

EIRENIC THEOLOGY

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IT was Fr Henry St John who suggested the title. The term 'eirenic' has some advantages over the term 'ecumenical', though the latter is of course the more widely used. 'Ecumenical', if understood etymologically, and if understood otherwise than the word 'Catholic', suggests that there is a theology which is general, over against a theology which is particular. In the context of modern conditions, that could mean there is a supradenominational Christian theology, over against sectarian or local theologies. Such a suggestion would be disturbing to the Catholic as being out of harmony with the divinely instituted unity of the Church.

There is, of course, a possibility of adapting the principle here involved to Catholic theology. One can, and must, distinguish between the theological opinions of a school and the universal teaching of the Church. In this way one distinguishes between the theological opinions of, say, Thomists and Molinists, on the one hand, and the universal teaching of the Church, on the other. The analogy fails, however, in so far as denominations are more deeply divided than schools of theology. Nothing could be more misleading than to compare Catholic schools of theology to denominations. Schools of theology, religious orders, and differing fields of study are all compatible with full agreement on Church, sacraments, doctrines, faith, and creed. When Protestants do nevertheless make the comparison, they merely show how far they are from understanding the meaning of Catholic unity. For the most part Protestants have retained enough of the Catholic idea to realize that there is still more than mere schools of theology dividing one denomination from another. If this were not so, there would be no ecumenical question.

The term 'Eirenic Theology', as we use it, implies no kind of sacrifice of principle on either side. It is rather a method of proclaiming Christian doctrine. It is a method that invites the co-operation of any who are willing to help the cause, rather than condemns their previous non-co-operation. Eirenic theology is a theology unwilling to be influenced by bias or prejudgment to

accuse people of heresy or bad will, where the latter perhaps do not exist at all, or at least do not exist by intention, or do not certainly exist, or are not consciously held.

To take an example, what should be our attitude to the Protestant who professes to accept some Catholic doctrine, say, the divinity of Christ or the real presence in the Eucharist? Should we immediately react with incredulity or even scorn, or should we be ready and anxious to believe that, in this matter, he is orthodox? Should we be anxious to prove that he is wrong, by convicting him out of his own mouth, or should we be rather ready to make due allowances for any possible inaccuracy in his less technical theological expressions? I quite agree that, in cases where the man's actions or other sayings would arouse suspicion, we should give him an opportunity by discussing the matter as far as possible in an easy terminology, of explaining more carefully what exactly he does mean. We all know that the concrete terms 'God' and 'Man' are more valuable to remove ambiguity than abstract terms like 'divinity'. Does he allow simply that Jesus Christ was God, and just as truly and fully man? If such a man continues to assert his orthodoxy, what harm can come from our taking his admission at its face value until he himself withdraws it?

It may happen, of course, that he will make some further statement which will arouse our suspicion. He may assert with confidence Christ's ignorance or fallibility on some point. The unsympathetic reaction to this would be to declare with a shrug of the shoulders: 'There, I knew he did not really believe that Christ is God.' A more eirenic course, and probably more effective, would be to say: 'How can you reconcile Christ's fallibility with his divinity?' It will then be up to the non-Catholic to distinguish, or to modify, one or other of his statements. If he is a certain type of modern Protestant, he may, of course, have recourse to the theology of paradox, according to which we can—and frequently must—hold conflicting truths which our minds are incapable of reconciling. Even then, we should not be anxious to convict him of heresy, as long as a benign interpretation of his words remains possible. Naturally we would judge a Catholic in the same situation more severely. We could demand of him that he either refrains from expressing himself, or that he uses unambiguous language. With those who have not had the

advantages of a Catholic theological training, we should be sympathetic with any inability to see the logical connections between doctrines. We should, to say the least, believe that a man is as orthodox as he professes to be on important questions until the opposite is proved.

Religious practising Protestants are commonly with us in the belief that orthodox acceptance of the creed is safeguarded by the rejection of four principal heresies, Docetism, Arianism, Pelagianism and Manichaeism. Against these, they are ready to agree that Christ is truly man, truly and fully God, that we all need the grace of Christ, and that the whole man is capable of salvation. Such religious Protestants will commonly agree with us that the essence of Christianity is salvation by Jesus Christ, who is God and Saviour. Except where modernist influences have dechristianized them, they still claim to accept the Incarnation. It is also probably true that the greater part of religious practising Protestants today reject the more obvious forms of modernism. It must unfortunately be admitted that they are not in general so able to detect insidious forms of modernism. In such cases, the eirenic approach will make us less severe on such insidious errors among non-Catholics, especially where there is evidence that they remain by intention loyal to the central doctrines of the Creed.

Sometimes it is easier to see the meaning of a position by contrasting it with its opposite. The opposite of eirenic would presumably be belligerent. I have been amusing myself by jotting down some of the characteristics of a belligerent attitude in theology.

1. The first principle of belligerent theology is carelessness with regard to one's opponent's facts. It is more important to refute him, than to represent him fairly.

Such carelessness may take the form of not reading their statements of their position carefully and sympathetically. It is frequently regarded as sufficient to judge their views on hearsay, or at second-hand.

At other times, our carelessness may take the form of knowing our opponents' views better than they know them themselves. We may, for instance, insist on judging a modern Protestant group by the statements of one of their historical representatives, even though such statements are no longer representative. If we insist on understanding Lutheranism according to our own interpreta-

tion of Luther's works, we may be right from the point of view of history, but our attitude may be of little value in converting a modern Lutheran. To see the dangers, we have only to consider how often non-Catholics condemn Catholicism on their interpretation of something said by St Thomas or by some Church document, while we can see that their interpretation is one that would not be accepted by ourselves.

Eirenic theology will not falsify what appears to be historical for the sake of peace, but it will at least recognize sympathetically that the view we think to be the factually true one is not in harmony with that of modern Protestants. A present-day Anglo-Catholic is not immediately proved wrong by a proof on our part that the thirty-nine articles are anti-Catholic. The Anglo-Catholic may already recognize it. He may reply that he also rejects the anti-Catholicism of the thirty-nine articles. Alternatively, he may argue with Newman (before his conversion) that the thirty-nine articles can be so understood as to tolerate an essentially Catholic interpretation. As a matter of history and interpretation, he may be wrong. But, as a matter of theology, it is more important to rejoice that he agrees with us in rejecting the anti-Catholicism of the articles than to prove that he does not know history.

It is especially important that Catholics should not waste too much time and energy proving that we understand Protestantism better than Protestants, since Protestants do not claim infallibility for their leaders or confessional documents. Let us have the charity to grant to their representatives the human privilege of making mistakes and correcting them; as indeed we, in turn, expect them to allow us to correct statements made by any of our individual theologians.

It is especially fallacious when judging Protestantism, but the same applies to Catholicism as far as the statements of individual theologians are concerned, to argue from the principle: *Ab uno disce omnes*. A modern polemic book against Catholicism condemns the whole medieval Church's attitude towards penance on the basis of a sentence in one of Tertullian's Montanist writings! It is, I suppose, a supreme example of carelessness regarding facts to condemn medieval Catholicism on the word of a fourth-century heretic. Catholics, again, will often condemn a whole denomination of Protestantism on the word of one of its supposed

representatives. Catholics have been known even to claim that Protestants say it does not matter how much we sin provided we believe, on the basis of a passage in Luther which (a) to say the least does not represent his whole considered judgment, and (b) is repudiated by the majority of Protestants for the same reasons that it is repudiated by ourselves. Protestants, likewise, often condemn the Catholic doctrine of the *ex opere operato* efficacy of the sacraments on the basis of the illusion that it means the sacraments are salutary without faith and other dispositions on the part of the recipient.

Belligerent theology makes a fine art of quoting passages out of their context, with very little effort to discover whether the context admits of its interpretation. There is a passage often quoted out of its context by non-Catholics from St Thomas to prove that he held that Christian hope rests ultimately, not on Christ's grace, but on human works.

A more subtle way of misrepresenting facts is to assume that people of other traditions use their terms in the same meaning as we do. There is perhaps no greater source of misunderstanding than this. We Catholics have an ancient catechetical and traditional use of terms, which has been made clear and exact through centuries of scholastic theology. Non-Catholics take their terms either from Reformation usage, or—and this is more and more the case—directly from the Scriptures. Thus words like 'grace' and 'faith' tend for the Protestant more and more to be used to express what these words mean when they actually occur in Scripture. We Catholics have, in our long living tradition, given them technical meanings, which we know to be in harmony with the Scriptures, but which may not always be found in such technical meanings in the actual text of Scripture. The Scripture terms are popular, synthetic rather than analytic, and only fully intelligible in their context. Our technical terms signify something clear and definite almost regardless of their context.

A variant of such misrepresentation is to use an opponent's technical terms in a way which caricatures their meaning, as when a non-Catholic calls the Catholic doctrine of sacramental causality magical or mechanical.

All the examples so far given are examples of belligerent theology by means of misrepresentation of the facts of the case in so far as our opponent's position is concerned.

2. Nowadays there exists what is perhaps a more valuable gambit for the belligerent theologian in the use of emotive language. This enables one to describe his opponent's beliefs and opinions unattractively and even repellingly without transgressing the bounds of strict truth. If your opponent writes in a foreign language, it is possible to discredit his views by an emotive translation, which almost amounts to a mistranslation. I came across a passage where St Robert Bellarmine was being quoted, in it he said that a man did not need infused internal virtues before presenting himself for Baptism, provided of course he is in good faith and has the right intentions and dispositions. His passage was translated: 'You do not need internal dispositions before entering the Church.' If a Catholic theologian decides that sin does not automatically exclude a person from all membership of the Church, this is liable to be interpreted: 'There is no need for those who are in the Church to possess faith and internal virtue.'

Emotive use of language often consists in choosing words which are known to be charged with emotions for the person who reads them. Such words, often arousing unfavourable emotions today, are: 'outmoded', 'organization', 'institutional', 'legalistic', 'forensic'.

It is difficult to know how far this kind of thing is deliberate. Frequently it obviously cannot be. Normally it comes from a deep-seated bias which makes one almost pathologically ready to believe the worst of one's adversary.

3. A final sin against eirenic theology is to refuse to make the necessary distinctions which alone save the situation in an adversary's theology. If a non-Catholic says that Baptism is not necessary for salvation, it is eirenic to enquire further exactly what he means. In some cases, it may turn out that he is merely trying to safeguard the Catholic teaching that in certain circumstances faith and charity may save a man without actual baptism by water. Likewise, if he says that works avail nothing towards salvation, it is worth while discovering whether he means by 'works' good actions done by God's grace. Often it will be found that he means the works of unregenerate nature.

Eirenic theology, as contrasted with belligerent theology, will not only attempt to avoid misrepresenting Protestants, but will make it a principal aim to preclude as far as possible the chance of

being misunderstood or misrepresented oneself. Charity demands that we must allow to those who read our own theology the privilege of having their own long-standing suspicions and prejudices, which for long may make them incapable of seeing our point of view unless we meet them half-way.

It would help considerably towards this purpose if more monographs on Catholic doctrine were written as far as possible in scriptural and non-technical language. Where technical terms have to be used, as they undoubtedly have, we should take care to make quite clear how our terms differ from the usage of other traditions. By due warnings we may succeed in forestalling misunderstandings. It is important that we should make clear also which authorities we regard as authoritative to represent our case, and to make sure that, where those authorities speak, they are correctly understood. On the other hand, we should show readiness to reject the views of Catholic writers whose opinions we do not consider tenable—or at least give the Protestant the same liberty to reject them which we would recognize in a Catholic.

Eirenic theology will try to present doctrines in their fullest context, and show how they hang together with others, which, often enough, may already be accepted by non-Catholics.

Our answer to emotive language is not counter-attack of the same type, but rather to show humbly its unfairness, and to restate the Catholic position in language which is emotively attractive. Thus the unattractive word 'organization' can be replaced by the attractive word 'organism'. The word 'magic' as applied to grace can be replaced by 'new creation' and 'new life'. 'Authoritarianism' can be replaced by the idea of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and obedience to his voice when he speaks through human agents.

It is, of course, obvious that not all differences in theology can be reduced to misunderstanding of facts, emotive language and differences of terminology. When all the facts are understood, there will remain many points of disagreement, even controversy. Here, at any rate, we can and should proceed pacifically, exposing the full Catholic doctrine and leaving it to speak for itself. It will attract people more for what it is when fully understood than it will as a refutation of certain views held by non-Catholics.

A fruitful source of unnecessary disagreement in every sphere

of life is argument about terms. In the matter of terminology, nothing is gained by disputing as to this term or that, or whether to give it this meaning or that. The Fathers of the fourth century learnt this lesson when they agreed at Alexandria that either of the Greek terms for 'Person' could be used to express the Trinity, provided they were held in an orthodox meaning.

A great cause of misunderstanding of Protestants on the part of Catholics comes from an unwillingness to admit distinctions among them. Still more unfortunate is the refusal, fairly common, to admit distinction between believing practising Protestants and agnostics. Our tidy minds prefer a world in which everyone is either a believing Catholic or an agnostic Protestant. We like things to be black or white, but in practice there are numerous shades of grey.

Because of this habit of dividing into blacks and whites, we too readily assume that Protestants have in no sense the gift of faith, just as Protestants often readily assume that Catholics are Pelagians. It is not even true that all Protestants live by private judgment of the Scriptures. Luther himself occasionally protested vehemently against private judgment. It is true that Protestants do not agree with us that the Church is the divinely protected witness of Christ's word. But they do not go to the other extreme and say that Christ's word is what anyone wants it to be, or even what anyone thinks it is. Where a Protestant professes to accept the Creed as the word of Christ, what right have we to assume that he does not do so by the virtue of faith? If he refuses to accept the Church, it does not prove he has no faith, unless it can be shown also that he realizes that the Church speaks in the name of God.

In so far as our theology is hopeful of ever being understood sympathetically by non-Catholics, we have to approach them as people who, though they have not our own training and background, yet may already accept all that part of revealed doctrine which they have had opportunity to see as revealed. Through invincible ignorance not yet having the advantage of the Church's guidance, they must inevitably be thrown much more on private judgment to help them to discover from Scripture and tradition what it is that Christ has revealed. It must be the hope of our own theology to help them in their task. In this way, fruitful dialogue on the basis of the sources of theology is possible between Catholics and Protestants, even while there still remains an inability

among the latter to understand the fullness of our position.

There has never been such an opportunity for dialogue between Protestant and Catholic theologians as today. Catholics have become as never before ardent lovers and students of God's word in Scripture, and Protestants are more than ever reverential towards tradition. These two facts alone arouse great hope of more sympathetic mutual understanding.

Eirenic theology must recognize that the answers to Protestant difficulties normally found in our text-books are of little or no value to non-Catholics. They may or may not misrepresent the Protestant position. They certainly do not present it in its living context. They do not tell us the motives that have led Protestants to their present positions, which motives are often purely Christian and Catholic. Even where we are bound to declare that their position is unacceptable, we may be bound to admit that it owes its plausibility to some true Christian background and claimed basis.

Again, where we do not in any way misrepresent, our answer to an adversary may be given in terms, understandable indeed in the Catholic schools, but wholly or partially unintelligible to Protestants. Obviously there is not much else we can do in the limited scope of a text-book. But more and more we should aim at making our dialogue with Protestants more real and sympathetic. The refutation of Protestant error is of limited advantage to Catholic or Protestant, unless it can be used effectively in winning them to our point of view.

All this is obvious on general principles when we bear in mind that the Protestants whom we fail to convince are not less intelligent than ourselves. I doubt whether this failure can be reduced to a lack of logical training on their part. Nor can their resistance to our persuasion be purely a question of their greater obstinacy or prejudice: Our arguments can deceive us by their success when used to convince converts under instruction, who are already strongly disposed in our direction.

Where eirenic theology has been adopted, and Protestant and Catholic theologians have been able to discuss their differences and agreements in a fully sympathetic atmosphere, far more constructive work has been done towards solving the ecumenical problem than was ever done by the old methods. The suggestions in this article are tentative feelers towards a new method of

theological dialogue, more adapted to the better spirit of conciliation that exists today between all sincere believers that Jesus Christ is Lord, Son of God and Saviour. We Catholics do not, by these methods, compromise our position. To do that would be against the whole idea of eirenic theology. For eirenic theology desires, not to suppress or hide anything we believe to be of the essence of Catholicism, but rather to reveal everything that we hold to all enquirers, so that they may be led to understand it as sympathetically as we do ourselves. We do not wish to tell them they have the whole of Catholic doctrine already. It is obvious they could not be Protestants if they had. But we can at least show them that often enough the doctrines which they value most are looked upon by ourselves as authentic Catholicism, and that they are deprived of something that belongs to the same world of faith, when they stop short of Catholicism *tout court*, in all its implications.



UNITY AND DISUNITY TODAY¹

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EDUCATED Catholics today are at least dimly aware that considerable changes are taking place among Protestants in regard to the problems set by Christian disunity. It is doubtful, however, whether the majority, even of educated Catholics, know just how considerable these changes are; still less do they envisage them as important. In this paper I propose to outline some of the facts concerning these changes and to attempt to interpret their significance for us.

From the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, constant fragmentation became a commonplace and accepted condition of Protestantism. On the continent, from the first, the two great movements initiated by Luther and Calvin were antagonistic, and in due course each produced its sub-divisions. Here in Britain Scottish Presbyterianism suffered, in the course of its history, at least a threefold fission, and the Elizabethan

¹ The substance of a paper read at the Regional Conference of the Newman Association, Cheltenham, November 9th, 1957.