

About the church-reunion difficulties

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review**

Band (Jahr): **4 (1896)**

Heft 13

PDF erstellt am: **14.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403332>

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ABOUT THE CHURCH-REUNION DIFFICULTIES.

(NORWICH CONFERENCE, OCTOBER 1895. *)

I am glad to notice that the question of Reunion is one of deep and growing interest to your readers. We, too, Eastern Orthodox, consider the subject as the most important of the many questions at issue to-day; and so I venture to send you a few lines, based upon the debate at the Norwich Church Congress, trusting that they may be of some use in elucidating the main points concerned.

All endeavours to come to an understanding since the time of the great schism—that between Rome and the other patriarchates—have been doomed to failure because the considerations that really motivated them were rather political and utilitarian than religious. This should no longer be the case. How then does the question stand now? Is there to be found a basis for the reunion and common action of once united, now disunited and widely differing Churches?

Our great ecclesiastical bodies derive their life and doctrine from the ancient undivided Church. Her teaching, then, her canons, and only these, are binding upon all the Churches of Christendom:—I mean, of course, the canons touching dogma, not those which had reference only to the circumstances and conditions of those primitive days, and which therefore possess but an historical interest. This leads us at once to the famous standard laid down by St. Vincent of Lirinum, which must be the basis of all our efforts towards reunion, and which alone offers a serious guarantee of their success.

*) From the *Anglican Church Magazine*, December 1895.

The only Church which cannot join us in this is the Church of Rome: she cannot consent to any such standard of Catholic truth. And with Rome, in this matter, I must couple what I may call the extreme Left of Protestantism—and so of Anglicanism. The Pope and the ultra-Protestant fall into the same error. Their teaching can be expressed by similar formulæ, only with different signs—*plus* and *minus*. Both the one and the other are in rebellion against the *universal* Church: both erroneously maintain that the rights, the spirit and the power of the Church are centred in one man. The Roman Catholics identify the Church with the Pope: the ultra-Protestants with each of themselves. In both cases the idea of the universal Church is lost; neither the one nor the other can accept our ideal; and so unhappily they must be left out of our field of action, unless indeed they altogether shift their ground.

Some days ago, at the Norwich Conference, the question of Reunion was discussed by Anglicans of high standing, clergy as well as laymen. Two of these, whom I have the honour of knowing personally, Prebendary Meyrick and Mr. W. J. Birkbeck, took as their special subject the prospects and the hindrances of reunion between the Anglican and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. With your permission—and of course only in my private capacity—I will say a few words upon this part of the great Reunion question from my Eastern Orthodox point of view.

Mr. Birkbeck, who has visited Russia, and knows our Church not only *de auditu* but also *de visu*, spoke of the difficulty of grasping her theological position. The East, he said, considers that the West left the Church at the schism of the eleventh century. Easterns maintain that the Church alone is infallible, no individual having any claim to this attribute of the Church, or to her essential holiness. Thus the difference with Rome and with Protestantism is the same. Each of these has introduced a new and unknown quantity into Church life—the substitution of the authority of individuals for that of the Church. Such, according to Mr. Birkbeck, is our standpoint.

Herein he is quite right. We do strongly believe in the infallibility of the Church—that “the gates of Hell shall not prevail against her”: we do not, and cannot allow infallibility to any individual, be he Pope, patriarch, priest or layman.

And so, as Mr. Birkbeck avers, theoretically we regard Roman Catholics and Protestants as being in the same relation to eternal truth—as being equally far from the teaching of the primitive Church. From a practical standpoint, however, there is a great difference between the two. The Roman Catholic has given up his free will and his understanding to an infallible Vicar of Christ, who has bound down new dogmas, unknown and contradictory to the teaching of the first eight centuries; and so he cannot, and dare not accept our Eastern teaching. He has no longer, indeed, the right to do so, even if he would, for the only definer of the dogmas which he is bound to admit is, not the Church universal, but the vice-God, the Pope, who has issued new and unreformable dogmas in direct opposition to the Church's teaching.

Not so the Protestant. He is bound by the opinions of no one save himself—not even the Church. He claims the right of explaining and commenting upon the Word of God according to his own understanding. And so there is, in his case, the *possibility* of an identical view between us. The Protestant *can* share—often does share—the opinions of the undivided Church. He is in no way bound, as is the Roman Catholic, to consider our Eastern teaching as heretical; and I have known, and now know, many Protestants, as well as Anglican Churchmen, who cherish no prejudices against, and who are even friendly to much of our dogmatical teaching—who are, indeed, very near to our Church. Here, then, in Mr. Birkbeck's statement of the position, I see no insuperable hindrance to union between the Orthodox and Anglican Churches.

Shall we find it in the speech of Prebendary Meyrick? That distinguished divine discussed the question from a more formal, precise point of view. He began by declaring that reunion with the Oriental Churches was not so difficult as reunion with Rome. Still, he says, the hindrances are very real and very grave. They are (1) the *Filioque*, (2) the icons, (3) the consubstantiation, (4) the acceptance of the second Council of Nicea, and (5) the infallibility of the Church. Let me, now, approach these difficulties from my own personal point of view (which I am far from considering infallible), putting Nos. 2 and 4 together, as they practically form one.

It seems to me that a solid basis of agreement between Easterns and Anglicans on the subject of the *Filioque* could be found in the formula adopted at the Bonn Conference, 1874-75. We reject the $\epsilon\kappa$, but accept the *per*, the $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}$; and of course you will never insist upon a double *fons divinitatis*. Here, then, we could come readily to an agreement.

The worship of icons presents now even less difficulty. There were indeed here the gravest difficulties in Charlemagne's time; but through explanations given by Rome, with the formal agreement of the Western Churches (at that date *free*) the matter was satisfactorily settled, and the decisions of the second Council of Nicea were everywhere accepted—in England as in other parts of Western Europe. Whether we regard that Council as œcumenical or local, the iconoclastic tendencies of some Western dioceses were removed, and Western Europe fully accepted the worship of icons. That is a solid fact. Anglicans and Protestants may strive to change the position, and obscure the real point at issue, by bringing forward the many undeniable abuses of the worship of icons: they may aver, and rightly, that there is here a danger of pagan *latria*; but a true doctrine cannot be made answerable for the misunderstandings of ignorant people. *Usum non tollit abusus*. So this difficulty, I submit, is not a grave one.

The question of consubstantiation, in the sense of transubstantiation, is more serious, and may offer real difficulty. The Roman tendency to define things which, by their very nature, cannot be reached or explained by logical arguments, or Reason, has wrought much mischief. The teaching of the ancient Church was that in the eucharistical elements the bread and the wine become Christ's Body and Blood. In our Orthodox communicant's prayer—one of the sublimest I know—we say: "I believe and confess that this is Thy purest Body, and this is Thy purest Blood." Nothing else. This is the faith required by the teaching of our Church, as it was required by the primitive Church. *How* the change is effected is beyond our comprehension, though terms and phrases, more or less happily chosen, have been put forward by our theologians, mainly with a view to check the inroads of Protestant reasoning. Now, can a simple faith such as ours be a hindrance to Union? It can; but surely only with those who, forsaking

primitive doctrine, maintain that the bread and wine remain just bread and wine, *and nothing more*. Unless I am mistaken, however, a large proportion of the Anglican Church—the whole High Church party—accept as well as we do the theory of a transmutation of the elements.

I do not quite understand what meaning Prebendary Meyrick attaches to the fifth point—the infallibility of the Church—when he considers it as “a more formidable hindrance”. I have already had the honour of discussing this point with him in the *Revue Internationale de Théologie*, and am inclined to think that there is not so much a difference of principle between us as a misunderstanding. I will limit my arguments to one statement. Our Saviour, in founding His Church, promised that the gates of Hell should not prevail against her. What meaning can be attached to His words? Surely that, ‘hell’, meaning error and wickedness, shall never conquer the Church; that she will ever remain holy; that she will never err; that she will stand fast as an infallible guide in morals and doctrine. This, I believe, will be admitted by every true Christian; and, if I mistake not, it is avowedly stated—at least within the limits of the first four centuries—by a large section of the Anglican Church. I really cannot understand how or why the Church œcumenical should, at a certain epoch, say after the Council of Chalcedon, be considered as no longer the infallible teacher of mankind, as being deprived of the gifts granted to her by her Founder! It seems to me that this difficulty is based, as I say, rather upon a misconception of terms than anything else.

Such, then, are the hindrances to reunion between the East and the West which were detailed at the Norwich Congress; and they certainly do not appear to me to be insuperable. There are, however, two other questions—difficulties—which I would notice, which call for elucidation and disposal by writers possessed of more exact data and science than I possess;—difficulties, hindrances, which were not passed under review at Norwich, but which, from our standpoint, call for careful consideration.

The first question is that touching the validity of the episcopal succession in the Anglican Church. Anglicans ought not to be angry with us for putting this question. For my

part, after having listened to the learned Döllinger, and devoted some study to the matter, I accept the Anglican succession as perfectly valid; but the romanists have so skilfully attacked and calumniated Anglican Orders that their validity is far from being generally held by our Orthodox theologians. Since, however, the Conferences with the Old Catholics and Anglicans, the question has taken a new direction, and should not present any very serious difficulty. Still, it awaits elucidation.

The second of the two difficulties to which I would refer is of a much graver character, and seems to me, at the present time, to be insuperable. Though the Church admits of a considerable amount of freedom of scientific investigation in the realm of dogma, she nevertheless maintains strongly the unity of dogmatical belief—*in necessariis unitas*. Those who do not recognise these *necessaria*, these essential, universal, dogmatical truths, cannot belong to the universal community, the Church. What, then, one should like to know, does the *established* Anglican Church inculcate with regard to these *necessaria*? I do not refer here just to the XXXIX Articles. Some of these we believe to be in contradiction with primitive doctrine: but—a strange statement!—we are told that the Articles are not binding, at least upon laymen. But is it not the case that a very large section of the Anglican Church not only hold the most questionable of these Articles, but go actually beyond them, entertaining—while still regarded by the Church as her faithful sons—views, *e.g.*, upon ‘salvation by faith alone’, Election, the Incarnation, the Trinity, which the Church Catholic regards as heretical? Here, it seems to me, we shall find the great hindrance to any real and abiding measure of union between the Eastern and Anglican Churches; and I must confess that I do not see how the stumbling-block can be removed, in the present state of things.

I have had the pleasure, from time to time, of being in intercourse with representative Anglican Churchmen of different shades of opinion, and have found that the tenets of many of them—particularly those of the High Church party—are very near indeed to the faith which our Church demands of us as being the faith of the primitive, undivided Church. Between Anglicanism as represented by such as these and the Eastern Orthodox Church union seems to be readily practicable, not-

withstanding the hindrances pointed out by Prebendary Meyrick and Mr. Birkbeck. But then there comes the insuperable difficulty of arriving at a *modus vivendi* with what I have termed the extreme Left of Anglicanism, who belong to the Established Church and can claim the same rights and privileges as their brethren holding more Catholic doctrine. Any measure of union with the radical Left of Anglicanism, is, I fear, impossible; and here is a hindrance which I suppose can only be removed by Disestablishment. That accomplished, a reunion, on equal terms of autocephality, with a large section of the Anglican Church, should be easy.

I am heartily in accord with what you, Sir, have written upon the means and ways of a general reunion of the Churches. It can only be compassed *viâ* Old Catholicism. The Bonn Conferences, under the leadership of the great Döllinger, will, I believe, whatever be their immediate result, stand in the history of Christendom as a model upon which must be shaped all future attempts at reunion. Former essays in this direction—for instance, the Councils of Lyons and Florence—failed because there was no sincere desire for union. The underlying and animating motive was not Christian brotherhood, but the devilish idea of domination. How could God's blessing rest upon such endeavours? To-day, since the Old Catholic congresses, we are upon the right path. Neither side claims submission. We do not say, however convinced each of us may be of the truth of his own creed, "Come and kneel before my altar. God's blessing is *here*, and nowhere else." No! we say: "Let us compare our teaching with the teaching of the ancient, universal, undivided Church, and let us be united in Her."

ALEXANDER KIRÉEFF.
