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THE TRACTARIAN CHALLENGE TO CONSENSUS AND THE IDENTITY OF ANGLICANISM

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I

"The Church of England above all others," writes John McManners in his contribution to the Doctrine Commission's report *Believing in the Church*, "lives by consensus." But, he convincingly suggests, it is not a consensus that consists in the unanimity of all church members or one that can be identified by reference to the pronouncements of authority, duly embraced by the faithful. It is not specifiable. You cannot take its temperature. It is a consensus that exists in the tacit dimension, an unwritten understanding between members of a common fellowship.¹

The hidden agenda here is of course the transposition of the notion of consensus from the explicit to the tacit, from theory to praxis, from doctrine to living. In effecting this transposition Professor McManners and the members of the Doctrine Commission are making a virtue of necessity. The notion of a tacit consensus is a *post factum* accommodation to the demise of doctrinal accord within the Church of England. To say that is not by any means to criticise the concept of a tacit consensus subsisting in the realm of praxis – I have sponsored this view myself in a recent publication² – it is simply to make it unambiguously clear that what we are dealing with is not the timeless essence or ethos of Anglicanism but a pragmatic adjustment to the facts of history.

But a one-sided emphasis on praxis is dangerous. It is undialectical in that it destroys the tension of theory-praxis that alone gives meaning to the concept of praxis. It compels praxis to carry a burden that it cannot sustain³ Consensus needs to be explicit as well as tacit if it is to contribute to the identity of a Christian church.

Such an explicit consensus existed in the Church of England prior to the Oxford Movement and consisted in adherence to the central principles of Reformation theology. The Tractarian challenge to this consensus contributed significantly to the state of affairs to which the Doctrine Commission makes a noble attempt to give an acceptable face.

II

The avowed intent of the more extreme Tractarians to *unprotestantise* the Church of England appears in retrospect as the culmination – though not the inevitable conclusion – of a process that had been at work for nearly 200 years. The 17th and 18th centuries saw a deepening sense of reserve and distrust among Anglican churchmen towards the Continental churches of the Reformation, affecting first the Calvinists, in the 17th century, then the Lutherans in the 18th. As Owen Chadwick has pointed out, three out of six Archbishops of Canterbury from Parker to Laud (Grindal, Whitgift and Abbott) "would not have disdained the theology of Switzerland", but as a result of the Civil War and Commonwealth, Calvinism came to be identified with disloyalty to the Church of England. By the end of the 18th century Anglicanism had come to be conceived as a

tradition that did not include Calvinism.⁴ Instead there had developed a discriminating attitude to the Reformation, which favoured the Lutherans as members of a sister church, at the expense of the Reformed.

In the early 18th century high churchmen were said to esteem the Lutherans as "the best part of the reform'd religion" and as closest to the Church of England in doctrine, discipline and worship. One decided high churchman advanced that "as they retain a considerable share in the divinely appointed form, without any schismatical opposition to it, so we may reasonably hope that a proportionable share of the divine blessings attends and vertuates their sacred ministrations". The same writer added: "Of these Protestants we cannot advisedly say that their sacraments are no sacraments, that their ministers are mere laymen, that their churches are no churches, but rather that they may be churches, tho' not so perfectly formed". This, we are reliably informed, was "the traditional high church view".⁵ But as rationalising tendencies began to prevail in Lutheranism during the *Aufklärung*, English high churchmen looked on with dismay and a sense of increasing alienation. However, this did not affect their assessment of the Reformation itself or of the reformed character of the Church of England.

Within the Oxford Movement, three strands emerged: firstly the old high church tradition represented by Hugh James Rose and William Palmer of Worcester College; secondly, the high church tradition radicalised by a rejection of the Reformation and of the Protestant character of the Church of England, seen in Keble, Pusey, and the Anglican Newman, following the lead of Hurrell Froude; thirdly, the extreme left wing, Frederick Oakeley and W. G. Ward who, also provoked by Froude, set the pace for radical measures and preceded Newman into the Roman fold.

Of these three groups, the first, the faithful high churchmen like Rose and Palmer, respected the reformed nature of the English church and disassociated themselves from the Tractarian platform of *unprotestantising* the Church of England. Keble (a hereditary high-churchman) and Pusey (a convert) set out from the same position but moved steadily towards a negative attitude to the Reformation and a determination to change the face of the church. Together with the extremists, the avowed Romanisers, they presented a deliberate challenge to a consensus within Anglicanism.

Such a consensus clearly existed prior to the Oxford Movement. In general terms, it comprised an acceptance of the Protestant character of the Church of England in its articles, liturgy and polity. Specifically, it meant the central Reformation principles of justification by faith, the supreme authority of scripture and the role of the sovereign – a lay person – in the government of the church. It was a consensus of all living traditions in the church, evangelicals, high churchmen and latitudinarians.

The evangelicals saw themselves as custodians of the reformed character of Anglicanism. Tractarianism provoked a vigorous reaffirmation of Protestant principles by the evangelicals. They responded to Tractarian editions of the Fathers and the Caroline divines with new editions of the English Reformers. The Parker Society published 53 volumes for 7,000 subscribers between 1841 and 1853. Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* appeared in a new edition in 1837

and the Calvin Translation Society commenced publication in 1843. Notable evangelical divines like William Goode and E. A. Litton adorned Anglican theology and were a match for the heavy guns of the Tractarians like Pusey. Litton's major treatise *The Church of Christ* (1851) took up its ground on the principles of "evangelical Protestantism, the Protestantism of Luther, Calvin and our own Reformers". But at that time, the evangelicals also had fraternal links with both the high church and the latitudinarian traditions.⁶

Through such allies as C. P. Golightly, prime instigator of the Oxford Martyrs' Memorial (1839-40), the evangelicals joined forces with the high-churchmen – a tradition within Anglicanism that like the evangelicals, though perhaps less fervently, accepted the heritage of the Reformation.

III

The developed Tractarian position, however, had no hesitation in claiming that Protestant sacraments were no sacraments, their ministers mere laymen and their churches no churches. This was not – as might be supposed – a mere republication of a temporarily obscured high church tradition, claiming unbroken continuity with Laud, but a harking back to the unrepresentative Non-jurors and the method adopted by Bishop Bull (d. 1710) of playing off the Reformers (particularly their doctrine of justification) against the Fathers. To Hurrell Froude, authentic Anglicanism meant "Charles the First and the Non-jurors".⁷

In response to Tractarianism, the term "evangelical high-churchman" was coined, both to distinguish traditional high churchmen from Tractarians and to emphasise their commitment to the Reformation principles of the supreme authority of scripture and justification by faith. Golightly himself, a staunch Hookerian, is difficult to place, being a high-churchman in all his instincts yet implacably hostile to Tractarianism and its most indefatigable Oxford opponent. As Peter Toon has commented: "To distinguish an evangelical high-churchman from an evangelical with a high doctrine of the visible, episcopally governed, national church is not easy and between about 1838 and 1848 perhaps impossible in some cases".¹

It was the Gorham case (1847 onwards) that drove a wedge between the evangelicals and the high-churchmen who had been united in their opposition to the Romanising tendencies of the Tractarians. While the evangelicals took refuge in the secular courts, thus bringing the old charge against the Reformers – Erastianism – out into the open again, the high-churchmen lined up behind Henry Phillpotts, bishop of Exeter, on sacramental doctrine. Phillpotts, though never anything but his own man, was regarded by the Tractarians as being on the side of the angels: in *Tract 81*, 10 years before Gorham, Pusey cites him as his last witness in a *catena* of fathers of the English church who held to a sound doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice.

Evangelicals in this period were firm in their confidence that they had the Reformers on their side. They were their true heirs and authorised interpreters. On the questions of justification and the authority of scripture their confidence was well founded. But on the priesthood of all believers and the right of private judgement – as well as in the problematical area of sacramental theology where the Reformers themselves were not agreed – evangelicism

had diverged from Reformation theology. As Peter Toon has pointed out, even the scholarly William Goode, "was so influenced by what we now know to be latitudinarian interpretations of the Reformation that he believed that the doctrine of private judgement was an essential principle of the Reformers, and this claim became a standard evangelical presupposition".⁹

As this point reminds us, there was another influential tradition of interpreting the Reformation, the latitudinarian or broad church one, which constitutes a challenge to the assumption of the evangelicals then (and now) that they are the only true voice of the Reformers. Just as the high church tradition should not be identified exclusively with the Non-jurors, so too the liberal Anglicans should not be placed with the shallow rationalism of Benjamin Hoadly (1676-1761). Coleridge, Arnold, Maurice, Hare and the others have their antecedents in the Tew Circle of James I's reign which interpenetrated with high church circles.¹⁰ They perpetuate the authentic Anglican ethos of cultured liberality, balance and breadth of view that we find in the moderate latitudinarian position from the Tew Circle and the Cambridge Platonists in the 17th century to Mandell Creighton and William Temple in modern times. It was a liberality and sense of proportion conspicuously lacking in extremes of churchmanship, whether high or low. That is not to say, however, that it lacked passionate conviction where questions of principle were concerned.

IV

In Anglicanism before the Oxford Movement there was no sense of exclusive adherence to, say, Catholicity at the expense of the Reformation, or Protestant principles to the exclusion of a high view of the church's tradition and sacraments. Coleridge, a close student of the 17th-century divines as well as a passionate advocate of Luther, symbolises this integrated position. In this Coleridge was doing no more than Hooker or Laud.

Elements within evangelicalism could make common cause with broad church liberals in defence of Reformation principles and in opposition to Romanist tendencies. On the question of justification they could stand together against notions of salvation by infused sacramental grace (though the latitudinarians would tend to favour a more moralistic position than the evangelicals for whom moral striving was confined to the sphere of sanctification). On authority they could unite in defence of scripture against tradition (though latitudinarians would give a larger role to reason). On private judgement they were at one in taking the Reformation to be an assertion of the principle of conscience and the first dawn of religious toleration. The evangelical predilection for a simple gospel, comprising those doctrines on the surface of Pauline Christianity, linked up with the undogmatic, minimising approach of the liberals for whom faith was expressed in the practice of the Christian life.

The liberal Anglicans or broad-churchmen are to be clearly distinguished from the low-churchmen who were, as Peter Toon points out, none other than right-wing evangelical churchmen who worked with dissenters and who set little store by the historic episcopate.¹¹

The limited and pragmatic partnership between evangelicals and liberals came to an end in mid-century as

the debate between religion and science began to claim more of the limelight from the Protestant-versus-Catholic controversy. The parting of the ways was the question of the inspiration of the Bible and matters came to a head with the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860.

V

However, on the eve of the Oxford Movement, the party-structure of the Church of England could be likened to a series of mutually overlapping circles: high church, broad church and evangelical. What united them was an unquestioned, tacit consensus with regard to the Protestant character of the Anglican church – a character that was evidenced above all in the doctrines of justification by faith and the paramount authority of scripture, in a fraternal regard for the Continental churches of the Reformation, in esteem of the Reformers both English and foreign, and in loyalty to the standards of the Church of England (the Thirty-nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer, as well as unofficial secondary standards among which Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* stands pre-eminent).

The Tractarians set out to challenge the consensus on each of these points, though they did so as men largely ignorant of the thought of the Reformers. In opposition stood faithful high-churchmen, led by William Palmer of Worcester College who had felt betrayed by the trend of the movement, bowed out and turned against his former colleagues; evangelicals, with William Goode spearheading their counterattack; and liberal Anglicans, including professed Coleridgeans, who reinterpreted Reformation principles and held up the Reformers as men to affectionate admiration. But together they did not succeed in preventing the break up of the Anglican consensus or the partial unprotestantising of the Church of England.

By this time, however, those who had done most to bring this about had passed over to the Church of Rome. Their successors in the Anglo-Catholic movement for the most part saw no need to take that final step. They remained in communion with a church now split into two opposed camps, evangelical and Anglo-Catholic – together with a sizeable rump of middle opinion, effectively permeated by liberal assumptions, sitting lightly to dogma, made uneasy by party tub-thumping and gradually adopting many originally Catholic practices in worship.

The liberal tradition of adventurous thinking, represented at the beginning of this period by Coleridge and Arnold, is scarcely discernible in contemporary Anglicanism, apart from those who have become self-consciously radical with a strong negative charge and have virtually passed off the ecclesiastical map.

The Oxford Movement was the Church of England's deferred Counter Reformation, an upsurge of consecrated energy through the channels of Catholicism. In the realms of worship, discipline, the sacramental life and the cure of souls the Tractarians had a prophetic message for the church. Through their sheer sense of God they may have saved the Church of England. It is unhistorical to be partisan about the Oxford Movement: we are all children of the Tractarians now. But with regard to the Reformation, there is no doubt that a powerful momentum of wilful misrepresentation, culpable ignorance and downright prejudice was generated by the Oxford Movement. No one

can read Tractarian polemic against personalities, whether dead like Luther or living like Arnold, without being disturbed by its incongruity with the obtrusive aspirations to truth and holiness with which it is not infrequently juxtaposed.

While successful, to a large extent, in their aim of unprotestantising the church, what the Tractarians did not do was to *catholicise* the Church of England. Does not Catholicism involve a sense of how the church has lived through history, some appreciation of the diversities of the Christian tradition and a willingness to learn from traditions other than our own?¹² It is doubtful whether the defensive narrowing of historical vision, such as the Tractarians evinced with regard to the Reformation, can be the fruit of a truly Catholic spirit. And without Catholicity there can be no valid consensus.

VI

A good deal of ecclesiological and ecumenical work now focuses on the notion of consensus. The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) envisages "the mind of the church" (*consensus fidelium*) counterbalancing the authority of the magisterium centralised in the papacy. Elsewhere I have questioned whether this ideal can ever be translated from theory into actuality.¹³ ARCIC has in mind an explicit consensus that can articulate views on specific issues. Newman, whose *On Consulting the Faithful* is the proximate source of this idea, was much more cautious, seeing the *sensus fidei* as an instinct for truth working in the unarticulated depths of the church's life.¹⁴

The report *Believing in the Church* understands consensus as an unspoken understanding expressed in a sense of belonging to one body and it is my belief that this insight is capable of being developed into a notion of unity in the tacit dimension that could break the ecumenical stalemate.¹⁵ But just as in the realm of constructive thought (following Polanyi) the explicit is merely the tip of the iceberg, resting on unplumbed depths of the creative process below the threshold of consciousness, so too the implicit, the creative, the source of new possibilities, cannot realise itself except by becoming explicit, by being articulated. A consensus that never becomes explicit is a broken reed. What is needed now is an attempt first to differentiate and then to correlate the explicit and the tacit, theory and praxis, the propositional and the personal, doctrine and living, in the concept of consensus.

One approach to this would be along the lines of Stephen Sykes' *The Identity of Christianity*,¹⁶ that is to say a broadening of the "essence of Christianity" project into the sphere of praxis and in the light of the structures of human relating and belonging revealed by the social sciences. Another approach, complementary to this, would be to look for a fundamental grammar of faith, a pattern of the truth, a distinctive logic of Christian existence underlying not only doctrine but believing, praying and suffering. To tackle that question would be to leapfrog over the problem of the identity of Anglicanism and make a contribution intended to be relevant to the whole church.¹⁷

NOTES

1. *Believing in the Church* (London, 1981), pp. 223ff.
2. Paul Avis, *Ecumenical Theology and Elusiveness of Doctrine* (London, SPCK, 1985).
3. Cf. Paul Avis, "In the Shadow of the Frankfurt School: From 'Critical Theory' to 'Critical Theology'," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 35 (1982), pp. 529-540.
4. W. O. Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (London, 1960), pp. 19ff.
5. George Every, *The High Church Party 1688-1718* (London 1956), p. 145.
6. Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (London, 1979), pp. 39f, 60f, 174. Cf. W. J. Conybeare, "Church Parties" (1853), *Essays Ecclesiastical and Social* (London, 1855).
7. H. R. McAdoe, *The Spirit of Anglicanism* (London, 1965), pp. 397ff; R. H. Froude, *Remains* (London, 1838), I, p. 308.
8. Toon, op. cit., p. 5.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 204f.
10. Cf. McAdoe, op. cit.; Brian Wormald, *Clarendon* (Cambridge, 1951), pp. 240-276.
11. Toon, op. cit., pp. 208f.
12. Cf. Owen Chadwick, "Catholicism," *Theology*, 76 (1973), pp. 171-180.
13. ARCIC, *The Final Report* (London, 1982). My criticisms are in *Ecumenical Theology and the Elusiveness of Doctrine* and, briefly, "The Church's Journey into Truth: A Preface to Further Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue," *Theology*, 86 (1983), pp. 403-411.
14. Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. J. Coulson (London, 1961).
15. See the section "Unity in the Tacit Dimension" in my *Ecumenical Theology: The Horizons of Method*.
16. Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (London, 1984).
17. Cf. Paul Avis, "The Church's One Foundation", *Theology*, 89 (July 1986). I hope to publish documentation of the thesis advanced in the present article in a study of the Tractarian and Liberal Anglican philosophies of history in general and interpretations of the Reformation in particular.

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