they asked for a new and different one. *Pace* the Archbishop, that was quite logical and plain to anyone who had troubled to read the debate. As to attendance, laity are not in the same position as clergy, but, despite that, the House of Laity attendance was the second highest in your editor's decade of membership. No one blames an Archbishop for disagreeing with the House of Laity, but half truths and misrepresentation are another matter.

The Archbishop had sought to push aside the House of Laity voting, which he had so magnified a few months earlier (in public at a press conference), but then in his next paragraph he sought to minimise the clergy referendum thus:

'I ask whether the fact that in the referendum of the clergy two thirds said they would and a third said they would not take part in the Service of Reconciliation constitutes a reason for the Convocations to say "no" today. It would of course be a grave precedent if the Convocations were to abandon their own judgment as a constitutional body in favour of rule by plebiscites.'

So in one paragraph the Archbishop can play down the House of Laity voting and play up the local lay voting, and then in the next, when the same plea would suit his case less well, he can decry the influence of a clergy plebiscite. Does he want to follow voting at local 'consultative' level or at central 'official' level? Even Archbishops cannot expect to have all their cake and still eat it.

It seems all too typical of the extremities to which supporters of the scheme have been driven. Theological integrity is at a very low ebb. Manipulation of figures, emotional appeals, and pressure tactics are, instead, the order of the day. The situation is indeed deplorable, and ought to make readers think very carefully whether ecumenical schemes promote union based on sound theology or whether they are not just battles of power politics as Ian Henderson has alleged.

The Archbishop was not the only bishop to come out of that debate with little credit. The Bishop of London who had earlier said how difficult it would be for him to go forward with sections of his diocesan clergy against the scheme came out in support of the scheme, despite

a clear overall adverse vote in his diocese, saying that the problems could be cleared up after Stage one.

The events of that day make depressing recording, but they are eloquent of what can happen when division appears over union schemes. We doubt if the British ecumenical scene can be quite the same again after this. The church as a whole had been exhorted to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Now that it has come Archbishops and bishops do not seem to want to accept it.

In an interview on the radio after the vote the Archbishop was asked if he would now resign. He replied with what seemed to be an embarrassed laugh and attempted to shrug the suggestion off. But deeper questions are involved. Archbishops depend a great deal on church confidence, and it has to be asked, no more than asked, how long an archbishop can go on backing schemes vigorously, then having them turned down by the church of which he is archbishop, and yet retain confidence. Dr. Ramsey has backed this scheme and lost. He has backed the Fenton Morley report, and if we forecast aright, seems likely to lose this autumn. How much longer can this go on? On the political front it was not so very long ago that no less a person than Quintin Hogg, a known churchman and leading politician, vigorously criticised the Archbishop in the Beaverbrook press. Is the present Archbishop capable of restoring relations with leading M.P.'s which his predecessor was so careful to keep right?

All this makes us ask the question about the occupancy of Canterbury and Lambeth. There is nothing personal in this. Those who know Dr. Ramsey have a great personal regard for him, and his theological writings have had a valuable and steadying influence in days of considerable uncertainty and confusion. The real question is whether Dr. Ramsey has proved himself in the realm of church leadership, or whether his undoubted gifts are not better employed, as previously, in academic life and in writing. It is an open question. Confidence in bishops and archbishops is not exactly high at the present moment, and their ability to lead effectively and with theological integrity is not obvious, to say the least.

The Evidence of Sociology

SOCIOLOGICAL surveys are providing new insights into what is really happening in ecumenical circles. As yet the studies are not plentiful, but small surveys are building up a picture. Whilst ecclesiastics pontificate how much youth wants union schemes and how the laity want them and only a few awkward clergy hold things up, the sociologists are getting at actual evidence rather than vague and unsubstantiated generalisations. David Martin's *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* (SCM, 186 pp., 25s.) after apologising that the intended

volume on race has not materialised (thank goodness for that, for the subject is much overworked and such a volume would not have had the general interest of the present substitute) produces a fascinating selection of articles, three of them dealing with Anglican-Methodist matters. The first is a survey of Methodist churches south of London, one of which has a residual Primitive tradition. We might have guessed that those who had chosen to become Methodists would be less keen on union than those who had always been Methodists, but an extremely disturbing trend is that the keener a Methodist is and the more regularly he attends his chapel, the more likely he is to be critical of the union scheme. That must mean that the heart even of S. Eastern Methodism (not noticeably an opposition area to the current scheme) is largely critical. Also those who were members of Methodist organisations were 'a good deal cooler towards the idea of unity than those who were not members' (p. 33). The survey bears out Bryan Wilson's contention that religious professionals are more favourable towards unity than the laity in general. There is evidence of a more formal and sacerdotal concept of the church among unity supporters, and women are more critical of union than men.

The second essay studies northern Methodism and shows how locally disruptive apparent agreement at national level between leaders can be. The writer thinks ecumenism is the church's answer to being pushed aside, and that in the long run it is no answer at all. He thinks ecumenism is clergy dominated and actually provides the Methodist minister with a chance to gain equal social status with his Anglican counterpart. Bryan Wilson has already drawn attention to this flattery element. The author's conclusion is that ecumenism will only increase the rate of institutional collapse in the end. The rest of the book (including studies of a Faith mission and the Humanists) is equally fascinating but not directly relevant here.

American Evidence

ANOTHER piece of ecumenically revealing statistical information has come from America. The Missionary Research Library publishes from time to time missionary statistics. These show unmistakably that those churches and religious groups not related to the National Council of Churches all show *considerable* missionary growth against comparative prewar figures. Among churches linked with the NCC but not involved in unions there has been *some* growth but much slighter and some decline. Among churches involved in unions there has been *almost nothing but decline*. Recent history seems to support the sociological conclusions. The facts are very clear. Whether the cause is liberalism and syncretistic theology or not, the evidence is there.

What conclusions should we draw from all this? First, in ecumenism theology must be foremost and paramount. The pragmatic Englishmen tends to pay occasional lip-service to this, and then ignore it. The emotional reactions of ecumenical enthusiasts at the defeat of the scheme are understandable, though any impartial observer could see before 8 July that the two most theologically aware groups in the Church of England were anything but convinced, and that the scheme was therefore inevitably doomed. To be viable any union scheme must be theologically acceptable to the overwhelming majorities in both churches. The current union scheme was an utter failure on this front, and attempts by various bishops to try it again only underline the theological blindness of so many ecumenical enthusiasts.

Second, there has been failure after failure on the part of leaders in both churches. They seem determined to press on regardless of opposition, attempting to brush it all off as prejudice, ignorance and various other unflattering things. The smallest atom of statesmanship ought to have enabled the bishops to see what would happen, call the scheme off, avoid the impasse, and seek out a better way. Not a bit of it; most, with the honourable exceptions of Peterborough and Ripon later joined by Carlisle, Leicester and Sheffield, determined to press on regardless. The result? Growing distrust of the leadership (exactly the same is true in Methodism) and increasing suspicion of ecumenical plots and power politics. It will be surprising if future historians can describe the present leadership in both churches as anything other than a disastrous failure.

Third, one of the unexpected by-products of the union debacle has been the growing friendliness and theological proximity of Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. This is not an alliance of political scheming as shortsighted critics have alleged, but a growing concern for a revealed supernatural faith and an exasperation with current ecclesiastical pragmatism. We think we shall hear more of this development in the years ahead, and that a good many Roman Catholics will share the views of this new alliance. What it really comes to is that those who stand for a traditional revealed theologically articulate faith may want to stand together against debased theology at the whim of current fashions.

Fourth, the American evidence cited above means that churches must reassess their priorities. Current ecclesiastical leadership seems to have panicked and sought to avoid a difficult time for the Christian faith by sidetracking attention with a plethora of church reforms, most of them ill thought out or dominated by some passing craze. The American evidence suggests that those who adhere to the clear Gospel imperative to evangelise (and we do not mean that simply in terms of head counting after huge rallies) are pushing forward and maintaining church virility. Those churches which get sucked into far out political causes, into demonstrations, into civil rights crusades, into bureaucratic

ecumenism, into endless conferences and committees, are in grave danger of neglecting theology and in consequence its pastoral out-working and the very proclamation of the evangel.

We conclude with salutary warning from a distinguished sociologist, the more telling because the man states that he believes in political protest: Dr. Peter Berger, Professor at the New School for Social Research, said, 'The one thing that troubles me is that social action . . . can be a convenient method to avoid contact with the question of truth in religion. Instead of asking if God exists, you picket a Selective Service Board or demonstrate for civil rights. While I am personally opposed to the war, and in favour of protest—though not all forms of it—it has nothing to do with the question of God's existence. This activity can be an alibi from facing the theological questions, especially for theological students, and these are questions that should be faced.'

Marriage and Divorce

IN Britain at any rate the subject of divorce has taken up a considerable amount of top lawyers' time. The subject has been debated in Parliament more than once, and many experts have been concerned to find the right legislative basis for divorce. The whole debate is but a part of the larger debate about the permissive society and whether the more absolute morality of the past should be replaced in law and if so by what. Such debates are not of course confined to Britain, and have in fact been widespread throughout the English-speaking world. *A Christian View of Divorce* by D. W. Shaner, Brill, 115 pp., 30 guilders is thus a timely publication. The book is important as a summary for busy Christians rather than as an original contribution to scholarship. It falls into three main sections; the first is valuable as an historical summary of fourteen major studies over the last century, neatly classified on page 30 into conservative (marriage indissoluble), moderate (divorce for adultery and some sexual sins), and liberal (divorce for desertion, adultery and other offences). The classification is of course overneat but it serves a purpose. Not surprisingly Romans and High Anglicans make up the conservative group, whilst Liberal Anglicans fall into the other two groups, and Evangelicals into the liberal category (John Murray and G. A. E. Parkes, a Plymouth Brother). The classification is about right though more thorough research would have indicated a minority of Evangelicals taking the conservative line.

The second section is a careful summarising of the various biblical text, concentrating mainly on the Gospels and Paul. The texts are set out, the priority of Mark and Q are assumed. Shaner sees a basic harmony in the Gospel texts but thinks the NT shows signs of differing tendencies in the early church. Then he assesses critically the various

writers, and gives his own conclusions (ch. 5). The first four chapters are valuable summaries, but the author's conclusions are much inferior in value. He is obsessed by eschatological influences which seem to explain almost anything and then asks the naive question 'Did Jesus legislate for all time?' answering it with an even more naive list of ethical injunctions which cannot be taken literally. Asking a foolish question of course gets a foolish answer and helps no one. The real question is what Jesus meant by certain statements, not imagined literalistic fulfilments. If the reader ignores chapter 5 and the relevant parts of the conclusions, this publication will be a very serviceable summary of recent debate.

The Methodist Magazine

SOME readers will know that the July 1969 Methodist Conference closed down *The Methodist Magazine* on economy grounds. The magazine had run in unbroken succession since Wesley's own day. By a welcome contrast to some of the ecumenical activities mentioned above, we are glad to be able to state that the Marcham Manor Press in conjunction with a group of Methodists, who retain complete editorial control, plan to continue the magazine with October and December numbers, and on into 1970 if the response justifies this. *The Methodist Magazine* will include *News Extra* plus its own material, thus launching a partnership between Evangelical Churchmen and their Methodist brethren. It is in fact a return to the happy partnership that these two groups enjoyed in the early days following the Evangelical Revival. Any enquiries should be addressed to the new editor, *The Methodist Magazine*, 69 Woodhouse Road, Sheffield S12 2AY.

Churchman Style and Content

PERCEPTIVE readers will have observed that recent numbers of *The Churchman* have contained in this section a modernised lay out. We apologise for varieties of style in the transition period, inevitable if we are to avoid the additional cost of resetting, and hope to turn over to a new lay out during 1970, when we shall also be considering the whole question of content. More of this later. Meanwhile we should welcome comment from readers on both lay out and content. We trust readers will understand that we cannot enter into detailed correspondence on these matters, since already we run with a below minimum staff, but we can assure readers that all comments will be carefully considered and taken into account.

G.E.D.