

The question of Rome: can Anglican isolationism be justified?

“We have given up all that abuse against Rome” (a character in Newman’s *Loss and Gain*, towards the end of chapter XV)

Alternatively :

Said his Eminence Cardinal G.
“I shall have to become C of E,
For I’m quite at a loss
To refute Kenneth Ross
On *Why I am not an RC!*” (Mascall in *Pie in the High*)

There is a long history of Anglican argument against Rome. I do not propose to summarise it, but to consider it at the level of principle. Those who want more information might usefully seek a copy of Gore’s *Roman Catholic Claims* rather than Ross *Why I am not a Roman Catholic*, for if it has to be done at all, Gore presented the argument quite well (so far as applied before Vatican II) and updated the publication for developments such as *Apostolicae Curae*. The half century between Gore and Ross was hardly creative.

The original anti-Roman argument was that the Pope had *no jurisdiction in this realm*; it was for the ruler (Henry VIII) to organise Christianity *separately* in this country (and, probably, similarly for secular rulers in other lands). Now there are very few upholders of a state religion or national church, even in England. The phenomenon is now very rare in the world. It survives here in law (not least because its adherents know that any change would lead to chaos), but the state is generally unwilling to exercise the authority which it retains (though it is alleged that recent Prime Ministers have decided some episcopal appointments, and the extent to which General Synod is intimidated by the knowledge of Parliamentary power is unknown). Few will now be found to argue that the “Italian mission” has no place in this country and should be excluded by the state in favour of “its own” religion. We now know that there are more regular Roman Catholic worshippers in England than the sum of the dissident groups which make up the Church of England. And we know that Parliament contains members of all religions and none, so that its control over the Church of England is a scandal. Nevertheless, the Henrician “reformation” is oldest and longest-lasting.

The Articles retain the original Henrician protest that the Pope has no business here. This contention applies whether he is good or bad. It was made before there was any doctrinal dispute. The claim is simply to an *inherent right to isolationism*. It is a mystery how this can be squared with Catholicity, the universality of the Church. Nobody in the early Church imagined such a doctrine; the Donatists did not claim a right to be a *local* African church out of communion with all others, but that *they were the universal Church* because everybody else had consorted with error (with a bishop who had failed to resist persecution).

The traditional Protestant teaching (not least in the “Westminster Confession”) is that the Pope is Antichrist (all holders of the office, again irrespective of individual behaviour or belief). This has *never* been official Church of England teaching. The petition against the Pope in the 1552 (and earlier) Litany stops short of that, and even that was excised in 1559. Clearly if he were automatically Antichrist, no obedience to him and no communion with him and his followers would be tolerable. But this is not official Church of England teaching, though it has sometimes been found as a private opinion. If the Pope is not automatically Antichrist, then the Church of Rome (defined by its obedience to the Pope) is in some sense an instantiation of the Christian Church. If so, the question of what relationship with it is obligatory for others who make the same claim for themselves cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The official Church of England approach has been to denounce Roman errors of teaching and of practice rather than to assert that the Pope is Antichrist. This approach is found in the Articles and the Homilies. The Articles are out of date and the Homilies disused. It is disputed how much the Articles take account even of the Council of Trent. They were not revised for Vatican I or II. It might be doubted whether the modern Roman doctrine of Transubstantiation is the same as that condemned in the Articles. Communion in both kinds is now at least possible in the Church of Rome. A bad vernacular liturgy and scripture is now commonplace. There are married priests in some Roman jurisdictions. One can therefore point to many errors alleged in the Articles which no longer apply, or at least not as straightforwardly as the Articles assert, quite apart from the historical question whether any particular accusation was ever fair. There is no up to date official Church of England teaching on the subject. Either we pretend that the Articles are (miraculously) still correct in spite of changes in Rome, or we have to invent an anti-Roman doctrine for ourselves, which may have a longer or shorter syllabus or errors, with a longer or shorter catena of witnesses, but in the nature of the case can never be “the” doctrine of the Church of England, much less that of the “Anglican Communion”. (That fragmented body has never had the authority to bind its members on any subject, Rome included.) The appeal to history at best delivers a doctrine which has had some currency (but the better attested, the less well adapted to the recent Roman changes).

The list of errors, whoever compiles it, has problems. First, as I have argued, it is individual, not official - and all versions differ! Second, few Anglicans of any kind now believe the present perfection of the Church of England, fewer still that of the Anglican Communion. Yet this was the working assumption of the Church of England at its most presumptuous (found in George Herbert, indeed: see "The British Church") Even Traditionalist Anglicans, however much they have removed the more grotesque modern Anglican errors from their own jurisdictions, are unlikely to assert their own perfection, merely their struggle to restore a Catholic mind. Is a balance one way or the other in *comparative* errors enough to justify a duty to remain separate? For the communion of the saints in the One Church is a very basic obligation; surely it is more important than a minor imbalance in error?

Continued Anglican isolation therefore requires that the errors in Rome (similar logic applies to Orthodoxy!) be judged at least as *much more serious* than those in Anglicanism itself (or one's own fragment thereof) and preferably as fundamental. This was an easier stance for early Protestantism, which regarded justification by faith as the *essential* truth which Rome had betrayed, than for traditionalist Anglicans who do not have this particular hierarchy of truths and therefore will not readily find a fundamental error.

Papal infallibility once seemed a possible candidate for a fundamental error (both as a new error in itself and one which potentially legitimised endless further errors). But in practice there have been so few allegedly infallible pronouncements that this is not as important as was assumed when the dogma was new. Anglican attacks on the "papal fact-factory, manufacturing sacred history after the event" (Austin Farrer "*The End of Man*" page 51, and also in other works) sound less plausible after Vatican II, and after the evident disuse of infallible pronouncements even under recent authoritarian Popes.

The expectation that everybody should respect the Magisterium or ordinary teaching function of Rome as if it were infallible is now the normal way in which infallibility is encountered (and Ross already gave this aspect more attention than infallible pronouncements). But is this a fundamental error? At the lowest estimate, any body (secular or religious) will expect its members to give some respect to its established opinions. Any Church is likely to think that the stakes are higher, and the respect therefore greater. So Rome's claims are unremarkable - it is the avoidance of such claims in liberal Anglicanism which requires explaining!

Rome differs perhaps in the way in which it asserts that its teachings bind not just its own members but all Christians (though one might find something fairly similar in Orthodoxy, or dogmatic protestantism). This is simply the claim to universal jurisdiction in modern form. Now we may wish to assert that Rome claims too much, but we have to remember that Rome has a very long tradition of at least having its opinion respected by other churches, at most of having its rulings accepted. The two are closely linked because early Church practice as a working system involved Bishops being willing to take correction from each other, especially at synods. It was thus that Communion was preserved. To some extent this was a mutual relationship, but it would be wrong to ignore the practical leadership of the major Sees in this process. The Henrician dogma of isolationism, and the current Anglican dogma of provincial autonomy, are certainly not ancient. Rome is (to take a minimalist view) the only one of the ancient major Sees still able and willing to exercise that practical leadership. This is no new invention. It is already exemplified in I Clement, a first century work nearly accepted into the New Testament. It has often been exercised and respected subsequently.

Rome is the only See ever to have had such a role in the Western church. Occasionally, various individual Bishops in other sees had such a role on personal grounds. But important as Cyprian, Ambrose and Augustine were in their lifetimes, nobody suggested that this gave their sees a status similar to that of Rome in the West. Maybe Rome claims too much for itself, but the witness of Church History (and indeed of the canons of the First Ecumenical Council) would give it a great deal of authority even in the East, and make it the essential focus of unity for the West. (Issues are more complicated in the East, but Anglicanism is an entirely Western phenomenon. We cannot seek to escape our duties in relation to Rome by fantasising about relationships with Orthodoxy.) Anglicanism replaces the role of Rome as, if you will, Patriarch of the West, with nothing except a demand to be left alone - and yet welcomed; to exist in isolation - and yet enjoy something called communion.

We may, perhaps, regard the specifically Petrine claims as excessive and the founding of the claim to universal jurisdiction on them as mistaken; but the argument I have advanced, of Rome as the practical centre in the West of communion and wise correction, makes no necessary reference to them. The early church made little reference to them either.

Continuing Anglicans of all jurisdictions in particular are not well placed to sneer at the modern Roman system, for they have recognised for themselves (in the Affirmation of St. Louis) that the combination of a high degree of fidelity to the past and a determination to maintain discipline is both our dutiful response to the Spirit, who does not change his mind, and also achieves some stability. This is accordingly our basis of communion. The Anglican Communion has fallen apart, having no commitment to such fidelity and no disciplinary system (and now no communion). Its practical repudiation of the ARCIC studies, and exaltation of "provincial autonomy" is a return to Henrician isolationism (even from other alleged members). Outside the Church of England, there is not even the theory of the state religion to support this stance.

The Continuing Anglican objection to the Roman disciplinary system in practice is mainly that we are not convinced that this particular solution is a *gospel* obligation in spite of its long history; we have already decided that the need exists and it is reasonable to admit that the Roman system has, not without past errors and with the danger of innovation under a liberal Pope, addressed that need.

If we were merely making theoretical and abstract choices, we might waver within the range set by Rome (too centralised and with a risk of innovation) and Orthodoxy (too many different bodies, each in practice jealous of its independence, and too little power to take any decision). Outside that range there is only the private judgement of protestantism, or now post-modernism, or provincial autonomy. But we do not have theoretical choices to make. It is impossible for Continuing Anglicanism to join Orthodoxy for two reasons. First, because it has no mechanism whereby to agree to receive us. At best, one or two fragments of Orthodoxy might be sympathetic, but that would not be a restoration of unity. Second, Orthodoxy generally regards us as doubly schismatic (firstly because we shared with Rome in what they see as the Western departure from them, and secondly in our further departure from Rome at the Reformation - both departures involving innovation and error). The *practical* choice available to Traditional Anglicans is therefore Rome (with Roman errors) or isolation. And it is Rome that has the immediate claim on us as Western Christians. (This is essentially the argument made by Ronald Knox as a priest of the Church of England in "Naboth's vineyard in pawn". I do not think the analysis has changed in ninety years, though the crisis has deepened and so the need to act rather than talk has increased.) Of course, one hopes that reunion between Rome and Orthodoxy will happen; but the duty of faithful Anglicans is to seek unity via Rome, not to pretend to being a third force in themselves. That was always a ridiculous posture.

Of course we may disagree with many aspects of modern Romanism, but a dispute about taste is not the same thing as the allegation of serious error. Even a new (unofficial) *current* list of errors is not sufficient to prove that the practical jurisdiction of Rome is so harmful that isolation is a duty. A long list of niggles is not enough.

My belief is that Henrician isolation, as deliberately renewed by Elizabeth, was always a gross breach of Catholicity. Those who believed in a fundamental error by Rome might have pleaded this as a justification. But in proportion as Anglicanism (or even some Anglicans) withdrew from that posture and ceased to see the Church of England as a "reformation" body, it came under a duty to seek, with all necessary humility, a restoration of the relationships which were wrongly severed.

I believe then that the TAC approach to Rome is right, and the TAC willingness (so far as we are aware of its policy) to take advice and to correct its own inadequacies and errors in the light of that advice is also right. I do not know that the approach will be fruitful, but I am sure that the active search for unity with Rome is obligatory.