

Stephen Sykes on ARCIC: A Reply

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In *The Integrity of Anglicanism*,¹ Stephen Sykes brought his skills as a polemicist to bear, with force and affection, upon the Church of England. He has now turned his attention, with comparable force if less affection, to the ARCIC documents on Authority.² The context of his remarks is "a profound crisis of identity" (p. 10) affecting the churches of the Anglican Communion, which find themselves "in a strange twilight zone between a confessing past and a future of some unspecified kind".³

Which way out of the twilight? Without "reconfessionalization", the rediscovery of its confessional identity, Anglicanism will perish, since "All churches are, by definition, confessing bodies" (p. 10). And yet, acceptance of the ARCIC documents as "consonant with the faith of Anglicans" would necessarily be an expression *either* of the kind of unstructured comprehensiveness which he deplores⁴ or of a surrender of Anglican identity to ultramontanist (cf. p. 18). The message is clear: Anglicans should reject the documents, abandon the quest for "reunion with Rome", and take that route towards the recovery of their confessional identity which he outlined in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*. Because this message is nowhere explicitly stated in the article, which masks rejection in the guise of requests for "clarification", I feel entitled, in turn, to comment with "a certain astringency" (p. 9) upon his diagnosis.

Anglican theological traditions. Professor Sykes has four fears. The first is that, although the ARCIC documents give verbal assurance that theological traditions valued by Anglicans will be respected, the account given of the relationships between the "universal primate" and other bishops leaves a "loop-hole . . . for [the] wholesale suppression" (p. 17) of these traditions. "We have here", he says, "an interesting potential area of future conflict" (p. 11).

Of course we do. And the fact should hardly surprise someone who has written so perceptively on the necessary "dispersal" of authority in the Church, and on the inevitability of tension and conflict within Christian processes of decision-making.⁵

ARCIC had a limited brief: to discover whether there existed sufficient agreement, in those areas of doctrine which had most sharply marked the divisions between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, to render worthwhile the practical labour of attempting to restore full communion between

our traditions. To my mind, the brief betrayed an "idealist" misconception of the relationship between common life and common understanding. Nevertheless, that *was* the brief, and therefore I would not expect to find detailed specification of canonical or institutional safeguards built into ARCIC's descriptions.

Professor Sykes might agree. He might say that he was doing no more than reminding the new Commission, which is to succeed ARCIC, of aspects of its task. If this was his intention, he could have said so. As it is, his language invites a less charitable interpretation. "The major problem is for Rome to decide whether [such freedom as Anglicans value], against the exercise of which it has so strenuously campaigned in recent episodes, is now to be regarded as inherent in the very catholicity of the Church" (p. 11). Who or what is the envisaged agent of "decision"? Who is this strenuously active "it"? The Pope? The Catholic episcopate? The Roman Curia? The churches of the Catholic communion? No serious assessment of the ARCIC documents is possible except against the background of the actual (and conflictual) complexity of both Anglicanism and Catholicism. Whenever I hear unspecified reference to "Rome", I suspect that rational analysis is being over-ridden by emotionally charged myth.

Reception. Acknowledging the "exceptional difficulty" of both the theory and practice of "reception", Sykes next considers two features of contemporary Catholicism which, by blocking the flow of truthful communication, threaten the "reality" of "assertions about reception": the "marginalization of critics and the bureaucratic control of the Church (cf. pp. 12-13).

The heart of the matter (we would both, I think, agree) is the problem of *power*. The synodical structure of Anglican government ensures, better than does its Catholic counterpart, that the voices of laity and lower clergy are heard in high places. Nevertheless, some complicating qualifications are in order.

In the first place, at least where clerical opinion is concerned, the problem with the Roman Curia is not so much that it lacks an "accurate flow of information" (p. 12), but that its responses to information received are often disastrously inappropriate. The problem is a problem not of information but of power.

In the second place, in the matter of formation of theological attitudes, I am increasingly doubtful whether the central administration is as powerful as it supposes. Some individual "critics" may be institutionally "marginalized", but there are countervailing institutions. *Concilium*, with its editorial committees drawn from every culture and continent, publishing regularly in seven languages, is arguably one of the few "catholic" journals in the world. Its central directorate (on which I have served) includes some well-known "critics". Gustavo

Gutierrez, for example, has done more to shape Roman Catholic thought and behaviour in an entire continent than has the secretary of the Holy Office, and the writings of Hans Küng (who remains, after all, a "priest in good standing") are probably more widely read by Catholics than those of any other member of my communion except John Paul II. Is "marginalized" an adequate description of Küng's location within Roman Catholicism? Nor are most Catholic universities as subservient to the central administration as Sykes implies. The pressure is undeniable, but so is the resistance.

In the third place, anyone with Sykes's experience of academic committees knows that the best way to render the critical voice ineffective is to put the critic on the committee, allow him to talk to his heart's content, and then vote. Sykes's somewhat smug statement that "Anglicans have become accustomed to open government" (p. 13) overlooks the fact that becoming thus accustomed may mean learning the skills required to operate the system in the service of inaction. Power is wielded and retained more subtly in Anglicanism than in Catholicism, but the fate of the Anglican-Methodist scheme, of the covenanting proposals, and of proposals for the ordination of women, suggest that the Church of England has its own devices for neutralising prophetic criticism. More fundamentally, is it *quite* certain that the voice of Christ's poor is more effectively heard in Anglicanism than in Catholicism? Has Anglicanism solved the problem of power quite as neatly as the complacency of Sykes's comparison suggests?

Finally, it is surely self-evident that "open government" is not, as he seems to imply, an *alternative* to "bureaucratic control"? To acknowledge, as he does, that, "in accepting the argument for a universal primate", Anglicans "are necessarily accepting the existence and the influence of a central bureaucracy" (p. 13), is not to prejudge questions concerning the *kind* of administrative apparatus which would best serve the health and vitality of particular local churches in communion with one another. Moreover, I have the impression that Anglican "open government", although admirable in principle, has generated a vast and unwieldy bureaucracy, engagement in the affairs of which occupies a quite disproportionate amount of time and energy which would be better devoted to the proclamation of the Gospel.

The "Ideal" and the "Actual". "The Commission's method, especially in dealing with the question of papal primacy, was to lay emphasis on the distinction between the ideal and the actual" (p. 14). But, asks Sykes, "How does agreement about an ideal help, if there is residual dissatisfaction about the actual?" (p. 15). The answer, I should have thought, is that it sets the agenda for a programme of reform to be undertaken by *both* the parties which have reached agreement on the goal.

This is not how Sykes sees it. His suggestion, redolent of the complacency which other Christians regard as an unlovely characteristic of

Anglicanism, is that Anglicans should "wait until the papacy is reformed" (p. 15, my stress). I, for one, am most grateful to Archbishop Runcie for not taking this advice when considering whether to invite the Pope to Canterbury. By not "waiting", the Archbishop may have contributed significantly, through the power of symbols, to the reformation of both the fact and the perception (by *all* parties) of the papal office.

Instead of "waiting", Stephen Sykes might consider whether the papacy has nothing to contribute to the reform of Anglicanism. Might not "residual dissatisfaction" with its own actuality help the Church of England, in developing relationships with the papacy along the lines sketched by ARCIC, to recover its prophetic and critical autonomy vis-à-vis the hegemonic structures of our national culture?

Episcopacy. Whatever its value and justification, "primacy" has proved, for *all* Christians, at least as much a problem as a solution. But the same is true of "episcopacy". "By the very growth of ecumenical toleration", says Sykes, "the Anglican understanding of the episcopate has become extraordinarily puzzling" (p. 17). ARCIC's treatment of the relationship between episcopacy and primacy is sufficiently cogent to reinforce bewilderment. ARCIC, Sykes seems to be saying, has a point. He then dismisses this subversive possibility by adding: "ARCIC achieve an undoubted *diplomatic* coup" (p. 17, my stress). By this device, nothing is conceded. "Diplomatic" suggests sleight-of-hand. Sykes is warning his readers lest the mythical monster, weaving familiar spells, lures innocent Anglicans into her embrace. "Rome" may not be Antichrist, but her emissaries resemble Metternich or Kissinger rather than your honest English Protestant.

The final argument is that "the agreement on episcopacy seems to undermine one important element in Anglican ecumenical endeavour" (p. 18) by leaving "the whole matter of Anglican responsibility towards the so-called non-episcopal churches in a most unsatisfactory state" (p. 17). The fear is familiar: the nearer you move towards "Rome" the more you risk betraying the Reformation.

Not for the first time, it is the provincialism that is depressing. In Germany, Eastern Europe, Latin America, most of the United States and much of Africa and Asia, it is not with *Anglicans* that the Roman Catholic churches have been growing towards reconciliation. Sometimes (as in Latin America) the "leading edge" of the process has been primarily practical: a common conversion to the cause of "the wretched of the earth". Sometimes (as in the case of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in the United States) more academic theological considerations have led the way.

The point is simply this: it is not only Anglicans who have and who exercise "responsibility" towards "the so-called non-episcopal churches", and I find nothing in the ARCIC documents to suggest that the Roman

Catholic members of the Commission were unaware of this rather obvious fact. (Moreover, no one reading Sykes's article would suspect that Anglicans and Catholics *also* bear a "responsibility" towards the Orthodox churches.)

Conclusion. Professor Sykes's four fears are not unfounded. Caution, and requests for "clarification", are therefore in order. But what, *other* than fear, does he bring to Anglican-Roman Catholic relations? I find, in his article, no trace of affection or desire.

Ecumenical endeavour (like all aspects of reformation) is, or should be, motivated by the demands of the Gospel and the needs of mankind. Prudence is undoubtedly advisable, but does not the growth of *any* relationship, individual or social, entail a certain calculus of risk? There are costs that need counting, but the sums come out in many different ways. "Is it worth the risk?" is a question to which affection and mistrust give different answers.

I am *not* recommending that the risks be underestimated or obscured by bland evasion. I do not know whether the churches of our communions are sufficiently desirous of reconciliation to make the project worth pursuing. Professional "ecumenists" sometimes underestimate the potency of ancient fears which can only be exorcized (if at all) by the gradual, mutually transforming experience of closer cooperation in common life and discipleship (a cooperation which demands institutional expression).

For all the incisive intelligence of the argument I detect, at the heart of Stephen Sykes's four fears, the fear of "Rome". Perhaps this deep prejudice against Catholicism (which one finds, again and again, in very sophisticated Anglicans who would be shocked if one suggested that they harboured anything vulgar as prejudice) is simply an ineradicable *fact* about the Church of England. If so, the sooner those Roman Catholics who have worked for the recovery of unity come to terms with this fact the better. We could then put the ARCIC documents in the archives and play back the videotapes of the Pope's visit to Canterbury, reflecting, wistfully, on what might have been. And I could stop writing articles so critical of the work of a friend.

Footnotes

1. London, 1978.
 2. Cf., S. W. Sykes, "ARCIC and the Papacy", *The Modern Churchman*, Vol. XXV, No. 1, pp. 9-18. Page references in the text are to this article.
 3. P. 10. I am not sure whether he supposes this crisis equally to affect *all* the churches of the Anglican Communion. In the article, as in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, he displays a regrettable tendency to equate "Anglicanism" with the Church of England.
- Cf. the discussion of "a bogus theory of comprehensiveness, which for far too long has lain like a fog over the Anglican mind" (*Integrity*, p. 34).
- Integrity*, pp. 88-100.

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