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Some Realism in the Ecumenical Illusion

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REVIEWING THE FIRST TWO little books* (which can be taken as one, since the whole of the second is included in the first), is the most difficult task ever assigned to me, a reviewer. My first carefully written review lies unused on my table; the whole has had to be done again. After several days of distress, I think that I have at last been able to put my finger on what has troubled me all through.

The nineteen-seventies have proved themselves to be a very serious decade. Both church and world seem almost wholly to have liberated themselves from the follies and futilities of the violent and superficial nineteen-sixties. But nothing of this seems to have penetrated Geneva. The clichés and the jargon are still those of the day before yesterday. Realism will keep creeping in; I have identified it specially at four points, and to these I will devote most of my space. For the rest—the theology here presented seems to be fifteen years or more out of date.

We begin with a pleasant but rather amateurish introduction by a layman, Martin Conway. This has taken me back in thought to my own rather similar experiences at Tambaram 1938, a much more representative assembly than Accra 1974. There too hearing the Africans sing was one of the high lights of the Conference.

Then follows the Report of the Secretary of Faith and Order, Dr. Lukas Vischer. This is the best thing in the book. Dr. Vischer is one of those at Geneva who is still able to think and write theologically. And here comes the first breath of realism. He notes (p. 13) that 'however normal ecumenical relationships have become and however impressive the co-operation in many fields, there is clearly something in the nature of a spiritual emigration from the ecumenical movement'.

* ACCRA 1974: UNITING IN HOPE: REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS FROM THE MEETING OF THE FAITH AND ORDER COMMISSION. World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1975. 144 pp.

GIVING ACCOUNT OF THE HOPE THAT IS IN US. World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1975. 56 pp.

He does not explain the nature of this emigration but the facts are clear. The centre of gravity of the ecumenical movement, whether we like it or not, has moved from Geneva to Rome. The unhappy polarisation between ecumenical and evangelical has become acute; all over the world the Evangelicals are massing their forces, and in almost all the churches. The Pentecostal movement, the fastest growing movement in the Church, is still almost solidly anti-ecumenical. The ordinary man is just bored with the World Council of Churches. He had great hopes of it in 1948. Now all he knows (or thinks he knows) about it is that it is soft on communism, and gives money to terrorists. It is, perhaps, not the business of these reports to indicate how the lost ground can be regained.

We move on to the long section called 'Giving Account of the Hope that is in us' (pp. 25-80). The first thing that is notable is the absence in this section of any serious biblical or theological study. 'Jesus Christ the Hope of the World' was the theme of the World Council's second Assembly at Evanston in 1954. That was an inconclusive Assembly. But so much could perhaps have been saved out of the wreckage: Karl Barth was right in asserting that the only real hope of the Christian lies in the second coming of Christ. He was wrong in failing to recognise that there are also proximate hopes which the Christian is entitled to take seriously: hope for the individual, commonly called regeneration; hope for the church, commonly called revival; hope for society, commonly called renewal; hope for humanity, commonly called redemption. Some such theological introduction might have helped contributors to this section. The strange thing is that some of these writings seem to belong to the euphoric period round about 1925, before the economic blizzard and the failure of the League of Nations brought us to our senses. It is discordant to find Christians using in 1974 the word Utopia, which went out of Christian parlance fifty years ago. We are told that the contributions printed in these pages are a selection from a much larger number sent in. We are dependent on the editors for the selection. The statements are too many for a book this size, too few to give a general perspective on Christian attitudes, of hope and despair in the world of today.

John Deschner, on 'The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind', gives us our second gleam of realism. It has been realised that this title is hopeless (p. 88); it brings together the unity of mankind, which is a biological reality, and the unity of the church which is an eschatological reality, not yet anywhere visible. The tendency towards 'more realism and more modesty' (p. 86) seems to have come too late to help the statement 'Towards Unity in Tension', a statement forwarded to the Fifth Assembly of the WCC to be held in November 1975. It is hard to see how these four feeble pages, the weakest section in the whole book, will be of any service to the Assembly as it tries to deal with the theme 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites'.

The third gleam of realism comes in the utterance of Fr. Karl Lehmann from the Roman Catholic point of view. He states, clearly and temperately (p. 97), the Roman Catholic position that the unity of the church is not something that has to be sought, since it is already there as given by Christ himself in the Roman Catholic Church. With this must be taken the refusal of the President of the Conference, the Orthodox scholar John Meyendorff, to invite for communion any Christians other than those of the Orthodox faith (p. 2). It is just the fact that those two great communions, though they have grown greatly in charity and understanding, have not moved a single inch dogmatically, and that any thought of outward union with them is at the present time a pipe-dream. All the more important that those communions which could unite should recover the impetus that has been lost, and get on with the business of seriously seeking an outward unity according to the will of God.

The next gleam of light comes on page 114. Faith and Order has wasted an enormous amount of time discussing something called 'conciliarity'. The writer of the section 'The Unity of the Church: the Goal and the Way' writes a little sadly, 'We have not yet been able to give sufficient theological clarity to the terms "conciliarity" and "organic union", and to the relation between them'. This is not surprising. 'Conciliarity' is in English practically a non-word. The discussion of the theological status of Councils of Churches, and of the World Council of Churches itself, initiated a good many years ago by President H. P. Van Dusen in his book *One Great Ground of Hope*, is a useful ecumenical exercise. But 'conciliarity' should be banned from all future ecumenical discussions. Either it will lead simply to a restatement of the obvious; or it will lead to words spoken without knowledge. And both these things are if possible to be avoided.

As the Conference was held in Africa, it is right that the report of an African Consultation on Unity should be included (pp. 124-137). This is conventional rather than illuminating. It does just allude (p. 131) to the reality that the difficulties in the way of Christian union in Africa come from African Christians. It was an African Christian and not a foreigner who led the Presbyterian Church of East Africa out of the Committee on Church Union (a mistake which I understand has later been rectified).

Some interesting points do arise out of the discussions. One is in the Report of the Secretary. He writes, 'Many developments in recent years seem to suggest that the regions are becoming much more important in the life of the Churches, and therefore in the life of the ecumenical movement as well' (p. 18). Here once again the World Council of Churches is catching up with itself. After the Manila Conference of 1948, the proposal was made that the world should be regarded as being made up of eight regions—East Asia, the Pacific, Africa south of the Sahara, the world of Islam, the Orthodox world, northern

Europe, North America and Latin America (naturally there is some geographical overlap in these areas). The further suggestion was made that there should be one very carefully prepared regional meeting in each of eight successive years, and that the findings of these meetings should be fed into a world assembly to be held in the tenth year. If this proposal had been implemented, World Council Assemblies might have been delivered from the vacuity which has been their bane. It is quite probable that Dr. Vischer does not even know that this proposal was ever made. Quite likely it lies sunk five fathoms deep in the ocean of ecumenical lumber which overflows the basement of the headquarters in the route de Ferney. It is urgently to be hoped that this sensible suggestion may receive at Nairobi 1975 the attention which it deserves.

It is to be regretted that the World Council has not yet recognised the importance of getting someone skilled in the English language to edit and when necessary rewrite its utterances. It is still possible to find such sentences as 'It is not that we hold this hope—this hope holds us' (p. 29). It is possible to guess what the writer of this sentence meant by it. Simply as a matter of the English language, it is impossible, either grammatically or theologically, to attribute to it any meaning whatever. In English *epikletic* and *anamnetic* are non-words. There is no difficulty in expressing what is meant in ordinary English. Ecumenical reports ought to be widely read. It is desirable that no more difficulties should be placed in the way of the reader than is strictly necessary.

Over all the reading and study of this report hangs one dark shadow. If this is the best that the Conference on Faith and Order could produce, ought the conference to have been held at all? Such Conferences are extremely expensive. No one knows what the Nairobi Assembly is likely to cost. We are being told every day that half of the world's population goes hungry and that the funds available are far less than adequate to meet the needs. At such a time is the church justified in involving itself in such enormous expenditure, even in a cause which in itself is defensible? Well, the Assembly is going to be held. Let us pray earnestly that the realists will be able to make their voices heard, and that this time the illusionists will not be allowed to have it all their own way.

The third booklet* records discussions held over a number of years, and the measure of agreement reached in ecumenical circles on the three subjects indicated in the title. It is certainly good that so many misunderstandings have been cleared away, and that agreement has been reached at so many points. To one who was deeply engaged in the discussions that led to the formation of the Church of South India, it cannot but be gratifying that the ecumenical movement as a whole has

* ONE BAPTISM ONE EUCHARIST AND A MUTUALLY RECOGNISED MINISTRY: FAITH AND ORDER PAPER No. 73. World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1975. 61 pp.

caught up with much that was thought, said and done in South India forty years ago.

No list of participants is given, and it is hard to know how far those who took part in the discussions were really representative of the churches. No Baptist seems to have been present to state the Baptist position in relation to baptism (pp. 16-17). The vast majority of Baptists, Brethren and Pentecostals hold that both profession of faith by the candidate and baptism by immersion are *essential* to the rite, and that, if either of these is lacking, no baptism at all has taken place. There can, therefore, be no question of a repetition of baptism. If they ceased to hold this view, they would naturally cease to be Baptists. One sees again how unfortunate it is that such great bodies as the Southern Baptists are not associated with the World Council of Churches.

No Anglican seems to have explained why, whereas Anglicans are happy to use the phrase *vera praesentia* of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, they have never accepted in any of their formulae the phrase *praesentia realis*, and do not see any reason why other churches cannot accept what to them is the much more acceptable expression (p. 22).

It is a pity that no Evangelical seems to have been there to expound the Evangelical attitude towards baptism and confirmation. Evangelicals throughout the world regard the public profession of faith in Christ in the presence of the congregation as *essential* in the response of faith to the divine initiative in baptism, and the Holy Communion as the festival of those who have made this public profession of faith. It is precisely because they 'have fully appreciated and accepted the consequences of infant baptism' (p. 15) that they maintain this theological position.

Most of the writing in this work is highly theological. At this point a little sociological study might be interesting. Which churches do, as a matter of fact, have any appreciable number of communicants between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five? As far as the observations of one ecumenical traveller go, the answer is, those only which work for a definite (but not emotional) conversion, which insist on a period of careful and thorough instruction, which insist in confirmation both on the public profession of faith and on the laying on of hands with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and on the Holy Communion as the festival of those who have thus committed themselves to live and die with and for Christ.

The section on Ministry is mainly hortatory rather than theological. The same emollient tone as runs through all the reports is present. On such a controversial subject as the ordination of women (pp. 45-48), the pros and the cons are so neatly balanced as to leave the reader wondering whether anything really needs to be changed in the present situation. But here too we note the tendency to think that, if differences are not clearly stressed, they will somehow steal away and

disappear. 'The churches without episcopal succession . . . do not have the fulness of the *sign* of apostolic succession' (p. 56). Was no Presbyterian present to state the claim of his church that it *has* the fulness of apostolic succession in both sign and reality, and that any claim by Roman Catholics or Anglicans to have in some way *more* apostolic succession is due only to arrogance and to theological illiteracy? Those who have engaged in actual negotiations with a view to union know very well that no progress at all is possible until we grasp every nettle, and face honestly every difficulty in the way.

There is too much careless writing in these documents, and careless writing usually leads on to bad theology. Unfortunately in many passages *Anamnesis* is rendered by the term 'memorial'. Nothing has done more harm to eucharistic theology and to liturgical revision than the use of the term 'memorial' in this connection. *Anamnesis* does *not* mean 'memorial', it means 'remembrance' and should always be so translated. In the Passover context of the Last Supper, the idea of 'reliving with Christ' is hardly separable from the word.

'It is appropriate, of course, to think of God's use of man's metaphors as no less sacramental than his use of such products of human labour as bread and wine' (p. 40). Others may be able to make some sense of this sentence; I must confess myself to be completely baffled. 'As Christ offers himself for all men, the Christian offers his whole being as "a living sacrifice" Rom. 12:1' (p. 35). This must be regarded as very dangerous doctrine. Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for the *sins* of all men; this is exactly what the Christian, who is himself a forgiven sinner, cannot do.' 'It will largely consist in gathering and building up some form of missioning Christian community' (p. 43). 'Mission' in English is a noun and not a verb, and should be so used. It would be tedious to continue.

The discussions recorded in these pages have not been without their value. They must continue. Let us hope, however, that they may be led into paths which, though more difficult, are likely in the end to be productive of greater fruit. At the very first meeting of the Joint Committee on Church Union in South India which I attended in 1935, I made a speech in favour of brutal frankness; it seemed to me that the members of the Committee had just got too polite. The truth must be spoken. It must of course be spoken in love. But in that phrase the word 'love' must not be so interpreted as to bring about any possibility of the obscuration of the truth.