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THE POLITICS OF UNITY

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Pity the ecclesiastical politician.

The cliché that some see a cup as half full whilst others see it as half empty was particularly apposite for the recent General Synod debate on *'The Gift of Authority'*. *The Gift* is the fourth report of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). An accompanying article by Roger Beckwith explains some of the background to TGA and why evangelicals have been united in opposition to it. The problem was what to make of the resolution before Synod.

A glass half full

The motion brought from the Council for Christian Unity (CCU) was astonishing. Previous resolutions on ARCIC reports have been laced with platitudes whilst turning a blind eye to the gaping theological holes the reports opened up. As a result the General Synod embraced statements that were completely at odds with the doctrines of the Church of England only to find each time that Rome has budged not an inch. This time, however, the Synod was asked, in effect, to mark the paper 'good effort but needs more work'. At last it seems that the Church of England has found that if there is to be constructive dialogue there is a point beyond which we cannot go.

It would be nice to think that this new robustness is the result of a growing conviction that ARCIC has been leading us down an unbiblical path and that the Church of England is going to uphold its Protestant, Reformed and Evangelical faith. In reality many liberals are becoming increasingly aware that though they may long for unity, the Vatican is not very amenable to liberalism. The conservatism that characterises the Vatican today and has led some Anglicans to jump ship for Rome (out of the frying pan and into the inferno?) is anathema to liberals.

The motion brought by the CCU focuses on two areas where ARCIC has ducked crucial concerns and in an amendment Colin Buchanan, Bishop of Woolwich, attempted, but failed, to add a third.

Primacy

The first area of inadequacy in *The Gift of Authority* is in the way it treats primacy. The report seems to assume that universal primacy is a good thing but it does not address the fact that tied up with claims for Papal primacy are also claims to jurisdiction. As is well known the Thirty Nine Articles specifically repudiate the claims of the Bishop of Rome to jurisdiction in England. It is ridiculous that ARCIC has not addressed this properly and the Synod motion calls on it to do so.

(Aside : It is sometimes assumed that Anglicans already have a form of universal primacy in the historic and organisational importance of the Archbishop of Canterbury (who is Primate of All England). However, there is nothing theological about this, and there is no reason to think that the organisational function could not pass to a different Archbishop. For Rome primacy is a theological issue.)

Infallibility

The second area that the Synod motion draws attention to is in what *The Gift of Authority* has to say about the teaching Authority of the Bishop of Rome and in particular the expression used in the report that this is 'a gift to be received by all the churches'. This latter statement is a standard Vatican mantra and relates, of course, to the assertions of infallibility. There are differences between Roman Catholics as to the precise focus of infallibility. For Anglicans the subtleties are

irrelevant, all humans and all human institutions are fallible (Articles 19 &21) and therefore we only ascribe infallibility to the Word of God.

Colin Buchanan's amendment drew attention to the fact that Papal Infallibility has only ever been invoked in relation to the doctrines regarding Mary. Therefore, he argued in his normal robust way, it is pointless to consider infallibility detached from the Marian Dogmas. This was not accepted by the Synod partly because the next ARCIC report will look at the role of Mary.

In addition to drawing attention to the various deficiencies the motion also made a clear commitment that ecumenical dialogue should be within the context of what Anglicans are supposed to believe. Whilst this point was watered down in the final motion it was important that this was stated because the feeling has always been that ARCIC has misrepresented Anglicanism and has only ever given ground in one direction.

Therefore, in the light of the history of ARCIC and previous resolutions brought to Synod the motion was surprising and refreshing. A glass half full!

A glass half empty

In the euphoria, many do not seem to have been too bothered about what the Synod actually said in the motion.

The resolution began with one of those motherhood and apple pie statements about a 'commitment to full visible unity with our ecumenical partners'. There is nothing wrong with unity but it must be on the basis of a shared commitment to the authority of God's Word written as the supreme and final authority for the Church and of a shared gospel of justification by grace through faith alone. Without this backbone anything that grows out of the ecumenical movement will be deformed. However, our ecumenical partners are generally those churches that do not share this core teaching. Our ecumenical partners are Roman Catholics who deny these truths and other churches that have succumbed to liberalism even more than the Church of England.

The second part of the resolution speaks of the significant role of ARCIC in progressing the search for unity. A quick search through the archives and stockroom of Church Society will show that this is not a sentiment we can share. ARCIC and the ecumenical movement has hindered the search for unity because it has created barriers between Bible believing Christians within the Church of England and Bible believing Christians outside of it. The long round of ARCIC reports and talks has contributed to the wearing away of the heart of the Church of England whilst Rome has not moved an inch from it past errors and blasphemies. How can an Evangelical applaud the work of ARCIC?

An extra clause inserted by the Synod on an amendment by the Bishop of Rochester recognised the pioneering work of ARCIC in getting behind the language of division. It is this feature of ARCIC which has often been the target of evangelical opposition. ARCIC has clouded the issues. It has used deliberately ambiguous language and introduced vague theological concepts. However, when the reports have gone to the Vatican for consideration they have more than once stated that the vague language must be understood, and can only be understood, as being in accordance with Roman dogma.

Was it a glass half full or a glass half-empty? In the end there were only a handful of us who voted against the final motion.

The one redeeming feature in all this is that it appears that ARCIC, whilst not actually dead, is crawling slowly towards its grave.

Sooner or later we can expect the report on Mary but nothing is planned beyond that. The Vatican is not likely to give any ground under the present Pope with Cardinal Ratzinger running the show. Rome has been rightly distressed by the liberalism of global Anglicanism and is frustrated that the Anglican Church does not have a central organisation that they can negotiate with.

For Anglicans the greater issue is whether the Anglican Communion can survive at all. Liberalism has torn into the Communion and it is possible that within a few years the Church of England will find itself on the outside of the Communion. A decaying liberal minority in places such as England and the US will be of little interest to Rome. The majority, if it remains committed to Biblical Christianity, will not want to join with those who deny the truths we stand for.

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