

The Approach to Unity through the Scriptures

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In a television interview on the religious position of the Church of England recently given, the new Archbishop of York, Dr Coggan, said that he was an Evangelical, but with a high doctrine of the Church. This is as if his predecessor, Dr Ramsey, now Primate of all England at Canterbury, had said in a similar interview, as he might well have done, that he was an Anglo-Catholic but with a marked infusion of Evangelicalism.

The very real fact that two such statements, actual or hypothetical, represent is of profound ecumenical significance. The Church of England, and indeed world-wide Anglicanism as a whole, is a microcosm of the Ecumenical movement, for it contains in an organism which is highly cohesive in outlook and spirit most of the widely differing elements which exist within the World Council of Churches. It follows that the process of evolution going on within Anglicanism is likely to be reproduced, and is in fact now being reproduced, within the wider context of the main allegiances of World Protestantism.

One aspect of this process, and a fundamental one, is the increasing unity of outlook which marks the approach of many sections of divided Christendom to the Scriptures. In this we Catholics have both a share and a deep interest. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century Liberalism in the non-Catholic world took a lead in the scientific criticism of the Scriptural documents. In its eagerness however to lay bare the exact nature and provenance of the sources (in itself an excellent aim) it virtually rejected the doctrine of divine inspiration, lost sight very largely of the need for theological interpretation of the data of revelation, and came in consequence to discard any adequate recognition of what revelation itself involves.

Post-Liberal Protestantism, under the influence of Karl Barth and other scholars working in the same field and with the same or similar pre-suppositions, has to a considerable extent returned to traditional orthodoxy as to the foundation tenets of the Christian faith. It has done so without prejudice to the use of historical and critical know-

ledge in the search for which the Liberals were pioneers. Theological thinking concerning the biblical data has come back into its own and with it a growing appreciation of the nature of revelation itself.

The Roman Catholic Church, affected fundamentally neither by Liberalism nor by the Modernism that grew out of it, continued to insist on an exact appreciation of the nature of biblical inspiration and its corollary, biblical inerrancy. Its chief concern was to preserve this as basic to the very nature of the biblical revelation, guarded and interpreted by the teaching authority of the believing community, the Church. In the work of scientific criticism Roman Catholic progress, with notable exceptions, was slower and certainly more prudent in the acceptance of 'assured' results. The encyclical of Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, with its strong emphasis on critical scholarship in general and in particular on the importance of *genera litteraria*, has been a liberating charter to the biblical theologian, especially in the elucidation of the nature and scope of inerrancy in the light of new critical knowledge. He is able now to meet the non-Catholic scholar in ecumenical dialogue on largely common ground.

Until relatively lately the Evangelical movement in the Church of England was an exclusive enclosure of a Fundamentalism, which involved a theory of biblical inspiration necessitating what the Abbot of Downside has called, in a recent *Tablet* correspondence, the Hansard Report view of the historical truth of the Scriptures. The Anglo-Catholic movement, on the other hand, since Bishop Gore began writing in the eighties of the last century, was for long in the forefront of biblical liberalism, though it remained less affected, at least on the surface, by the principles underlying Liberalism's misconceptions of the nature of revelation. Thirty or more years ago however a change began to take place, under the influence from Cambridge of Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, himself largely influenced by Karl Barth. Since then Anglo-Catholicism has steadily returned to a more orthodox theological appreciation of the nature of biblical revelation. This appreciation certainly opens a way to a dialogue with Catholic theologians, versed in the idiom of biblical theology and able to apply to it fruitfully the categories of the scholastic discipline, as they are found in St Thomas Aquinas.

In the light of Archbishop Coggan's remark quoted above it will be of interest here to examine the latest move in the convergence towards a unity of view on the authority of Holy Scripture of the Evangelical group and the rest of the Church of England. In the *Times* of September

22nd 1960, the following communication from its correspondent appeared:

‘The Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen which ended at St Peter’s Hall, Oxford, today, has presented the following six findings:

“We affirm that acceptance of our Lord’s teaching that Holy Scripture is divinely inspired, true and authoritative is no less binding upon Christian people than acceptance of any other part of his teaching.

“We affirm that the Church cannot confer authority upon early Scripture but must recognize the divine authority inherent in Holy Scripture constantly to regulate and reform her life and order.

“We affirm that when the Holy Spirit inspired the Biblical writers he controlled their choice of both matter and words for the communication of divinely revealed truth.

“We affirm that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture in dependence upon the Holy Spirit and with due regard to the context and the literary category of each passage.

“We affirm that, in so far as Fundamentalism means upholding the inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture and the deity, virgin birth, and atoning work, bodily resurrection and personal return of Christ, it is to be approved as authentic, evangelical, customary to the fundamentals of the Christian creed.

“We affirm that, in so far as Fundamentalism means an obscurantist attitude to Biblical scholarship, a mechanical doctrine of Inspiration and an arbitrary liberalism in Biblical interpretation, it is false to the principles of historic Evangelicism”.’

A Catholic biblical scholar has kindly contributed the following assessment of the above findings from the point of view of Catholic scholarship:

‘Careful examination reveals that there is not a single proposition here which is not at least susceptible of a Catholic interpretation, though in practically every case a Catholic theologian would feel compelled to make precisions. It will be noticed that in these six propositions three distinct points are considered: first, the inspiration of Scripture; second, its interpretation; third, the role of the Church in relation to Scripture.

‘With regard to the first of these, it is affirmed as a sacred and essential part of our Lord’s teaching, and as such binding upon all Christians (prop. 1), that the Holy Spirit inspires the biblical authors by “controlling their choice both of matter and words” in such a way that they express “divinely revealed truth” (prop. 3) which “is authoritative

for Christian people" (prop. 1). This must not, however, be taken to imply "a mechanical doctrine of inspiration" characteristic of the wrong kind of fundamentalism (prop. 6).

'Catholic teaching on this point, equally regarded as sacred and derived from our Lord, is that the Holy Spirit positively moves the biblical author's mind, will and executive faculties in such a way that he conceives of rightly, wills to record faithfully in writing, and expresses aptly and infallibly all the truth and only the truth which God wills him to write, and which is, therefore, to be held sacred, true and authoritative by all Christians. Catholics equally reject a mechanical doctrine of inspiration. The biblical author is in no sense reduced to the role of a *passive* instrument or secretary by the movement of the Holy Spirit. His human personality is as fully and actively engaged in the writing as in any other specifically human activity. He writes as a man of his age and nation, and the writing bears the stamp of his human individuality, style, mannerisms and so on. Thus the Catholic explanation is simply an ampler and more precise statement of the same basic doctrine.

'In interpreting Scripture, the need for divine guidance is unequivocally recognized in the words "in dependence upon the Holy Spirit" (prop. 4). Fundamentalism in the false sense, which would imply "an obscurantist attitude to Biblical scholarship . . . and an arbitrary literalism in biblical interpretation" is expressly rejected (prop. 6). "Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture . . . with due regard to the context and the literary category of each passage" (prop. 6). Here one important reservation must be made. Though the proposition that "Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture" may be admitted and welcomed as a subordinate norm, it must not be allowed to obscure or to replace the *primary* and *external* norm (external, that is, to Scripture itself) of the Church's teaching authority.

'Subject to this the agreement is even more striking. Catholic teaching as expounded in the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* agrees point for point with these propositions. Catholics too are urged to pay due and positive regard to the findings of contemporary scholarship. By thorough and scientific research into ancient Near Eastern literature in general, and biblical literature in particular, they must strive to achieve a penetrating understanding of the world in which the Scriptures were written, of the ancient Semitic, as distinct from the modern Western, mentality, and above all of the literary genres (*genera litteraria*) characteristic of the biblical environment and period. Here too obscurantism

and arbitrary literalism are strongly rejected. The primary point, namely the need for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture, is affirmed most emphatically. Yet here again this guidance must be received through the Church herself as authoritative teacher.

'On the third point, namely the role of the Church in regard to Scripture, the Evangelical Churchmen state that "the Church cannot confer authority upon early Scripture but must recognize the divine authority inherent in Holy Scripture constantly to regulate and reform her life and order" (prop. 2). Measured by Catholic belief there is an important sense in which this is true and acceptable. The Church does not cause a book of Scripture to be inspired; she, and she alone, is empowered by the Holy Ghost working within her, as the believing community, to recognize and authoritatively to declare which books are *de facto* divinely inspired. For this purpose (here I think the Evangelicals would disagree) she has recourse to an external principle, namely her own nature, usage and activity. Canoncity is determined by the way in which the relevant books are used and esteemed in the Church's life.

'It is also true that the Church accepts the Scriptures as divinely bestowed guides as to what her life and order should be. In this connection it is relevant to refer to the recent treatise of Dr Karl Rahner, *Über die Schriftinspiration*, in which he considers the *charisma* of inspiration as an integral and constitutive element in the totality of the divine act of forming the Church during the apostolic age, as distinct from her foundation by Christ himself during his earthly life.

'If however this affirmation of the Evangelical Churchmen were taken to mean that Scripture is the exclusive rule of faith and morals for the Church, or that the divine foundation of the Church is secondary and subordinate to the divine inspiration of Scripture, then it would be essentially irreconcilable with Catholic belief, which regards the institution of the Church as prior, and inspiration as ordered to her enlightenment. The essential point of difference, I feel, is that Catholics hold the Church's divine teaching authority as a prior norm, external to Scripture itself, for determining what constitutes inspired Scripture and how it should be interpreted'.

The Anglican Church, as we have noted, is a microcosm of the ecumenical situation of non-Catholic Christendom. A general movement towards internal unity within it, of which the movement under discussion is an important, and indeed a fundamental aspect, is likely to reproduce itself in the Ecumenical movement as a whole. This is in

fact already taking place, and in it Anglo-Catholicism occupies a key position.

The Anglo-Catholic movement is often dated from the rise of Tractarianism, under the leadership of Keble, Pusey and Newman, in the thirties of the last century. In fact its history goes back to the very roots of the English Reformation. It was the Crown, especially under Elizabeth I, which protected the Church of England in its early stages from being modelled by continental Protestantism, as the Kirk was in Scotland. It was the Crown, very largely, that insisted on maintaining the ancient external Catholic organization of the established Church and its liturgical character. The Crown prevented the rising Puritanism from sweeping all this away, and with it was preserved, as one of the permanent elements of the variegated Anglican tradition, an ethos and idiom of thought which was more Catholic than Protestant in type.

This began to gain ground in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign. It was patristic in character, sacramental in tendency and made its appeal to tradition, the tradition of the primitive Church and the first four General Councils. It toned down the extremes of Calvinist and Lutheran doctrine on predestination and justification, and by the Stuart period it had begun to flourish under the Caroline divines, many of whom adumbrated a more general return to doctrines of the Real Presence and the Eucharistic sacrifice which at least approximated to traditional Catholic teaching. *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* by Richard Hooker, planned and largely carried out at the end of the Elizabethan period, was its systematic theological text-book, patristic and to some extent even Thomist in its conceptions. This work still embodies the essential ethos of Anglicanism upon which Anglo-Catholicism was later to build.

Eclipsed during the Whig supremacy, this tradition blossomed and expanded in the Tractarian movement, which, after its first phase and the departure of Newman, grew into what is now known as Anglo-Catholicism. It restored to the Church of England an idea of its spiritual function and independence, it promoted the religious life under vows and re-introduced the whole sacramental system modelled very largely on traditional Catholic lines.

Until recently Anglo-Catholicism had to fight hard to win a universally recognized place within the Church of England, but the battle is now won and it has succeeded in transforming and vitalizing the whole of Anglicanism far beyond its own distinctive borders. It exercises, as Dr Coggan's remark indicates, a considerable influence upon the other

distinctive tradition within Anglicanism, the Evangelical group, heir of the older Puritanism. It has made Evangelicals more traditional and sacramental, and Anglo-Catholics, in their turn, have come to appreciate more deeply the Evangelical emphasis on personal conversion and commitment. It has also brought into central Anglicanism some of the qualities of both.

Forty years ago all this might well have been regarded as an isolated phenomenon. But, especially during the last twenty years, it has become apparent that the same phenomenon is occurring in many different quarters of World Protestantism; here in England and Scotland, in the U.S.A. and on the Continent, among Methodists, Congregationalists, Lutherans and Calvinists. The symptoms, if we may use the word, are all of the same type, a marked development of sacramental doctrine and life, especially in regard to the Eucharist, which is returning to its central place in worship; the restoration of community life under rule and sometimes under vows, as among the Brethren of Taizé, a remarkable community in French Protestantism with a distinctively Catholic trend and atmosphere; the desire for the restoration of the function and authority of the episcopate in Lutheranism; and the revival of confession.

These movements all come from within the Ecumenical movement and owe their origin to the stimulus given by the Faith and Order movement to go back to the Scriptures in the light of Christian origins and the life of the primitive Church. It is remarkable how a number of biblical scholars of high reputation, such as Dr O. Cullmann, by no means an isolated instance, are moving in their exegesis towards a view of the Apostolic Church as Catholic in type, and especially towards the recognition of the prerogatives conferred by our Lord on St Peter and the Apostles as closely resembling those claimed by Catholics for the hierarchy of bishops with St Peter at their head. It must be remembered that Dr Cullmann and his fellow exegetes do not of course hold these original prerogatives to have been transmissible.

A development, parallel with this and not unconnected with it, is the increasing influence of Biblical Theology and the Liturgical Movement, both of which concurrently within the Catholic Church and outside it, are producing a renewed interest in and revival of the conception of the Church as God's *covenant* with the human race. Beginning with the call of Abraham and the first covenant then made it continues through the history of Israel, the chosen people, seen as a salvation-history, which culminates in the new covenant, with the new

THE APPROACH TO UNITY THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

Israel, the covenant of redemption in Jesus the Messiah, a covenant which is also a sacrament of Christ in his Mystical Body, the Church.

Here is to be found by those in separation a new conception of the Church, which does justice both to its inner life and its visible structure, a conception as old as Abraham, rooted in the Catholic tradition, the historic tradition of Christendom. It is rich and deep and all embracing because it is a bringing out of things new and old, already realized and to be realized, from the treasury of the Church.

May it not be that the Holy Spirit is moving divided Christendom to the recovery in separation of elements of Catholic faith and Catholic life, to be added to those already scattered among the divided parts? In God's time, maybe, these will lead at last, slowly but inevitably to the recognition of their true source and place of origin, the city set on a hill.

For further reading on the lines of this article we recommend two books recently published and inexpensive:

The Word, Church and Sacraments. By Louis Bouyer; Geoffrey Chapman; 10s. 6d.

Catholics and Protestants: Separated Brothers. By Canon Christiani and Pastor Rilliet; Sands; 10s. 6d.

And an older book, still in print:

The Christian Approach to the Bible. By Dom Celestine Charlier, O.S.B.; Sands.