

something which God could show us if we would together approach him in faith and expectation? If there is, then the Anglican-Orthodox conversations which we are preparing might prove to be of greater importance than we have yet recognized, and indeed of significance for the whole Christian world, and the whole of mankind.

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*A Marginal Note on Comprehensiveness*

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I

This paper is complementary to that of the Revd A. M. Allchin, not contradictory nor critical of it. The paper might be regarded as an elaboration of Mr Allchin's statement (in section I) that "Anglicans are open to history and involved in history". It is an attempt to explain further what this means.

The first point to be observed is that, somehow or other, the Anglican Communion as a whole has since about the year 1800 had a remarkably good record as regards schism. If we survey the history of the Anglican Communion since that date, we shall be surprised to see that there are absolutely no records of a major schism within the Anglican Church and very few of even minor schisms. In Africa, of course, there have been schisms to form African sects, but this is a phenomenon which no Church in Africa has been able to avoid. In South Africa a schism took place, but it cannot be regarded as a very important one. There was one "Evangelical Church of England" formed in the last century, but it is now reduced almost to nothing. Consider on the other hand some of the pressures towards schism which the Anglican Communion met during that period. The American Civil War in the middle of the last century caused almost every single non-Roman Catholic body to split, but it did not cause a schism in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America. The Australian Church, divided into high-church and low-church dioceses, has avoided allowing this division to grow into a schism. Above all the Church of England itself, torn in bitter and long-continued strife between Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical, when many on both sides thought that the others were betraying fundamental truths and that all was at stake, surprisingly produced no major schism. The Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, which was an entirely new experience and a great shock, at one time appeared to be threatening a schism in the Church between the extreme Protestants and the central Churchmen, but this danger was averted. If we compare the Anglican Communion with any other major Communion during that period – even with the Church of Rome, when we remember the Old Catholic

and the Philippine and Lusitanian Churches – the Anglicans come well out of the comparison. They certainly present a better record than the Orthodox.

We are not calling attention to this fact for the sake of idle boasting. But such a record as this cannot be a matter of sheer chance. It is probably no coincidence that the period from 1800 to the present day was the period when everywhere the Provinces of the Anglican Communion (like many other Churches of the same period, not least the Church of Rome) were freeing themselves from the restraints of the State, when they were either being disestablished or loosening very significantly their association with the State, when the last vestiges of the Tudor and Stuart polity were disappearing. What Anglicanism was when left to its own native genius was emerging by the ineluctable process of history. And whatever this was, it appeared to have a remarkable, though not easily definable, capacity for remaining united, an ecclesiological toughness of which nobody would have suspected it.

## II

The next point to be observed is that, on the whole, when Anglicans find themselves at variance with fellow-Anglicans within their own Province on points which appear to them to be important, they do not leave their denomination and join another, but find various devices whereby they can live together with those with whom they are in dispute without giving way to them, but without excommunicating them. One such device is the Trustee church or chapel; England and Ireland are still dotted with churches erected within parishes which had a parish church already to serve the needs of those – usually backed by a local squire or rich man or woman – who disagreed with the rector and his supporters. This was not schism; the Trustee churches were licensed by the bishop and he officiated there. Almost all of them have now long since ceased to exercise any significant function, but at one point they were a device to avoid schism. Another device was to call in one bishop to do what a neighbouring bishop found he could not conscientiously do; this was quite often used with the consent, or at least without the violent objection, of the bishop who had conscientious scruples. It should also be noticed that the Church of England discovered during the unhappy strife between Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals that ecclesiastical law was a useless weapon; where there was no local or popular opinion to support it, ecclesiastical law was invoked in vain. But in spite of this the bishop, unable to invoke canon law to help him, still managed to a surprising extent to retain a moral authority, to exact respect and even obedience simply because of his office (not just his character).

From this we can draw the conclusion that it is characteristic of Anglicans to believe that in spite of their being at variance with fellow-Anglicans they are united with them in the life of the Church and

especially in the bond of the episcopate. This means that for Anglicans doctrinal unity is not necessarily the same thing as unity in the life of the Church. This is an important point in its bearing on the subject of Anglican comprehensiveness. What is basic to Anglicanism is the Church as it appears and lives and functions here and now, and as it has emerged in an unbroken continuity from past history. A desire to maintain intact the life of the Church is apparently deeply ingrained in the character of Anglicanism, and in defence of the integrity of the common life in the Church Anglicans are ready to some extent to distinguish between unity in prayer, worship and church order on the one hand and unity in doctrine on the other. This can perhaps be illustrated by comparing the differing reactions of Anglicans and Roman Catholics to the impact of historical criticism of the Bible and of Christian tradition during the closing years of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. After the first initial shock the Anglican Communion found itself compelled to be much more flexible about enforcing doctrinal unity than ever before, did its best to come to terms intellectually with the new movement without precipitately abandoning the traditional orthodoxy, and entered into a kind of dialogue with contemporary scholarship without attempting to penalize extreme views. The Roman Communion, on the other hand, attempted to suppress the new movement by force, by censorship, delation, oath-taking and widespread excommunication. One may ask, which of these two procedures seems more concerned seriously to respect the unity of the Church and the common life in the Body of Christ?

### III

This characteristic of Anglicanism is strikingly borne out in what one might call Anglican theological method. Some people think that there is no such thing as an Anglican theological method, but I do not think that those who have looked at the record of the Divinity Schools of Oxford and Cambridge and who know something of the work of the major theological schools of German universities, can seriously doubt that there is an Anglican theological method. Speaking very approximately, one can say that the Anglican theological method is a primarily historical one. Its first and main aim is to study the historical documents relevant to the subject in hand as thoroughly as possible, and their historical background, and from there to advance, tentatively and slowly and sometimes uncertainly, to forming hypotheses or theories or doctrines. It is in sharp contrast to the German method, which is still very influential, of first by a kind of brilliant intuition forming an hypothesis, and then explaining the historical facts to support it. The Anglican theological method contrasts quite as sharply with the Roman Catholic theological method which is first to propound and elaborate dogmatic propositions and later – if at all – to advance within distant sight of the historical documents

supposed to support these propositions. The Anglican theological method has, of course, its disadvantages: it is apt to leave doctrines vague and not fully defined. It tends to turn out into the ministry men who know the historical basis of Christianity very well but who are insufficiently equipped to turn the bare bones of history into a gospel which can be preached or a doctrine which can be taught. The Anglican attitude to "the historic episcopate" is a typical example of Anglican theological method. It recognizes the episcopate as a present phenomenon, derived by continuity from a very early age of the Church. It has no intention of abandoning this form of ministry. But it is very cautious about giving it any theological interpretation.

This Anglican theological method bears an ambiguous relationship to systematic theology. H. R. McAdoo in his *The Spirit of Anglicanism* has shown that from a very early period there was that in the Anglican tradition which wanted to modify the harsh logical consistency of Calvinism, and in particular its doctrine of the "double decree". In recent years Anglican theologians have shown themselves almost neurotically averse to systematic theology. The studied neglect of Barth, by, for instance, William Temple, Hodgson, Mascall and Pittenger, verges on the absurd. There is a kind of Anglican theological laziness which cannot be excused. There is nothing in Anglicanism positively repugnant to systematic theology, as is shown in the work of Macquarrie. But Anglican theologians are disinclined to commit themselves wholeheartedly to systematic theology; they prefer to take an eclectic attitude towards it, retaining some features and abandoning others. Perhaps their preoccupation with history has convinced them that all theological systems, even the best, are in the end eroded by the winds of time and that to commit a Church to a carefully worked out theological system is to build a house on the sands. The kind of intellectual discipline which Anglican theologians learn tends to cause them to distrust any attempt to invest verbal propositions with finality. This tendency has its obvious dangers, but it can operate as a wholesome safeguard against doctrinaire rigidity and intransigent dogmatism.

One important truth about the Anglican version of the Christian faith is not always understood by non-Anglicans nor properly appreciated by Anglicans themselves. This is that Anglicanism is essentially not a faith built on a purely Scriptural foundation, but tradition modified by Scripture. The Anglican communion began as an enterprise of modifying the existing late mediaeval Church in the light of Scripture. It made no attempt to reform all the existing features of the Western Church. It accepted Christianity as an historical phenomenon and endeavoured to make it conform to what the Anglican Reformers thought were the demands of Scripture. That is why, for instance, the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons was preserved, and why the use of a fixed liturgy was not only maintained but was preserved at the very heart of

the Church's life. Anglicanism has always kept this respect for what history has bequeathed to the Church, which is fundamentally a respect for tradition. The concern to preserve intact the life of the Church and the interest in historical evidence which have already been noticed in this paper are consistent with this very important feature in the character of Anglicanism.

## IV

All the points which we have discussed so far amount to reasons why the Anglican genius (if such there be) lends itself peculiarly to comprehensiveness. But it is possible that the impression has hitherto been given in this paper that Anglicans manage to exist without any doctrine at all and that this is how they achieve comprehensiveness – an easy enough task on these conditions. It must now be pointed out that this is in fact not true. All Anglicans share a similar dogmatic basis, even though it might be considered a rather narrow one. All Anglicans are united in accepting the dogmatic tradition of the Church up to 451. This is as true of the most daring Modernist (who will want to reinterpret, but not abandon dogma, *vide* Rashdall) as it is of the most conservative Evangelical. It is as true of Hooker as it is of F. D. Maurice and William Temple. Anglicanism is in a peculiar way attached to the tradition of the first four Councils. This is the ground which Anglicans usually expect to find in common with other Christians, not just the Bible, but the Bible and the dogmatic tradition of the Church for the first four or five centuries. I myself believe that this is a particularly sound and wise basis to choose for a Church's doctrinal platform. I have come through the years to be convinced that in the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation the Church achieved a shape and a maturity which no later dogmatic development conferred and that we should recognize that these dogmas have an authority which belongs to no others. I am also convinced that the unity which lies behind the various Churches which participate in the Ecumenical Movement is not the unity so much of a shared Bible as the unity of a shared tradition, and that is the tradition of the Church of the first four General Councils. This is not to say that Anglicans really believe, as J. H. Newman accused them of believing, that the Holy Spirit ceased to guide the Church into truth after the year 451. Anglicans accept that the Church's understanding of the faith that has been entrusted to her has been enriched, deepened and added to since the fifth century. The fact that the Churches of the Anglican Communion all in some sense regard themselves as indebted to the Reformation of the sixteenth century suggests this. The Reformation might indeed be regarded as an effort to recover Catholic doctrine, not to alter it. The intention of the majority of the Reformers at least was to disclose again after its obscuration in the late Middle Ages the true, and therefore the Catholic, doctrine which the Church should preach. But it is still true that Anglicans regard the dogmas of the Trinity and of the

Incarnation as in a special sense the foundation-doctrines of the Church, different in this quality of being basic from all others, unless we include with them perhaps the belief in the Atonement.

At the end, then, we can say that the Anglican conception of unity in faith is a unity in the life of the Church expressed in allegiance to a common episcopate and nourished by an acceptance of the two great dogmas of the Trinity and of the Incarnation as they were achieved in the history of the Church up to the year 451. But this unity is a very elastic unity. It is prepared to accept very great divergence and variance between Anglicans. Even divergence which appears to go beyond the limits which I have set, as in the cases of Bishop E. W. Barnes of Birmingham or the more recent case of Bishop Pike in the USA, is allowed as a temporary measure, not because either of these bishops was thought seriously to express the faith of the Church (in both cases competent authority declared that they did not), but because doctrinal error should be tolerated, as long as it does not spread widely, as a lesser evil than the evil of breaking somebody off from the life of the Church. In this sense Anglican comprehensiveness can be said to possess a theological basis. It was put in homely but effective words by the Irish Anglican bishop, Fitzgerald, at the end of the Preface of 1878 in the Irish Book of Common Prayer:

“Consider that men’s judgments of perfection are very various and that what is imperfect, with peace, is often better than what is otherwise more excellent, without it.”

### *Answers to Questions*

Put to the Anglican delegates by members of the Orthodox Commission.

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QUESTION I The way in which the Anglican Church understands its union with the Orthodox Churches.

The Anglican Communion is a fellowship of self-governing Churches of many different nations, with a family relationship of origin and life. The following Churches belong to the Anglican Communion:

- The Church of England
- The Church in Wales
- The Church of Ireland
- The Episcopal Church in Scotland
- The Episcopal Church in the United States of America
- The Anglican Church of Canada
- The Church of England in Australia
- The Church of the Province of New Zealand
- The Church of the Province of South Africa
- The Church of the Province of West Africa