

The Power for Change in the Church ; An Ecumenical Reflection

by A. M. Allchin

‘There are, I conceive, two strains of description, by no means obviously identical, yet both alike true, which may be applied to the Papal action as a whole. The Pope, it may be said, adopted in effect no new decision; he only made articulate what the whole previous history and circumstances implied; he only formally expressed as conclusion, what was unmistakably contained, on their most natural interpretation, within the premises. This is true. But that it should be true is the heart of the pathos. It is the very admirableness of the protagonist, it is the moral excellence of his purposes coupled with what seems the inexorableness of a perverse setting of pre-assumptions or pre-conditions, which is the familiar secret of living tragedy. For on the other hand, it would be no less true to pronounce of the Papal action as a whole, that, basing itself upon the lines of a warped continuity of tradition and theory, it re-affirmed every disproportion of the older conception, re-emphasized every externalizing and materializing tendency, . . . At a moment singularly rich with possibilities for the future, it made after all no new effort; it saw no glimpse of newly harmonizing or interpretative insight; it simply sank back—as it were exhausted and defeated—within the rigidities which had suited, which perhaps had sufficed for, a cruder and rigidier age.’

No, not a rather rhetorical reflection on the events surrounding the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, simply the reaction of the Regius Professor of Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford in 1897 to an earlier papal encyclical, *Apostolicae Curae*.¹ Indeed if the phrase left out in the middle of the paragraph had been left in, it would have been clear that we were not dealing with 1968. For there Dr Moberly had spoken of the action of Rome as having ‘deliberately riveted on the struggling intellect and conscience, every paralysing fetter afresh’.

Allowing for the style of Victorian controversy, it must be admitted that that was how the publication of a papal encyclical looked to Anglicans in 1897. It brought discussion to a close, it blocked all avenues of possible research or investigation which might have led forward. Things are very different in 1968, and we need at times to remind ourselves of how different they are, and how immensely fortunate we are to be living at a time when all the issues seem to be open, and when apparent set-backs only give us

¹R. C. Moberly, *Ministerial Priesthood*, 2nd edition, p. 340.

new determination to seek together for glimpses of 'newly harmonizing or interpretative insight'. There are so many revolutions going on at present, that it is very important that we should not let the quieter ones get drowned by the noisier. The urgency which attends the problems of the Church's relations to a secular and technological world, the fascination of the largely unexplored fields of contact between the Christian tradition and the other religions of mankind—these and other like causes make the established movement of ecumenism *within* the Christian family seem almost old-fashioned. We are apt to think that we can take it for granted. And this is just what we cannot do, for much, every way, remains to be done, and it may well be that the possibility of truly fruitful and creative work *ad extra*, depends to a larger extent than we usually think, on the exorcism and healing of old attitudes and complexes within. It is impossible to overestimate the damage done, not only to charity and human relations, but also to our whole apprehension of what the saving truth of God is, by the centuries of polemic in which all parties have acquired the habit of considering doctrines as weapons which they possess in order to do down their opponents. There are certain areas of doctrine in which we can still hardly begin to speak in such a way as to heal and build, rather than to wound and destroy.

And after all, the ecumenical movement in its purely Christian sense is still a thing which has hardly yet begun. It is only a little over five years ago that the Roman Catholic Church as a whole began to enter into this process. Nowhere in its present form has it lasted more than about sixty years, and that on any longer view of Church history is a comparatively brief period.

These are some of the first reflections to be prompted in an Anglican by a reading of the symposium *Doctrinal Development and Christian Unity*, edited by Father Nicholas Lash.¹ The book is one which brings a promise of things to come. It consists of two parts, the first containing five quite brief essays on various ecumenical topics (one is by an Anglican), the second, a longer and much more technical study of the ecumenical understanding of the sacraments, by a Dutch Jesuit, Father Frans Jozef van Beeck. All the essays point to fresh beginnings, none more urgently so than Father van Beeck's which has important practical implications.

What are some of the general impressions of an Anglican reader as he becomes familiar with such a book? First, there is the simple recognition of how far we have moved away from each other in our style and manner of approach. It makes one curious to know what we must look like from outside! We refer to different authorities, we naturally tend to different lines of argument. A very striking example of this can be found not in the present book, but in Hans Küng's

¹*Doctrinal Development and Christian Unity*, ed. Father Nicholas Lash, Sheed & Ward, 25s., 1966.

monumental study of the Church. Although the English edition is dedicated to the Archbishop of Canterbury no mention is made, not even in the extensive bibliography, of Dr Ramsey's pioneering work *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, which in the nineteen-thirties foreshadowed many of the positions which are taken up more massively by Küng.¹ In *Doctrinal Development and Christian Unity*, it is noticeable that when Father Peter Harris comes to make an assessment of the theological contribution of the Anglican tradition, an assessment which is both balanced and generous, he remains very much at the level of generalities. We must know each other better.

One of the great rewards for this growth in mutual knowledge and understanding, will be the possibility for all of us of rediscovering and reappropriating the English tradition of Christian faith and life and understanding anew what is involved in being an English Catholic. This is a place where both Anglicans and Roman Catholics are hampered by inadequate and biased attitudes towards the past, and where both have everything to gain from learning from one another. It seems highly probable indeed that it is only as the Anglican tradition is in process of being re-integrated with the whole Catholic world that the full significance and value of our classical theologians of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, men such as Hooker, Andrewes and Thorndike, F. D. Maurice, Westcott and Moberly himself will be fully appreciated and realized. The example of Newman is an encouraging testimony to what happens when someone rooted and grounded in the Catholicism which the Church of England can provide takes that heritage with him into the communion of Rome.

The essay by Martin Reardon, the one Anglican contributor to the volume, will be enough to remind us that this recovery of the fulness of our inheritance is not a thing which concerns Anglicans and Roman Catholics alone. For some authentic Christian and Catholic values we have need to listen to our Free Church brethren, particularly in all that relates to religious freedom, the inalienable rights of conscience, and the meaning of the local gathered Church. Here, too, there are insights which are necessary to the *Catholica*. But again our perspectives cannot be limited to the great divisions of Western Christendom. There is also the witness of the Christian East as Father Lash reminds us, briefly but urgently, in his essay on 'Dogmas and Doctrinal Progress'. Here is another field where Catholic-Anglican collaboration is of vital importance, for the bringing to light of the riches of Eastern Orthodoxy. Anglicans have a long, if sometimes tenuous, tradition of concern for the Christian East, and in the past forty years, associations like the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius have built up close and intimate links with parts of

¹It is worth remark that Dr Ramsey's book, the work of a young and then unknown Anglican scholar, was thought worthy of an article in *Blackfriars*, November 1936, by Father Victor White. It is a highly perceptive and appreciative review.

the Russian and Greek diaspora. But how greatly the work of such groups would be strengthened by a more active participation on the part of Roman Catholics. When we reflect that in the whole of North America and Western Europe there are only three Orthodox centres of theological learning of any academic standing, it is not difficult to see why the Orthodox themselves find difficulty in articulating their tradition at the theological level. The need for Western Christians to engage themselves in the study and assimilation of the latent resources of the Eastern tradition is only too obvious. When they do so they find that the potentialities of 'harmonizing and interpretative insight' to be found there are great indeed.

But in case we should be inclined to rest content with this inner Christian dialogue, there is the essay of Sister Louis-Gabriel on 'Jews and Christians after Vatican II', to remind us of yet wider perspectives. The methods of dialogue gradually and painfully re-acquired by the theologians in the last generation of Faith and Order conversations, are *mutatis mutandis* applicable also to our meeting with the representatives of Judaism, and indeed of the other religious traditions of mankind. Because there are very great differences between the relations which can exist between those who share a common baptism and a common faith in Christ on the one side, and those who must start from some more general respect for man as made in God's image on the other, we should not neglect the similarities, nor the need for widespread inter-religious dialogue. To Judaism, of course, we stand in closest relation, both through the weight of guilt which attaches to inherited Christian attitudes towards Jews, and more profoundly in the fact that our origins lie in Israel. The fact that the ecumenical movement owes much to the renewal of biblical study and thinking in all the Churches needs no underlining. How much that biblical revival owes to a direct and personal contact with Judaism as a still-living reality is perhaps less commonly realized, though the writings of Martin Buber have unquestionably had their effect. But as in other matters so also here, ecumenism in space carries with it an ecumenism in time, which takes us back to our shared inheritance with Jew and Moslem alike, and reminds us that we are all children of the faith of faithful Abraham. Here there are perspectives which this symposium points to, but does not begin to explore, perspectives which at the present open up towards Judaism and reveal the notable contributions of men like Abraham Heschel and Emil Fackenheim in North America to the debate about God, and at the same time open up towards Islam showing us the remarkable convergence of Christian scholars so widely different as Louis Massignon and Kenneth Cragg, who have rediscovered the meaning of their faith in God the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ through their encounter with the God who speaks through his servant Muhammad.

But it is of course on the essay of van Beeck that the weight of this

symposium falls. It is an attempt to rethink in more positive terms the Catholic attitude towards the sacraments and ministries of the Protestant Churches. The line of argument which it works out has in part influenced, in part run parallel with, similar movements of thought within the Anglican Communion, though I am not aware that any Anglican writer has thought through the issues with the same thoroughness as van Beeck. Its influence can be felt in the majority view expressed in the Church of England's Report on *Intercommunion Today*, or for instance in an article published in a recent number of the *Indian Journal of Theology* concerned with the urgent problems of Church Union in North India and Ceylon.¹ Not least the approach of van Beeck could be paralleled in the intervention on the subject of intercommunion made in one of the plenary sessions of the Lambeth Conference by the Archbishop of Canterbury, perhaps the most weighty single intervention to have been made at the meeting of the Lambeth Bishops.

It is impossible in short compass to summarize the argument of van Beeck which is carefully and intricately balanced. Perhaps the following quotation gives its atmosphere best.

'It must be realized, however, that the deposit of faith and the Church order as shaped under the guidance of the teaching and ruling authorities in the Church are ambivalent values. On the one hand they render service; they are *diakonia*. On the other hand they are rules of law, open to the dangers of hardening and sclerosis. Creeds and Church orders, which shape the churches' unity of order, act as *diakonia*, because they enable a church to concretize its faithful and hopeful anticipation of eschatological salvation; in this way they act as redeeming, saving grace, in the sense that they shape God's kingdom, as yet imperfect. But if they are to go on serving as a true *diakonia*, they must never be allowed to tie salvation down to themselves in a definitive, universal fashion. Never must the letter of the *professio fidei* or of the church order oppose itself to the pushing power of the church, which always strives for the full and ultimate revelation of the kingdom. In virtue of their very essence they are provisional, capable only of truly realizing salvation in an incomplete manner. A church conscious of its pilgrim status will *in concreto* always realise that these limitations of its creed and church order make it at least possible for the kingdom to be concretised along different lines, and that *de facto* other churches exist by its side' (p. 161).

It is from such considerations as these that at the end of his article van Beeck can speak of 'a Copernican revolution in the problem of *communicatio in sacris*' which makes intercommunion a positive duty in circumstances where there is a definite will to advance towards full communion, and an already existing unity in the fundamentals of faith.

¹*The Indian Journal of Theology*, April-June, 1968, 'Anglicans and Intercommunion: New Thoughts on an old Problem?' by J. D. M. Stuart.

Whatever our own convictions on the subject may be, this question of intercommunion is one that can no longer be avoided. Public acts such as the unauthorized participation of some of the Roman Catholics present at Uppsala in the Eucharist of the Swedish Lutheran Church, or the widely publicized joint celebration of Catholics and Protestants in Paris on Whit Sunday, or more recently the authorized participation of the five Protestant observers (among them an Anglican Bishop) in the Eucharist on the last day but one of the Conference of Latin-American Bishops at Medellin, all these things only bring into the open what is going on in many places in less spectacular and open ways. Acts of intercommunion may sometimes be the result of sentimental confusionism, sometimes of a mere desire to protest, sometimes of simple ignorance or lack of information. But at least at times they seem to be, to those who have taken part in them, an authentic expression of 'the pushing power of the church, which always strives for the full and ultimate revelation of the kingdom'. In such moments, which are certainly moments of intense joy and suffering, it seems as though the circulation of life and love, so long impeded, is being restored in the body, and that the grace and mercy of God is triumphing over judgment. They therefore may prove to be moments of renewal of faith in the presence and activity of God at work now through the sacraments of the Church, and of insight into the enlightening power of 'the divine grace which always heals what is wounded and makes up what is lacking' in the Church.

It is on the thought of mercy and judgment that this article must end. Is the category of development which is central to the whole of this symposium really adequate to the catastrophic nature of the days which we are living through? That it is useful and helpful, the articles in the book prove time and again. But is it enough? May it not be that for their understanding our days require us to penetrate deeper into the great moments of crisis and redemption in the history of salvation? At the moment of the exile in Babylon the people of Israel saw many of their securities, age-old and as they thought God-given, crumble before them. At the same time they rediscovered in a new and unsuspected way the depth and universality of significance to be found in the great events which had made them a people, the exodus and the covenant at Sinai. And now in our own time, the whole new people of God is called to discover together, at a time when much that was thought of as most reliable is revealed as expendable, that the great and definitive saving acts of God have a depth and a universality of power and meaning which the Church up to the present has only begun to glimpse and suspect.