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Editorial

'Universal Primacy' and reality

It is ironical that the most realistic reactions to the ARCIC report (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report, Windsor, September 1981*, CTC/SPCK, London 1982) have appeared neither from the hysterical Protestant wing nor from the ecumenically motivated centre of the churches, but rather from the secular press. That this has been so is at first glance rather surprising, though on further reflection it makes more sense. The problem is that the perceptions of both sets of churchmen are so coloured by their vision either of the past or of the future that they cannot easily come to terms with the reality of the present.

The extreme Protestants regard Rome as, in effect, Antichrist. They are unwilling to grant to its present manifestation any significant change, or the possibility of any measure of spiritual discernment. It remains essentially the same as it was at the Reformation and, in their attitudes, such Protestants claim to stand four-square on the traditions of the Reformers. As is typical of many who claim to stand in the traditions of the past, in fact they show little awareness of the complexity of these traditions. If they did, they would understand that the condemnations of Roman Catholicism by those they claim to represent were, though delivered in very vigorous language, less ungenerous in their estimates, and more open to the possibility of movement, than their twentieth-century equivalents. So Luther, who in the antipapal vituperation scales would lose nothing to Ian Paisley, argued that 'the Christendom that now is under the papacy is truly the body of Christ and a member of it. If it is his body, then it has the true spirit, gospel, faith, baptism, sacraments, keys, the office of the ministry, prayer, holy Scripture, and everything that pertains to Christendom' (J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols, Fortress and Concordia Presses, Philadelphia and St Louis 1955–, vol. 40, p.232). The critique of such extreme Protestantism is, in brief, that it recalls neither its own past traditions about Roman Catholicism, nor judges the present realities correctly.

The problem with the ecumenically motivated centre of the mainstream churches is that their commendable vision of the future ecumenical paradise affects their balance of judgement. They simply do not seem able to come to terms with the reality of contemporary Roman Catholicism. So the most recent ARCIC report demonstrates the masterly ability of theologians—united by theological affinities which are the product of eleven years camaraderie and fellowship—to slide over the differences of the past and to produce a measure of

consensus about the future. That achievement would be of much greater import if it was not so illusory when compared with the actuality of Roman Catholicism. It is of course a matter of the greatest significance that Roman Catholicism is taken seriously as a church, even by the most ardent evangelical Anglicans. It is a matter of rejoicing that there have been momentous changes within Roman Catholicism, and indeed within Anglicanism, which give both a greater appreciation of each other. Yet the divide remains very great, at any rate to all who are not in the Church Union wing of Anglicanism. The divide relates to a whole host of theological issues, on many of which ARCIC has undoubtedly made advances—though much of it more flimsy and tenuous than is often realized—but it is centred most crucially in the understanding of the nature of priesthood and the primacy of the papacy. This is where the perceptions of the secular press have been so salutary.

The secular journalist becomes impatient with the nuances of theological debate, and his impatience is of course no measure of the importance of the issues being discussed. His antenna is, however, particularly acute when it relates to institutions with a high visibility. Thus he can see the papacy, Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism with a degree of objectivity which few insiders can match. What journalists have perceived is worlds so different, that only a frank determination to alter radically the understandings of the past would bring the sort of meaningful unity towards which the latest ARCIC statement is pointing. There are many theological questions which are asked elsewhere in this issue—particularly why universal primacy is so self-evidently the right way forward and why it should be centred on one see, however ancient—but the crunch journalistic criticism is equally important. This is that such a watered-down papacy has nothing whatsoever to do with the way the actual papacy conducts itself, most of all in the shape of John Paul II. *The Times* exactly posed the problem in a leader of instant perspicacity unmatched by any churchmen. It pointed to the realities of widely differing and polarized histories, and continued:

> No echo of these great acts and long habits of history, which will reverberate in living minds, is audible from the texts of the joint theological commission. There the papacy assumes an angelic pallor which those favourably and unfavourably disposed towards it will alike have difficulty in recognizing, and which the comportment of the present Pope belies.

It argues that there must either be considerable change in the understanding of the papacy, 'or Romans and Anglicans must embrace one formula for the primacy, reserving to themselves alternative and incompatible versions of what it signifies.' It asserts, surely rightly: 'That would not be conducive to truth' *(The Times,* 9 March 1982,

p.13). Conor Cruise O'Brien made a similar point in *The Observer,* concluding that John Paul II did not look in the least like Dr McAdoo's 'universal primate', and expressing his dislike of 'the false ecumenism that dresses up disagreement to look like agreement' *(The Observer,* 4 April 1982, p.7).

If this analysis is true, it is worrying for a number of reasons. Firstly, it enhances the prospect of conflict within Anglicanism. If both the more extreme Protestants and the more ecumenically motivated churchmen have a perception of reality which is distorted at opposing poles, then their own estimate of each other is likely to diminish more than a cooler assessment of events would warrant. This prospect has been considerably enhanced by what is, from an Anglican perspective, the strategically inept timing of the publication of the report. Conspiracy theories are always attractive to those on the defensive, and to publish the report in the general context of a papal visit is greatly to increase the fears of Machiavellian behind-the-scenes sell-outs. Some Protestant Anglicans have spoken strongly, perhaps over-strongly, so there have been impatient attempts to deny that they speak as Anglicans—even some evidence of diocesan pressure against them for having so done—and some Catholic Anglicans have been so enthusiastically welcoming of both report and visit that their less Catholic co-denominationalists have found it more difficult to be sympathetic to their position. It is the irony of ecumenical attempts which are not soundly based, not only that they fail, but also that they cause a heightening of divisions within the sponsoring bodies.

Secondly, it makes more likely the prospect of confusion amongst both the committed laity and uncommitted men of good will. Disunity is a scandal. Disunity without a proper cause is an even greater scandal. Any attempt to minimize falsely the theological reality of disunity therefore does a disservice, because it suggests that churches are closer to each other than they actually are, and increases the sense of puzzlement and outrage when they seem not to grasp the unity which is so apparently close.

Thirdly, it tends to reduce the classic attraction of Anglicanism as a *via media.* To those who find the sheer authoritarianism of Roman Catholicism impossible to stomach, Anglicanism offers an alternative way which, while demonstrating the sympathy for tradition and religious mystery which Catholicism maintains, also gives the Bible a determinative authority, appeals to the mind, and allows a variety of interpretation. Of course this alternative has not been surrendered, but some might be forgiven for not noticing it so readily if official Anglicanism sees any meaningful relationship between the dehistoricized and theoretical 'universal primacy' of ARCIC and the highly papalized actuality of the primacy of John Paul II.

This is written before the papal visit, but with the fear that the apparent *rapprochement* of views which has been reached has actually

weakened the appeal Anglicanism might have had in a somewhat charged religious atmosphere. It could have rejoiced with those many parts of the Christian heritage which it holds in common with Roman Catholicism, while at the same time making clear its reservations about the form of papalism being demonstrated. That would be important, for however newsworthy and attractive such papalism may be in the short run, it has many aspects which are as offensive to men of good will as to classical Protestant theology. By conniving at a theological analysis which, though skilful and seminal in itself, fails because it does not relate sufficiently to present reality, and by presenting it at a time when its highly tentative actual significance was most likely to be distorted, Anglicanism may have missed an opportunity, on a rare scale, to underline its distinctive ethos and role. Meanwhile the gain is largely on the Roman Catholic side. The papacy is made to look benign as the visit approaches. Reality can, and of course will, reassert itself later.

Such pragmatic considerations have apparently not been allowed to influence the ARCIC Anglican representatives. That is a pity. We have a right to expect that theologians, when they act as representatives of their church in crucial matters, have a better grasp of reality and a better appreciation of the immediate diplomatic and political use that may be made of their visions of distant ecumenical horizons.

An élite gerontocracy?

Three years ago this editorial drew attention to George Moyser's analysis of the 1975 General Synod *(Churchman,* 93, 1979, p.197). He has now provided a similar analysis of the most recently elected representatives ('The 1980 General Synod: Patterns and Trends', *Crucible,* April–June 1982, pp.75–86). It offers small comfort to those who might have been hopeful for signs of change in the decision-making body of the Church of England.

Apart from a trend towards more women representatives, all the characteristics remain as previously. General Synod representatives continue to be middle-aged and, when they are laymen, to have upper-middle-class occupations. Indeed Moyser concludes that what movement there is—the increase of women apart—is 'towards the consolidation of synodical ties with the most privileged sectors of society' (p.77). He examines the profile of those who hold significant church office amongst the synod members, finds that 50 per cent are over sixty and, not unreasonably, postulates 'a very pronounced gerontocratic tendency in the distribution of committee assignments and presumably, therefore, in the way policy is made' (p.78). He finds, as well, that those with higher status occupations have twice as much likelihood of holding important positions as those from lower-middle-class backgrounds—there are of course virtually no working-class

representatives (1 per cent).

His analysis indicates furthermore that there are other notable imbalances. The qualifications of representatives were heavily biased towards the more traditional disciplines and professions. Few had qualifications in economics, management, the social sciences, or the media (p.80). Few had ties with political and governmental institutions, only 2 per cent were trade unionists, and 'links with important economic, commercial or industrial associations seemed to be virtually non-existent' (p.82).

There is no suggestion that individual representatives are anything less than an accurate reflection of the wishes of the electorate. However, it is fair to wonder whether that electorate is aware of the cumulative effects of its decisions. Is it aware that the working class is not represented? Is it aware that synod is dominated in its important committees by an ageing élite? There must be respect for the wisdom of age, and for achievement and proven competence in secular life. There should, however, also be a measure of balance: a feel that the grass-roots voice can be heard; a confidence that, though the active membership of the Church of England may be more socially and economically privileged than the nation as a whole, its own representatives do not compound the imbalance by being an élite within an élite. The remedy may lie in an effort to make the constituency aware of the present lack of balance. This should presumably start with discussion at PCC and deanery synod level.

PETER WILLIAMS

Attention please

Newbold College Library is anxious to acquire back numbers of *Churchman*. We have been able to supply the majority of issues since the beginning of 1949, but they still need the following: 1949:1; 1954:2; 1956:1; 1958:3; 1959:3; 1960:1; 1974:2; 1975:2; 1976:3, 1977:1, 2; 1978:4.

We shall be glad to hear from any reader who can let us have some, or all, of these issues. In addition, offers of complete volumes prior to 1949 would be appreciated.

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The Rev. Canon George Boardman Davies

We regret very much to record the death of Canon Davies. A fuller notice will appear in our next issue.