

## THE OPEN LETTER:

### EVANGELICAL ANGLICANS AND ECUMENISM

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In July 1977 a group of Evangelical Anglicans addressed an Open Letter to the bishops of the Anglican communion. The Letter has recently been published together with a lengthy commentary, somewhat in the style of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) Agreements, in the general reception of which this is intended as a significant intervention.<sup>1</sup> This document invites attention from Catholics, not merely on tactical grounds, because of the large number of Anglicans with a Protestant cast of mind who must be respected and accommodated in any reconciliation between Canterbury and Rome, but also because of the intrinsic importance of the theological questions that the authors raise.

The tenor of the Open Letter may be judged by the Preface: "Some speak as if with the appearance of the three ARCIC Agreements the main theological discussions are already over, and we can all now move on to arranging the nuts and bolts of intercommunion with Roman Catholics and union eventually. This shows how intoxicating is the strong wine of ecumenical bonhomie, and how churchmen, like motorists, can have their heads grow muzzy while feeling that their judgment was never better. Let it be said here, with emphasis, that the signatories think that the discussions which history will see as the main ones *have hardly yet begun*" (my italics). Evangelicals find themselves badly under-represented in ARCIC, and they consider that the Agreements so far reached on the eucharist, the ministry, and authority, do little to show that Catholics have yet "fully assimilated the doctrinal clarifications which came out of the Reformation conflict". That the Reformation made Christian doctrine clearer, and that the Anglican communion "stands in the Reformation tradition", are affirmations that are certainly often neutralised by ecumenists.

These Anglicans "committed to the Reformation tradition" feel ready to give up their longstanding suspicions of the Church of Rome, "not because Evangelicals have changed their principles, but because the whole situation has changed within living mem-

<sup>1</sup> *Across the Divide: An exposition of the Open Letter on relations between Evangelical Churchmen and Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Old Catholics*, by R.T. Beckwith, G.E. Duffield and J. I. Packer. Lyttelton Press, 1977, pp. 64-90p

ory". By this they mean that Rome has changed: "The last century suspicion and indeed the hatred of Rome, reflecting the empire-building Englishman's sense that the Roman Catholic Church was empire-building too, as in England it truly was, is hardly a proper reaction to present facts, whatever justification for it there was in the past". Salutary and welcome as this admission of "hatred of Rome" certainly is, a statement as bigoted and myopic as that just cited plainly needs to be revised. The prejudice comes out for what it is in that astounding reference to the empire-building Englishman and his sense that, in the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church in England was "empire-building". Perhaps it seemed to middle-class Anglicans a hundred years ago that the Catholic Church in England was truly empire-building. If so, they must have been unable to perceive any more than Wiseman's foolishly triumphalist pastoral "From the Flaminian Gate" in 1850, and the touting for "converts" among university men and the landed gentry that occurred after 1845, when Newman, Faber, Manning and others "went over to Rome" (an influx that was, of course, never treated as an unmixed blessing by most English Catholics).

The Catholic Relief Act of 1829 finally removed most of the disabilities that barred Catholics from middle-class occupations. Two or three generations had to pass before this emancipation worked through into any significant rise in the social and political status of English Catholics. Furthermore, as Cross's Dictionary puts it, with exquisite tact, this "most decisive of the Emancipation measures" was passed "when the Irish situation was critical". The Roman Catholic Church in England, a century ago, was a very ill-matched and unhappy union between the surviving Recusants (mostly in rural Lancashire) and the thousands of destitute Irish labourers and their families who came in search of food and work on any terms, particularly after the disastrous potato famine of 1845-47. In 1890, as Manning noted, eight out of ten Catholics in England were Irish. To speak of the very discreet emergence of the Recusant families, after nearly three centuries of discrimination, and of the long and bitter struggle by the clergy to create community and claim some human dignity for the bewildered and resented immigrants in the worst slums of Victorian England as "empire-building" would be horrifying, if it were not a statement plainly made out of total ignorance of the facts. Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century these two groups remained extremely fragile and bent simply on self preservation. Neither was in any position to make inroads on the English establishment or upon the Anglican Church. Apart from a handful of young men at the ancient universities who were tempted to become Catholics, and of Anglican ordinands in particular, no threat (such as talk of "empire-building" suggests) ever came from the Catholic Church

in England in the last century. It is a curiously clerical and Oxbridge-centred version of history to imagine otherwise. But Evangelical Anglicans are not the only ones who suffer from mythical accounts of Catholicism in England (perhaps I should add at this point that I am neither an ex-Anglican nor, so far as I know, of Irish descent).

What has changed, since about 1966, is that Catholics have begun to take a much more open and active part in interconfessional discussions. It is really rather touching to learn that Evangelical Anglicans have discovered that “unlike many who share in contemporary ecumenical discussions, mainstream Roman Catholics believe that there is such a thing as revealed truth, and so do not welcome the bureaucratic pragmatism which seeks ecumenical success by superficiality, ambiguity and accommodation of opposed convictions”; and that Catholics “maintain that there is a biblically revealed faith, revere God’s word in the Scripture no less than they revere his presence in the Church, and do not see it as superior wisdom to evade questions of truth by pragmatism and diplomacy, or by begging that differences be sunk because time is short and action is urgent”. Surprise, surprise!

*Somebody*, clearly, is being got at there! We may rejoice, however, that we find ourselves at one with the signatories of the Open Letter, sharing their concern for “real and tested theological agreement as a precondition of closer churchly relationships”. We can only endorse their recurrent appeal for “theological seriousness”, “serious and unhurried theological discussion”, “serious, unhurried theological talks”, and so on. Surely they are correct when they write that “whatever isolated individuals, even Archbishops may say, union with Rome is not at present under discussion, nor can be”. This assertion, coming from this Evangelical Anglican quarter, will be welcomed with relief and gratitude by many English Catholics who fear that the current towards reunion between Canterbury and Rome is accelerating and sweeping aside deep theological and doctrinal issues which we on our side, in England, are only beginning to have the resources in scholarship, manpower, and social and ecclesiastical freedom, to be able at last to identify and thus perhaps to resolve. Man’s hurry is never God’s good time—but to say that is already to make a fundamental theological option which not all Christians share. On this at least, Evangelical Anglicans and English Catholics are at one.

The more haste the less speed. On the question of the ordination of women, for example, the Open Letter regrets, as surely most Catholics do, that some churches of the Anglican communion have proceeded as if the theological issues were already settled: “It does not follow that because voices from the WCC, the Anglican Establishment, or any other source tell us that the theological exploration is now over that it really is so. We suspect that on

the issue of human sexuality and the relative roles of men and women in God's creation (which is what the debate is really about) *much more remains to be said*" (my italics). The question is much deeper than many who treat its solution as urgent seem to think (cf. Rosemary Haughton, *The Tablet*, 12 February 1977). The coming solution and recrystallization of the ministry would only be deferred by incorporating women into that sociological variant of a presbyteral grade of the apostolic ministry which is distinguished by Roman collar and black suit, with or without black hat (or the dishevelled figure in baggy Aran sweater and overfilled jeans which is the larval form it produces).

Again, on the question of intercommunion *now*, an equally pressing issue, the authors of *Across the Divide* find they cannot endorse the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent plea in Rome and in Westminster Cathedral: "We think that the Pope was wiser in his politely negative reply". While allowing that the individual, involved in some special situation, may sometimes decide to act on his own, "by contrast, official churchly intercommunion, which is what the Archbishop apparently envisaged, is a matter of formally authorised policy towards other churches as such". Very few Catholics see sufficient grounds as yet, any more than these Evangelicals do, to make such intercommunion meaningful. The ARCIC statement on the eucharist has not yet closed the gap between the Protestant Lord's Supper of Evangelical Anglicans and the eucharistic sacrifice of the Roman Missal. The patience in enduring such deep doctrinal divisions, which the Open Letter commends, far from being a counsel of despair, springs from "the confidence that these will yet be dispelled through God's blessing on appropriate argument". This notion of "appropriate argument" is surely very important. In a splendid phrase, we are invited to acknowledge that "the first and basic form of doctrinal discipline is public argument, which should be allowed to run its course". From that we should indeed all benefit, and this would dissipate fears of "doctrinal minimalism", "pragmatic ecumenism", and so on. It might also confirm that "any idea of a negotiated new relationship with either the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox churches is of course very hypothetical, remote and by human standards improbable".

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The writers of the Open Letter see four major areas in which further discussion, and more explicit agreement, are required: namely, the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the place of ministry in the Church, and the nature of the eucharist. While welcoming such agreement as the ARCIC statements have reached, this group of Evangelical Anglicans remain far from satisfied with the treatment so far of ministry and eucharist, and trace their dissatisfaction to the fact that neither

the authority of Scripture nor the doctrine of justification has yet been properly discussed.

As regards the question of the Bible, the authors of the Open Letter find themselves able at last to look hopefully towards Roman Catholics simply because they detect "genuine openness to the Bible" among people with whom "previously there was no common quest for doctrinal agreement under the authority of Holy Scripture". They welcome the new links, "so long as all these relationships have an adequate basis in the theology of the Bible". They welcome the rapid growth of biblical studies since Vatican II, but they feel "obliged to press the question whether the non-reformed Churches are yet sufficiently ready to test all their traditions . . . in order to correct what the theology of the Bible will not justify". They refer to "the traditional anti-evangelical Roman formularies", and evidently have the Marian doctrines in mind. There are certainly problems there, as the third ARCIC Agreement said. Far more thought needs to be given to the whole question of tradition, and in particular to the development of doctrine.

*Across the Divide* challenges the view, derived from Newman, that has become common among Catholics, to the effect that the Church is "a living, growing, developing organism which from time to time finds itself blessed with new intuitive certainties of faith, certainties which, although occasioned by its commerce with the Scriptures, go beyond interpretation of them as Protestants understand it". On the other hand, a good deal of work has been done on the relationship of Scripture and tradition, particularly since the question was reopened by Cullmann, Congar and others in the 'fifties. The reference to Congar, for example, may remind us that, for him, the relationship between Scripture and tradition must be sought in the priority of the *Gospel*. Apart from one allusion to "the Bible and the Gospel" our Evangelicals are remarkably shy, for Evangelicals, about referring to the Gospel. But for Catholics, the Gospel takes precedence, ontologically as well as chronologically (cf. several essays by Cornelius Ernst, e.g. *The Thomist* XXVII, 1963, pp 170-181). Oddly enough, then, Roman Catholics seem to be more "evangelical" than Evangelical Anglicans committed to the principle of *sola scriptura*!

But, in agreeing that "this area of the transmission of the 'given' in Christianity" offers a theme of immense importance (covering inspiration, hermeneutics, infallibility, and so on), one cannot but be struck by the frequent invocation of "the theology of the Bible". One wonders to what extent the authors would accept that *the* theology of the Bible is a very complex and plural phenomenon. We should think rather of the *theologies* of the New Testament, with Paul, John, Mark, Luke and the others all straining against one another, none with any priority (theologically) over the

others, each envisaging and proclaiming the Gospel within his own particular ecclesiological and missionary perspective, with the Gospel itself being (so to speak) the always moving product of their almost infinitely open, diverging theological trajectories. Catholics used to be castigated for thinking of the “deposit” of faith as some static thing—like “treasure” to be hoarded; Protestants, however, seem often trapped in a picture of the Gospel as precisely such fixed datum. But if the ‘given’ in Christianity is the Gospel, in the sense of the complex and dynamic mutual confrontation and intertextuality of theologies which the canon of the New Testament surely is, then we are at once drawn into an ongoing process (what Gadamer would call an effect-history, *Wirkungsgeschichte*) in which there is no reception of the original truth without our being affected by its effects. In this case, there would be no authentic reception of the Gospel except within the tradition of the Church which it has produced. The growth of biblical studies since Vatican II tends only to convince Catholics that Catholicism is at work, originatively, in the written word of God.

On the question of justification of the sinner by faith alone, the signatories of the Open Letter say that they are “anxious to explore whether the Roman Catholic Church now agrees that justification is essentially God’s free gift of acceptance, bestowed on sinners by grace alone, in and through Christ, and received by God-given faith alone”. To this one can only reply that the Roman Catholic Church believes that now because it could never believe anything else. We must be allowed to apply to Catholicism the distinction which the writers use in connection with Anglicanism, when they differentiate between an Anglicanism “which in principle (not always in practice, but that is another question)” stands for this, that and the other. It is unfortunately typical of much controversy that Catholics are judged on the worst excesses of popular devotion or on polemical and extravagant theological opinions, whereas Protestants expect to be measured solely by the writings of their finest theologians (Calvin, as it happens, here). Newman’s *Lectures on Justification* (1838) bear witness to a climate of thought in which much misunderstanding of their own doctrine seems to have been common among Protestants. There is little reason to suppose that the Protestant distortions that he attacked then are any less common now than the Catholic errors that he exposed. That some version of Pelagianism remains a common temptation (though much less so, I guess, among Anglo-Irish working-class Catholics than among the White Highlands of Anglicanism) may easily be conceded; but, with St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas as well as with St Paul, the Church has steadfastly resisted the temptation throughout its history. Whatever many individual Catholics have thought, and still think, or what-

ever they have given the impression of thinking, there can be no real doubt that, in principle, the Catholic Church has always believed that "it is not in man's nature to acquire justifying grace by his own work, but by God working in him" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae. 113, 10). As St Thomas writes: "it is necessary that God alone, *solus Deus*, should make godlike, by communicating a share in his divine nature by participation and assimilation" (Ia IIae. 112, 2). The language here is remarkably "Greek", with that allusion to "divinisation"; but no one who reads St Thomas on grace, justification and merit, can seriously suppose that Catholic teaching, in this uniquely representative and classical version, departs essentially from the Gospel.

That is not to say that St Thomas's theology of grace ever prompted him to want to organize the whole of Christian doctrine around the notion of justification by faith alone. The Evangelical (Lutheran) claim is that this is the necessary expression of faith in the deity of God and in his saving work in Christ. Where this doctrine is not explicitly taught as central there can only be error, exemplified particularly by how Catholics "still easily slip into the language of self-salvation through meritorious co-operation with grace". This claim involves a particular interpretation of the Epistle to the Romans, affirming as it does that the key to Paul's theology is to be found in the notion of justification of the sinner by faith alone (Romans 3: 22). It further involves reading the whole of the New Testament in the light of the principle that justification by faith alone is the only true clue. The problem for Catholics is not simply that such concentration on the justification of the sinner by faith alone can very easily become an individualistic and subjectivistic doctrine. That is precisely what the theologians of the Council of Trent feared. From within the Lutheran tradition, the same point has been made by Ernest Käsemann: the existentialist, anthropocentric version of the doctrine for which Bultmann is blamed is not some unaccountable excrescence. But there is another problem, which is that Pauline theology, and even the Epistle to the Romans, does not necessarily have to be interpreted in the light of justification by faith alone at all. It is at least as plausible, as E. P. Sanders has recently argued (in his monumental book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*), that Paul's primary conviction was that Jesus had become Lord, and that to confess this was to believe that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10: 9). In other words, St Paul may have thought that the Gospel was essentially about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That might then serve as the key to Christian faith, as it may certainly be plausibly offered as the clue to the Catholic and especially to the Orthodox liturgy and eucharist. Christianity might thus essentially be about the Resurrection.

But the need for a single key concept at all is suspect, particul-

arly when it is one which requires to be defined all the time over against a grotesque caricature of Catholic doctrine. For when we read that Anglican theology “emphasized that God’s grace is personal and not material, spiritual not natural, gratuitous not earned, efficacious not frustrated, using means but not bound by means” we surely want to ask who is supposed to believe that God’s grace is material, natural, earned, and so on. That has never been Catholic doctrine. The New Law, as St Thomas said, is the very grace of the Holy Spirit given inwardly; indeed he went on to say that the letter of the Gospel kills unless the healing grace of faith is present within (Ia IIae. 106, 3). Too many theological principles are slogans, formulated in polemics; which is why it is important not to make an absolute of any single one of them.

For even if Paul’s writings yield their true meaning only to those who wield the principle of justification as the sole clue (which I contest), it is much harder than Lutherans seem to think to fit *all* the New Testament writings into this pattern. Catholics might well concede that the author of Luke–Acts has been allowed to exert an over-dominant influence in the formation of liturgy and piety. It seems senseless, however, to reduce the distinctive theologies of Luke–Acts. or of the Johannine writings, to something that yields its true meaning only under the grid of the justification doctrine. In fact, as Lutherans have always argued, the principle of justification by faith alone, and the authority of Scripture alone are interlinked. It is thus not surprising that if one begins to allow for the immensely creative diversity barely held within bounds by the canon of the New Testament, one finds it impossible to subject everything to the key concept of justification.

The other two areas may be dealt with briefly; they are essentially only lacunae in the ARCIC Agreements. For Catholics, a “sacerdotal” theory of the ministry has been interwoven with a “sacrificial” doctrine of the eucharist, and there is no doubt that the Open Letter is drawing attention to something that many Catholics also feel: namely, that the ARCIC Agreements seem to dispose of these two doctrines with remarkable despatch. As Andrew Louth shows, in his valuable commentary on the Canterbury Statement (Church Literature Association, 35 p), the priest is in a sense on a boundary between God and man; and the belief that sacraments, without teaching, are no better than “dumb ceremonies” contains presuppositions about instruction and ceremony, communication and symbol, which need examination. The Orthodox liturgy communicates, and mediates between man and God, in ways that are much more profound than the theory of knowledge that operates implicitly in the Open Letter can embrace. And certainly Catholics will always be ready to oppose presentations of the eucharistic sacrifice that “obscure the sufficiency, finality and historical completeness of Christ’s one sacrifice for sins on the cross”.



But when the doctrine of justification by faith alone is expounded—preached, rather—in the moving terms with which *Across the Divide* concludes, “where the sinfulness, impotence and needs of Christian people are never out of view and all praise is for saving grace and the deliverance from evil that it brings”. there is no doubt that we recognise “basic truth about every Christian’s communion with God”. We know that this is “direct adoration of the living Lord—Christ crucified, risen, reigning and coming again”. This is precisely what, or rather whom, in all humility, every Catholic has also found. Paradoxically enough perhaps, for Evangelicals, this is an adoration of the living Lord that is never more personal, spiritual, gratuitous, and so on, than in the old-fashioned Catholic custom of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. On the whole, western Catholics have had remarkably little explicit awareness of the Resurrection of Christ. Perhaps the most radical correction of Catholic doctrine and practice in recent years was the decision by Pius XII to restore the Easter Vigil (1951). But Catholic devotion to the presence of Christ in the sacrament, and the custom of frequent confession, were, and are, *at their best* (and Catholics are not always at their worst), genuine encounters in faith with the exalted and sovereign Lord: Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (I Thess 1: 10).

The Agenda that the Open Letter sets for serious, unhurried theological discussions between Anglicans and the rest of us must surely be accepted with gratitude—if for no other reason than that we cannot but be led in the end into all truth by such sharing of reflection upon our work of faith, labour of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thess 1: 3).

## FAITH AND EXPERIENCE II:

### CHARISMS AND ECCLESIOLOGY

SIMON TUGWELL O.P.

Heribert Mühlen’s “Introduction to the Basic Christian Experience” (wrongly entitled in English *A Charismatic Theology*)<sup>1</sup>, though not intended as a work of speculative theology, is nonetheless a theological work of considerable interest—probably the first so far to come from within Catholic Pentecostalism.

As we should infer from the very title of his book, one of Mühlen’s fundamental beliefs is that there is such a thing as “the basic christian experience”. It is the “experience” of a real pres-

<sup>1</sup> *A Charismatic Theology*, by Heribert Mühlen, Burns & Oates, 1978. pp.360 £4.95