Authority in the Church

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The publication of the final Report of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission *Authority in the Church* (SPCK, 20p) has rightly made a considerable stir. An agreed Statement on such a subject is a remarkable achievement, and its authors are to be congratulated on having the courage even to attempt it.

The Report must be seen in the perspective of earlier attempts by the Church of England to have closer relations with the Church of Rome. In the early eighteenth century Archbishop Wake corresponded with French Roman Catholics about a possible scheme of union. In the 1890s Lord Halifax and the Abbé Portal initiated an abortive *rapprochement* which ended disastrously with the publication in 1894 of *Apostolicae Curae*, in which Anglican orders were pronounced totally void. Later there were the Malines Conversations, headed by Cardinal Mercier and Lord Halifax, which ended with the death of Mercier in 1926, and the publication two years later of *Mortalium Animos*, which reaffirmed Papal Supremacy in unmistakable terms. These setbacks, however, have not deterred subsequent moves, for, as Bishop Bell reminded us (*Christian Unity: the Anglican Position* (London, 1948), p. 60):

> It is no accident that three successive Lambeth Conferences (1908, 1920 and 1930) have declared –
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> > There can be no fulfilment of the Divine purpose in any scheme of reunion which does not ultimately include the great Latin Church of the West, with which our history has been so closely associated in the past, and to which we are still bound by many ties of common faith and tradition.

Since Bell's day a revolution and renewal have taken place in the Roman Church, the full implications of which will be seen when the spirit of the Second Vatican Council has fully permeated that great Church. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, following in the steps of his predecessor, visited the Pope, and they both agreed to set up the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission. Its two earlier Reports, on *Eucharistic Doctrine* (1972) and *Ministry and Ordination* (1973) were widely acclaimed, although not (so far as the present writer is aware) subjected to rigorous theological criticism.

The work of the Commission was carried on in an altogether different atmosphere from earlier conversations. The participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement has meant a growing sympathy and understanding between the priests of the two Churches,

and a stronger fellow-feeling among the laity. Increasingly the two Churches use a common language: their journals review each other's books (in a recent number of the *Catholic Herald* more books by Anglicans were reviewed than those by Roman Catholic authors); while the recent Roman report on pastoral strategy *A Time for Building* has evoked as favourable a response in Anglican as in Roman Catholic circles. Both Churches have returned to the Bible: both Churches have enjoyed charismatic renewal: both are beset by similar problems of increasing secularization and a falling number of baptisms and vocations to Holy Orders. It would be hard to imagine a more propitious time for serious conversations between the two Churches.

Perhaps for these reasons *Authority in the Church* has received rave reviews in both the secular and church press. It is so important a document that it deserves more serious consideration. If in the course of this article its arguments do not find favour, this is not because the present writer is against closer relations between the two Churches. On the contrary he would favour immediate intercommunion between Rome and Canterbury, and (since both Communions hold fast to the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral') he would even hope that some mutual recognition of ministries could be agreed. At the same time care must be taken lest warmth of heart should blind us to the truth that the two Churches, by tradition and by practice, have differing conceptions of authority in the Church.

The Report, after confessing Christ as Lord of the Church, considers the nature of *Christian Authority*. We are told that shared commitment and belief create a common mind in determining how the Gospel should be interpreted and obeyed; a sentence typical of the Report, in so far as it confuses a statement of what *ought* to be the case with what *is* the case. Looking at the ferment within the Roman Church (for example Rahner and Küng), and at the differing convictions within the Church of England, it is hard to accept such a statement at face value. Or take the following: 'The Spirit of the risen Lord, who indwells the Christian community, continues to maintain the people of God in obedience to the Father's will. He safeguards their faithfulness to the revelation of Jesus Christ and equips them for mission in the world . . . They are enabled so to live that the authority of Christ will be mediated through them.' This describes a perfected Church, not the *corpus permixtum* of saints and sinners of which the present writer is a member.

Turning to *Authority in the Church*, the Report is content to assert, with regard to 'the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers', that pastoral authority 'belongs primarily to the bishop'. Because the bishop has general oversight of the community, 'he can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in daily life'. It is agreed that all ordained ministers share with

the bishop in mutual responsibility and interdependence, so that the bishop does not act alone. Nonetheless, he can 'require the compliance necessary', although the present writer must confess that, as a bishop, he does not know how compliance necessary to maintain charity can be exacted—those who attempt to restore charity in difficult pastoral situations know that it must be won and cannot be enforced.

This is not episcopacy as Anglicanism has received it. In the 'Appeal to All Christian People', the Lambeth Fathers said in 1920: 'We greatly desire that the office of a bishop should everywhere be exercised in a representative and constitutional manner.' The 1968 Lambeth Conference wrote of bishops: 'What we do and the way we do it should remind the people of God of Jesus the servant.' In the same report the bishop is understood as an enabler, exercising his authority by persuasion and not by requiring compliance. 'The bishop has to lead his people in their obedience to Christ, leading them and taking them with him. . . . As a teacher he must try to evoke the creative thinking of his people. As an administrator he must call out and train their varied gifts' (*The Lambeth Conference 1968* (London, 1968), p. 108).

According to Anglican tradition the historic episcopate functions through the bishop-in-synod, and this includes the laity. Except for a bare mention of 'responsible participation of the whole people of God' (and that with reference to General Councils) this concept seems unknown to the Joint Report. The old Roman Catholic distinction between *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* still operates. Far from the desirability of a genuinely lay theology, the layman's role is to 'respond to and to assess the insights and teaching of the ordained ministers'. It is the ordained ministers who are 'commissioned to discern these insights and give authoritative expression to them'. 'The real problem', wrote Edward Rich (*Spiritual Authority in the Church of England* (London, 1955), p. 28), 'which constitutes the heart of the controversy, then and now, between the Roman and Anglican doctrines of authority, is that of the Teaching Authority or Interpretation of the Faith.'

The Joint Report seems to the present writer to come down fairly and squarely on the Roman Catholic side of the fence. The Anglican view of a disseminated authority (contrasted with hierarchical authority) is described with lucidity in a Report of the 1948 Lambeth Conference (*Lambeth Conference 1948* (London, 1948), Part II, pp. 84 f.):

> Authority, as inherited by the Anglican Communion from the undivided Church of the early centuries of the Christian era, is single in that it is derived from a single Divine source, and reflects within itself the richness and historicity of the divine Revelation, the authority of the eternal Father, the incarnate Son and the life-giving Spirit. It is distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds,

the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of the saints, and the *consensus fidelium* which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through his faithful people in the Church. It is thus a dispersed rather than a centralised authority having many elements which combine, interact and check each other; these elements contributing together, by a process of mutual support, mutual checking and redressing of errors or exaggerations to the many-sided fullness of the authority which Christ has committed to his Church. Where this authority of Christ is found to be mediated not in one mode but in several, we recognise in this multiplicity God's loving provision against the temptations of tyranny and the dangers of unchecked power. . . .

It may be said that authority of this kind is much harder to understand and obey than authority of a more imperious character. This is true and we glory in the appeal which it makes to faith . . . . As in human families the father is the mediator of this divine authority, so in the family of the Church is the bishop, the Father-in-God, wielding his authority in virtue of his divine commission and in synodical association with his clergy and his laity, and exercising it in humble submission, as himself under authority.

The Report next considers *Authority in the Communion of Churches*, stating that decisions of what has traditionally been called an 'ecumenical' council are binding on the whole Church. 'When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous.' However, in the Anglican Article XXI we read that 'general councils . . . may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining to God'. Which general councils have been traditionally called ecumenical? Yves Congar writes of Vatican 2 that 'more than any other ecumenical council, it has the hallmarks of authenticity' (*Challenge to the Church* (London, 1977), p. 18). Are Anglicans to accept its statements (e.g. the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) as binding upon them? And what about the Council of Trent and the nineteen other Councils recognized by Rome as ecumenical? Richard Hooker and Launcelot Andrews upheld the authority of the first four Ecumenical Councils only. Orthodox Churches accept none after the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. Clearly there is no agreement here, and the Joint Report is ambiguous at a crucial point.

A further ambiguity seems probable by its use of the word 'indefectible' in relation to the Church. In this Report its meaning is described as 'subject to defects but certain of correction' implying that these defects will not destroy its ability to proclaim the Gospel nor to demonstrate Christian living. It seems strange to invite ambiguity by using a word with a clear meaning – not liable to defect – to signify something else.

Turning to *Authority in Matters of Faith*, the Report states: 'The bishops are collectively responsible for defending and interpreting the apostolic faith'; a somewhat exclusive and uncreative role. What is this apostolic faith which they are to defend and interpret? 'In both our traditions the appeal to Scripture, to the creeds, to the Fathers and to the definitions of the councils of the early Church is considered basic and normative.' This seems rather a lot of luggage to carry around at a time when one would have thought it prudent to travel light; but a footnote refers the reader to the Anglican Conferences of 1948 and 1968. When the present writer turned to these Conference Reports to verify this statement, he found something rather different: 'We recall that beneficial reformulations of the Christian faith have often arisen out of conflicts, and we are confident that out of this present travail [viz. the "Debate about God"] new understandings of the Christian faith will similarly be born. We also remember that the Church and Christian tradition cannot be true to themselves if they are static' (*The Lambeth Conference 1968*, p. 69). Room must surely be kept within the Anglican Communion for those who, in the words of the recent Report of the Church of England Doctrine Commission, 'can neither affirm nor deny the creeds, because they look to the present rather than to the past to express their faith, and attach most importance to fresh understandings of that continuing enterprise which has its origin in Jesus' (*Christian Believing* (London, 1976), p. 37).

The Joint Report does recognize the cultural relativism of credal formulae, but it only permits restatement that 'builds upon the truth *intended* by the original definition' (italics mine). But cultural differences cannot be disposed of so easily. The Joint Report seems to place undue emphasis on credal formulae, and there is no hint in its pages that 'all such language was, and was acknowledged at the time to be, an attempt to express the inexpressible' (*op. cit.*, p. 36).

Turning to *Conciliar and Primatial Primacy*, the Report gives an uplifting vision of the Roman Primacy that differs little from the Primacy accorded within the Anglican Communion to the incumbent of the See of Canterbury. Primacy and conciliarity are said to be complementary, and primacy is described in terms of enabling rather than enforcing. It is however strange reading to find stated in the Report that the doctrine of papal infallibility, as defined at Vatican I, precluded the idea that the Pope could speak independently of his fellow bishops. The Infallibility Decree states that 'when the Roman Pontiff speaks . . . on his Apostolical authority . . . such definitions of *themselves and not by virtue of the consent of the Church*—are irreformable' (italics mine).

The present writer longs for the day when the Pope will be *de fide* as well as *de facto* spokesman for all Christendom; but it must be agreed

that what is described in the Joint Report is very different from the present reality of the Roman Catholic Church.

A case in point is the present question of the ordination of women. It so happened that one week after the Joint Report was published there appeared what *The Times* religious correspondent called 'a Roman torpedo aimed at Canterbury' in form of a Declaration by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, approved by the Pope back in October 1976, in which theological objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood were set out. (Most of these come from Scripture, although the Pontifical Biblical Commission has recently declared that 'the question of ordination of women could not be settled by recourse to Holy Scripture alone'.) But the Church of England has *already* declared that there are no fundamental objections to their ordination, and some Provinces of the Anglican Communion already ordain them. Is such a differing view of doctrine and practice consonant with the doctrine of Conciliar and Primatial Authority in this Report? Unfortunately, the Official Roman Catholic Commentary on the Declaration states unequivocally that 'the Church decides by her teaching and Magisterium what requires unanimity, and distinguishes it from acceptable or desirable pluralism. The question of the ordination of women impinges too directly on the nature of the ministerial priesthood for one to agree that it should be resolved within the framework of legitimate pluralism between Churches.'

It will be apparent that the present writer has grave reservations about the theological adequacy of the Report, however warmly he welcomes the spirit which underlies it. Perhaps he is misinterpreting it—in which case it is to be hoped that he will be shown that he is wrong; for truth matters. The impression has been gained that the Report is primarily a political rather than a theological document, and that this accounts for the ambiguities and other difficulties to be found within it. It is worth contrasting the Report with a statement made by the Church of England's Doctrine Commission in 1968:

> The chief difficulty in drawing up a set of formularies today arises from the very rapidly increasing activity (in all communions, not excluding that of Rome) of radical rethinking of traditional positions in the light of both modern biblical and patristic scholarship and thought-forms influenced by the contemporary scientific world-view, and by what has come to be called 'cyber-culture'. Variegation of thought, rather than rigidity of definition, characterises theology today.
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> *Subscription and Assent to the 39 Articles* (London, 1968), p. 44.

In 1976 the Doctrine Commission again submitted a major Report, entitled *Christian Believing*, in which it asserted that pluralism of belief

is not merely well founded in the New Testament evidence, but even necessary and inevitable within the Church:

> The tension must be endured. What is important is that everything should be done (and suffered) to make it a creative tension – that is, not a state of non-communication between mutually embattled groups, but one of constant dialogue with consequent cross-fertilization of ideas and insights. The quality of this dialogue is determined by three inseparable factors. First, it takes place within the community of faith . . . . Secondly, this dialogue takes place not only between contemporary attitudes but always in relation to a classical tradition of which the scriptures are the foundation . . . Thirdly, wherever there is genuine dialogue, it is marked by an openness to truth from whatever quarter it may come . . .
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> *Christian Believing* (London, 1976), pp. 38 f.)

This doctrine of a pluralism of belief within one Church is as hard for others to grasp as the Anglican doctrine of disseminated authority. For example, *The Times* religious correspondent, himself a Roman Catholic, responding to the suggestion that he was baffled and shocked by Anglican diversity, replied that he was more worried by the implications of *Christian Believing* that 'the Church could manage without doctrine at all' (Clifford Longley, *Theology*, Vol. lxxix, no. 672, Nov. 1976, p. 357).

But Anglicans must not blame other communions for their failure to understand or to take seriously the Reports of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission. Since publishing *Christian Believing* the Doctrine Commission has, up to the time of writing, actually gone out of existence! Its latest Report has been greeted with an indifference bordering on hostility on the part of the Church of England; and it is noteworthy that its General Synod has decided to debate the joint Anglican Roman Catholic Report rather than to discuss the nature of Christian Belief as held among its own members.

But it is at least possible that the principle adumbrated by the Church of England's Doctrine Commission is capable of a far wider application. It seems evident that the Holy Spirit is drawing all Christians more closely into *koinonia*. The suggestion that the Roman Church and the Anglican Communion should draw closer into union, proposed by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, seems an appropriate response to this prompting of the Spirit. But each Church could do this, while keeping its own traditional ethos and doctrine, and at the same time agreeing that there are other legitimate ways of grasping and expressing truth within the Church of God. For we certainly do not all agree, and it seems that we do not even yet *understand* each other. The rejection of pluralism by the Roman Catholic Sacred

Congregation of the Faith cannot be regarded as final. Just as the right kind of patriotism is consistent with a genuine internationalism, so could not each Church, Roman and Anglican, recognize each other, and yet keep its own integrity, and retain its own distinctive ways of expressing truth in faith and order?

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Perfection

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'Be ye therefore perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect.' Christian morality demands perfection; but so does every worthwhile moral system. What is distinctive about the Christian ethic?

A feature of human motivation suggests an answer to this vexed question. Men and animals alike are moved to action by desires and motives; but man alone is capable of evaluating and criticizing these springs of action. He can form second-order desires, striving to change his existing purposes and preferences, and hence himself.

Sometimes a moral theory can explain a second-order want; by comparing the moral worth of the actions motivated by various desires, it can judge some to be preferable to others. But often, especially when the evaluation is of fundamental wants and aspirations, when the consequences of the choice will reverberate throughout the individual's life, the matter outruns specifically moral reasoning. Choices between asceticism and comfort, self-abnegation and self-indulgence, personal integrity and patriotic loyalty, rationality and spontaneity, industry and leisured idleness, are guided less by moral argument than by one's picture of *to eu zen holos*, the *summum bonum*; they express the more-than-moral commitment, a commitment of the kind faced by Antigone: here I take my stand.

Such choices are philosophically puzzling. The term 'choice', connoting rationally grounded preference, misleads; for although one must indeed soberly calculate such facts as one's economic and social position, one's intellectual and emotional resources, this assessment cannot alone determine what one's paramount values are to be. We must appeal to reason in her *persona* as the reflective imagination; and imagination is a notoriously obscure concept. Aristotle located the faculty of imagination intermediate between thought and perception: as thinking, it is active and grasps; as seeing, it is passive and is grasped.

This bilateral complexity of the imagination is mirrored in its object—something seen but also something created. The reflective imagination frames and succumbs to an ideal of a perfect life; man perceives and paints for himself a picture of what it is in which the sanity and the nobility of life consist. So, returning to describe these choices of fundamental attitudes and commitments, they are not primarily choices stemming from a reasoned discovery of the sort of person one is in truth. They articulate part of the ideal seen and created by the imagination; and, being commitments, help to mould the individual into nearer approximation to it. Rational and moral criticism of another's ideal are alike misplaced unless it can be indicted as inconsistent, self-deceiving, or impossible to attain within a society. For each individual's commitment to his own metaphysic of the person determines the very configurations of his thought—determines what he finds funny, tragic, admirable, blameworthy, his manner of speech and silence, the whole texture of his life—and this is the background for, not the object of, rational and moral assessment.

What does guide the reflective imagination? Evidently, the facts of a man's material and psychological endowments. But more interestingly, foci of aspiration are endorsed by his society, family, friends; indeed misguided states like Sparta and Nazi Germany have sought to enforce, and individuals like Socrates have powerfully preached, a single, simple, and universal ideal of human perfection. Literature and history provide compelling pictures of supremely desirable lives. But above all, the reflective imagination has for two millennia succumbed again and again to the ideal portrait of humanity represented by the life of Christ: the ideal of a life dominated by two overriding values, love of God and love of man.

Such a paradigm does not, however, determine a ready-made or unique picture of perfection; the reflective imagination has its work yet to do. Whereas the life and teaching of Socrates presented clearly an unambiguous ideal of perfection as consisting of flawless rationality, much of the magnetic attraction of the life and teaching of Jesus derives from the fact that this ideal, like the parables that illuminate it, is infinitely suggestive, infinitely paradoxical, demanding unceasing reflection, meditation, and reinterpretation. There is no relief from the burden of individual autonomy in the creation of one's own picture; the sole factor common to all Christian visions of perfection is that love of God and man—values themselves requiring strenuous efforts of understanding—must dominate.

Christ, then, in calling for perfection imposes two tasks. 'Be perfect': by your choices and actions mould yourself into identity with the ideal you have framed; 'as your father in heaven is perfect': create this ideal by immersing the reflective imagination in a study of the life and