

by A. Raymond George

Three dissimilar books illustrate three aspects of that search for renewal which now characterizes so much of the life of the Church.

*The Church in Transition* (Geoffrey Chapman, 16s.) by Desmond Fisher, a Roman Catholic journalist, is a popular account of that great upheaval which would probably have come in any case but which was largely set in motion by Pope John. There are in most churches good simple believers who ask not in any obstinate spirit of opposition to all change, but in all innocence, 'Why can't we just go on as we are?' There are many books which we might put into their hands, but this is one of the clearest and best. It describes in lucid terms the preparations for the second Vatican Council and the subsequent events. Mr Fisher recognizes the importance of the Council, but sees clearly that it is only a beginning. 'Vatican II proved the truth of the old tag—*Ecclesia semper reformanda*.' 'The *aggiornamento* is for all time and it must go on.' But this work will not go on unless not only ecclesiastics but lay people are involved in it, and its ideas penetrate the thinking of Roman Catholics everywhere.

One of the encouraging features of the situation is that the closing chapters of such a book are out of date before it is published. Since the introduction of this book was written in February 1967 further changes have been made in the liturgy, a further instruction published about ecumenism and the proposals for changes in the Curia have been announced. Before this article is published, the Synod of Bishops will have met.

Perhaps a Methodist is asked to devote a whole review-article to three comparatively short books in order that he may make some general observations on Methodist attitudes to the renewal of the Roman Church. Your reviewer as observer for the World Council of Churches at the Post-conciliar Liturgical Commission has the opportunity of observing the liturgical part of the work at close quarters, and greatly admires the energy, the learning and the devotion which inspire this attempt at renewal. He once found himself saying in regard to one of the proposed new Canons of the Mass: 'These naturally express your eucharistic theology rather than mine', but this could not be otherwise. The dogmas of the Church have not been altered, and are therefore not fully acceptable to non-Romans: how could they be? But the mode of expression may change, and this makes dialogue possible. Indeed it may well appear that the line between the substance of dogma and its verbal expression is not

always easy to draw. But even apart from that, it is clear that in many liturgical matters discussion and even a measure of co-operation are possible, particularly in such matters as calendar and lectionary.

There are many other developments very congenial to non-Romans, for instance some of the new formulations on Tradition (on which the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Conference also made notable progress at Montreal in 1963) and the new stress on collegiality, which sets the claims of the papal office in a fresh context at any rate. But of course the theme which has most interested non-Romans has been Ecumenism itself.

The changes here have been so rapid and so striking that the ecclesiastical scene can never be the same again. The presence of observers at Vatican II set a pattern which has been widely followed on all sides, and the practice may now almost be taken for granted. We do not see in Great Britain the striking developments of which we hear in other countries, but there is a steady advance in friendship. The Methodist Conference in Middlesbrough in July 1967 gladly accepted the invitation from the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster that over a hundred Methodists should attend a one-day Conference at Westminster with a like number of Romans in December 1967. The World Methodist Council is in October 1967 to have talks with Romans in Italy similar to those already begun between Romans and Anglicans. In the light of history it is remarkable that, whatever may be the case in Ireland, in Great Britain these developments have encountered very little opposition. A great volume of Christian goodwill and brotherliness which had been repressed has somehow been released, largely by the personality of Pope John. Protestants, who had always regarded Roman priests as no doubt devoted men but aloof and unco-operative, are discovering in many of them warm and sympathetic fellow-workers; and venture to hope that their new-found friends are equally delighted with the discoveries that they have made. Moreover the serious scholarly work of Küng, Rahner and many others, reflected in the great mass of documents from the Vatican Council, has given a kind of fresh twist for Protestants also to the study of systematic theology.

In this change of ecumenical climate how do Methodists see the prospects for actual Church union? The last document of the Anglican-Methodist conversations, *Towards Reconciliation*, marked a great advance in clarity on its predecessors, but it has produced such a crop of comments that the production of the final report has been delayed for two or three months; and as the Methodist Conference meets only once a year, this means that the first Methodist vote is deferred until the Conference of 1969 and a favourable vote then would need confirmation in 1970. Reactions to this delay have varied greatly; some think, perhaps wishfully, that it is the prelude to the complete breakdown of the scheme; others think it sad that so long a courtship should not now lead to a speedy marriage. The months

between the Spring of 1968 and the Summer of 1969 will be crucial.

Meanwhile voices are raised to demand that the conversations should be re-started and this time include the other Free Churches, in accordance, it is said, with the famous resolution of the Nottingham Conference of 1964 about seeking reunion by Easter Day, 1980. It was not, however, the intention of those who advocated this resolution at Nottingham that a halt should be drawn so that a fresh start should be made. The hope of many people was rather that the two unions which seemed to be likely, namely the Anglican-Methodist and Presbyterian-Congregationalist, should go forward and pave the way to a wider union. Certainly Methodism, always torn between its links with Anglicanism and its links with the other Free Churches, must not forget either; and if only Methodists could get to stage one of the Anglican-Methodist union (intercommunion and parallel episcopates) there seems no reason why the other Free Churches should not be considered while an approach is made to stage two (organic union). After all, some Anglicans see no inconsistency in discussing the reunion with Rome and with Methodism at the same time. It must, however, be said that few Methodists contemplate union with Rome in the foreseeable future. Whatever may be on the Agenda in A.D. 2080, this forms no part of the immediate programme, however much Methodists rejoice in growing co-operation and friendliness.

Amid all this discussion of reunion, it should be instructive to look at some of the great reunions of the past. South India is the favourite example, but an earlier example is that of the United Church of Canada, formed in 1925 by a union of Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. It was a classic case of a union causing a fresh schism, for about half of the Presbyterians stayed out, amid great bitterness on both sides; and they continue to this day as the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The union was not of course so difficult as South India because it did not include Anglicans; and it has often been underestimated because of the belief that its theological basis reflected the liberal theological pragmatism of the 1920s. Professor J. Webster Grant, himself a Minister of the United Church in *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* (Lutterworth, 13s. 6d.), has written a very fair and objective survey of the negotiations that preceded the union, the union itself, the schism, and the subsequent progress of both churches. It is simply a work of Church History, as befits the series 'Ecumenical Studies in History' in which it appears; but it is the most original of the three books here being reviewed. It corrects some common misapprehensions about this union and it shows that the two churches, while sharing of course the difficulties that now afflict all churches, have on the whole made good progress. To effect such a union at such an early date was indeed a notable achievement.

The book moreover describes subsequent moves towards wider

union. Negotiations have taken place with the Anglicans, and these after some delays are now making fresh progress. The book contains only a few references to Roman Catholics; as the book is not a general history of the Church in Canada but deals with a restrictive topic, that is reasonable enough. It refers to the progressive spirit of Cardinal Léger, but does not mention the remarkable ecumenical service in which he took part at Montreal in bilingual Quebec in 1963 during the meetings of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Conference. This service, of a type less common than that now, made a profound impression on those who took part in it.

These ecclesiastical topics may not seem to have much connexion with the book *Alternatives to Christian Belief* (Hodder and Stoughton, 30s.) by Leslie Paul, an Anglican sociologist best known as the author of the 'Paul' reports on the deployment of the Anglican clergy. The book, sub-titled 'A Critical Survey of the Contemporary Search for Meaning', consists of lectures given at Kenyon College, Ohio. The connexion might be made in either of two ways. As someone once replied to an apology for a rapid conversational transition. 'After all, philosophy of religion and liturgy are the two ways in which the Church makes its impact on the world'. The second way of making the transition from ecclesiology to philosophy, a way much more obvious but more gloomy, is to recall the fact that many of the younger generation seem to be losing all patience with our fumbling approaches to reunion and our cautious attempts at renewal, so that they seem to wish to dispense with the institutional Church altogether, if not also with any kind of recognizable Christian theism. Are we not fiddling with the validity of orders while the Church is burning with a holocaust of doubt about the very existence of God? The Bishop of Bristol, one of the most respected of Anglican ecumenists, has often remarked that the fact that a divided Church is the wrong-shaped tool to deal with these fundamental questions should itself be a strong incentive to work for the union of the Church. Meanwhile we have to be concerned with both topics.

It cannot be said, however, that Leslie Paul's book throws much new light on apologetics or the philosophy of religion. It is a kind of Cook's tour: Huxley, Waddington, Sartre, Marx, Toynbee, Popper, Kierkegaard, Marcel—and so one could go on. No doubt it served its purpose of stimulating discussion at a Summer School, but it is hardly possible, as the author would no doubt recognize, to do justice to all these thinkers in three or four pages each. Moreover, the author's style is complex and allusive, so that those who are educated enough to follow the allusions will hardly need the brief summaries of the thinkers discussed. The title of the closing chapters, 'God as the Afflicted Man', gives some indication of the author's own position. It would be helpful if the author could next develop in greater depth the position there outlined.