

DOCTRINE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

TWELVE months have now passed since the publication of the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine. The varied comments with which it has been received, both within the Church of England and outside it, have revealed much divergence of opinion as to the significance of its content and in consequence as to its value as an indication of the direction in which the Church of England is moving. Among Catholics, the tendency has been to judge it in the light of its obvious divergences from Catholic standards, particularly in regard to its apparent surrender, as necessary dogmas, of the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the bodily Resurrection of our Lord, and to write it down as proof positive of the final victory of modernism over orthodoxy in the Church of England.¹ The Memorandum, published this month with the authority of the Council of the Church Union, is an illuminating commentary both upon the Report itself and also upon many of the judgements which have been made upon it.² Indeed, it would not be untrue to say that for the outsider a real understanding of the Report is very difficult without its help. A judgement which assesses the Report merely in the light of its divergences from Catholic standards is shown to be superficial; a fruitful judgement must penetrate to the root of the problem and undertake two closely connected tasks. The Report must be seen in

¹ This cannot be said of the two articles by Fr. Victor White in the March and April BLACKFRIARS of last year, in which the main verdict of the Memorandum mentioned below is anticipated.

² *Memorandum on the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine.* By A. G. Hebert, S.S.M. Published with the authority of the Council of the Church Union. (The Church Union is a powerful Anglican society, which represents the main body of Anglo-Catholicism.)

its setting as the product of the Church of England as it is to-day, and the Church of England as it is to-day must be understood in relation to its past history if an estimate is to be made of the direction whither in the future it may move. The first of these tasks is admirably performed by the Memorandum; to the second, we shall return later.

In order to indicate the light thrown upon the Report by the Memorandum, we will summarize its main argument, keeping as far as possible to its own words. The verdict of the Memorandum is that, excellent though its work has been in many directions, the Commission has failed in its purpose, which was 'to demonstrate the extent of existing agreement, and to show how far it is possible to remove or diminish existing differences.' The reason of this failure is shown to be that within the Church of England (and consequently within the Commission itself, which was to that extent representative) two views are held, at least implicitly, of the nature of revelation and ultimately of God and of His action upon the world, and these when analysed and made explicit are found to be mutually exclusive. Instead of exploring as deeply as possible these fundamental questions, the Commission has been content to leave undone this basic work, and has sought to find nominal agreement only on many individual doctrines by means of formulae which can be interpreted in different senses. The Memorandum then states the traditional and Catholic doctrine of revelation as embodying God's mighty acts, the formulation of the significance of those acts in dogma, and man's realization of truth by faith and human reasoning. From this it shows that Liberal theology in concentrating attention on the 'values' and 'ideals' realized by man in the course of his religious development, to the exclusion of the ontological aspect of revelation, has come to equate revelation with religious experience, and faith with intuition.

These divergent views of revelation and faith give rise to two quite different views of the Incarnation: 'the one,

that while there was a preparation for the Incarnation in history, the Incarnation itself is the breaking-in of the transcendent God on the course of history, or, in eschatological language, the coming of the Son of Man to judge and to save; the other, that the whole process can be described in evolutionary terms, as a progressive illumination of mankind which reaches its highest level in Jesus Christ' (p. 20). The Memorandum criticizes the Report, in that though stating the orthodox doctrine that Christ is true God and true Man, and accepting the Chalcedonian formula, in seeking to present an agreed statement it does not point out these different and conflicting tendencies or the dangers of a wrong view regarding them.³

The ambiguity which underlies the thought and statements of the Commission in regard to revelation is shown to issue in a corresponding ambiguity concerning the meaning of biblical inspiration and the method of biblical interpretation. We note with pleasure what is said about the unwisdom of repudiating the inerrancy of the Bible without defining the word accurately, and with still greater pleasure the wise words on the right approach to biblical study. 'To acknowledge the Bible as the word of God demands an attitude of docility and humility towards it. But now the hearer is being encouraged to set himself up as the judge and critic of the Bible: and there could be no better way of ensuring that he will not learn what it has to teach him. Humility and docility are indeed quite compatible with a thoroughly open-minded and critical attitude. But it is disastrous when, as so often happens, the latter is there and the former are absent' (p. 24).

One of the most important sections of the Memorandum (typical of the exact theological thinking which charac-

³ To what extent the evolutionary view of revelation and faith is held explicitly and exclusively in the Church of England, the Memorandum does not say. It is clear, however, that it believes that there is a fairly widespread tendency to lay emphasis on the evolutionary aspect.

terizes the whole of it)⁴ is that which deals with symbolism. A careful analysis of the meaning of the word symbol shows that in its theological context it may be used to mean either that which manifests or describes in time a transcendent reality existing outside it, or an event happening within the course of history which is the outward sign of the impact of the transcendent God upon it. In the first sense the appearance of an angel or the description of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Apocalypse is symbolical; in the second, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the sacraments. As mere physical phenomena, these latter have no symbolic significance for us; but they have meaning for our faith as symbolizing the divine redemptive action; the Virgin Birth was the means by which the Divine Person was born, the tomb was empty because the Lord of Life was risen, the water of baptism effects the washing away of sin. Symbols, therefore, have meaning only if they represent spiritual realities, or if the physical events which symbolize the divine action really happened. If the realities do not exist or the events did not happen, it is hardly legitimate to use the word symbol, at least without accurate definition of its sense. This definition the Report altogether fails to give, with the result that the word is capable of being interpreted in two diametrically opposite senses. To readers of the Report, therefore, 'symbolically true' may mean 'really true,' or it may mean 'unreal,' 'untrue'; and to use the phrase in the latter sense of the doctrine of the Resurrection or the Virgin Birth reduces them to the level of legendary stories without indicating what possible religious value they could have in that capacity. The Memorandum goes on to point out that the ambiguity can

⁴ Father Hebert, S.S.M., the author of the Memorandum, is a member of the Anglican religious community which has been the pioneer in the Church of England of an education for the clergy which aims at combining freedom of thought with true deference to the authority of traditional Christianity, and exact theological thinking based on the study of St. Thomas.

be traced to the same root cause as the other ambiguities of the Report; 'failure to distinguish between the truth relating to the heavenly order, which is rightly and properly described by symbol, and the truth of the phenomenal order, which is investigated by Natural Science. Minds which have become habituated to think of this 'scientific truth' as the type of all truth cannot help regarding the symbolical language which sets forth the truth of the heavenly order as fanciful, unreal, illusory. It is just this tendency to regard sensible phenomena as the type of reality, which led to the value-philosophy which renounced all attempts to dogmatize about the heavenly and the unseen, and directed its thoughts to 'experience,' 'values,' and 'ideals.' To this type of mind, the real is that which is verifiable in sensible experience, or again in religious experience; anything that goes beyond this is speculative and meaningless, unless it can be translated into terms of religious or other 'values.' But to the Biblical mind, the heavenly order of things is ontologically real, and is that which gives meaning to the visible order of things; so that the symbols which describe and mediate to us the heavenly order are not fanciful or unreal, but symbols of *truth*' (p. 38).

Two quotations will sum up the final judgement of the Memorandum. 'We have, then, this main criticism to make of the Report of the Commission—namely, that it fails in its task of demonstrating the existing agreement within the Church of England, and investigating how far it is possible to remove or diminish existing differences, because it has not set itself to go to the root of those differences. Two radically different views of revelation are left side by side unreconciled, and therefore the exposition is seriously confused . . .' The strength of the Report lies 'in the constant endeavour which it makes to grasp the meanings of things, and to commend the Christian faith to men by bringing out the intrinsic truth of the faith; it puts its trust in the witness of the truth itself, in

the power of the Gospel message, in the presence of the Holy Spirit operating within the Body, to overcome the evil and bring to fruit the good. But the Anglican way presupposes, for its healthy working, a true concord in the essentials which we are accustomed to sum up as Scriptures, Creeds, Sacraments and Ministry; and the naturalistic theology which gives rise to the false doctrine about God and man and redemption which we have encountered constitutes a threat to the basis on which Anglicanism stands. The weakness of Anglican discipline is typically shown in its failure to guard sufficiently against such a danger' (pp. 45-46).

There can be no doubt that this Memorandum, voicing as it does the general mind of Anglo-Catholicism, marks a further decisive stage in the movement towards securing a genuine unity of belief within the Church of England, which was begun by the appointment of the Doctrinal Commission. The Church of England is moving; but it is impossible to gauge whither it is moving apart from an understanding of its past history. In another article next month we shall attempt to indicate those elements in its history and present position which have a bearing upon the problem, and to estimate the direction that its further movement may be expected to take.

HENRY ST. JOHN, O.P.