

Concerning schism

This term is far too freely used as if it is a uniquely grave offence. It should be kept in proportion. It merely means a cleavage or division, and often now (not anciently) carries the hint that there is *no* doctrinal difference grave enough to merit the term “heresy”.

The biggest and longest schism, not yet fully mended, is that between East and West. In that sense, there are no members of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church who are not involved in schism. Clearly this is not an assertion of their personal guilt, for most of them have never had the opportunity either to mend or rend. It is only organised bodies which belong to that One Church which can be in a state of schism from each other. It is inappropriate to talk of “schism” when dealing with bodies which do not accept the One Church, or when dealing with individuals.

The English state religion of Henry VIII was schismatic, if we say that there was *initially* no significant doctrinal difference. The schism had two key features. Henry asserted that the Pope was exceeding his authority. Henry asserted that the proper form of Christianity was a national church controlled by a national state. It is only *later* that there are doctrinal differences such as are hinted in the Article “the Church of Rome hath erred”.

The contemporary English state religion and all those bodies descended from it remain *at best* schismatic from their origin. Hardly anybody now accepts that the church ought to be controlled by the national state and coextensive with it. Few remember the technical issues of the “King’s matter” - what degrees of relationship were forbidden in marriage by divine law and to what extent the Pope might grant dispensations. The separate existence of Anglicanism while claiming to be within the One Church could only ever be justified if it were believed that the Church of Rome - and also the Eastern Churches - were still in error (though the errors might change since the sixteenth century). Otherwise there is not merely the fact of schism but also the guilt thereof.

The modern Anglican Communion, to the extent that it “hangs together”, is not now within the One Church. Quite apart from its origin in deliberate and conscious schism, it has in our time failed to use opportunities to heal that schism. It did not make a serious and penitent response to its weaknesses exposed in the ARCIC discussions. It has not engaged seriously with the Eastern Churches. It has defied both East and West by ordaining women, and by showing contempt for the moral law. It has tolerated almost every variety of unbelief and sin. It may indeed be said to have passed from schism into heresy, *quite apart from any question of residual protestantism*. There are faithful individuals; there may come to be faithful provinces - but their fidelity will be seen in their abandonment of the erring body. As matters stand, no body of Christians need be concerned about schism from the Anglican Communion, *only from the One Church*.

Are the Continuing bodies schismatic? Yes in relation to the Anglican Communion as a collective, and so free from its fatal errors. TAC seeks normal relations with Anglican provinces and indeed dioceses which have avoided those errors; there is no wish for schism from them, though the degree of success is varied. TAC actively seeks to restore relations with Rome; there is a wish to heal schism, and so to be part of continuing efforts to heal the relations between East and West. TAC acknowledges its part in the failure of the Continuum to cohere; here and here alone is our local problem of schism.

Michael Gray, Ampthill and Letchworth

An addition and example: Bishop Hamlett

The Bishop reports division in his own body. One of the bishops he has consecrated has used his ability to control his church web site to declare Hamlett's suspension; he in turn has used his continued control of his church newsletter to repay the compliment.

It is not for TTAC to gloat over the difficulties of any Continuing body. We will always owe a debt of gratitude to him for showing that it was possible to continue in England by doing it. He was the pioneer. He saw the need correctly, and he saw it first.

We also owe him gratitude for recognising that one could not simply continue the old Anglicanism, warts and all. It was essential to learn from its failings and to select. Even if every one of his judgements were wrong, still this was the right method and indeed TTAC has much to do in this area.

My view is that more can rightly be salvaged from the Church of England than he believes; that the faith and discipline of Bishops such as Gore and Kirk was solid and is a proper foundation. The idea of a new beginning was, I believe, mistaken.

It seems (*but all this is under correction and I welcome more information*) that there are two recent issues, which are more than mere issues of personality. It has been suggested that he has attempted to impose liturgical forms which may be orthodox but are not essential. It has also been suggested that he now teaches that private Confession to a priest is essential, and the forms of confession and absolution included in Anglican public worship are inadequate. This topic was indeed discussed by Bishop Kirk, the greatest moral theologian in the twentieth century Church of England. A priest or bishop may indeed commend Confession strongly, but cannot teach it to be requisite. For the Prayer Book stipulates otherwise. Private confession is not a primitive practice; the One Church managed without it for many centuries. Granted that the Church of Rome requires private confession at least every Easter, this is only a medieval development, in origin a precaution against unworthy reception of the Sacrament at the one time a year when it would be received. It is wrong to generalise from that rule. At least all Roman priests are well trained in hearing Confessions; the Continuum cannot be sure of providing this standard. We have several centuries experience of voluntary private Confession combined with confession and absolution in public worship; I do not believe that Anglicanism has been a total failure in bringing souls to heaven!

An essential feature of all Catholic Christianity is "shepherding". (It does not cease to be essential just because some evangelical groups talk much about it.) Nobody should be free to go out on a limb; *bishops need mutual correction*, just as priests and laity need oversight. One of the worst sins of the old Church of England was indiscipline. We now see indiscipline between "Anglican" provinces, and frantic efforts to create a disciplined body out of a mere garden party.

TAC may have found a better balance, and we pray that its bishops faithfully discharge that ministry to each other. It seems - to an outsider - that Bishop Hamlett's church is suffering from its isolation. And this will be true whoever leads it.

Michael Gray, Ampthill and Letchworth