

Present controversies in the Church of England

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): **7 (1899)**

Heft 27

PDF erstellt am: **13.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403454>

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PRESENT CONTROVERSIES

IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

By the Bishop of Salisbury.

I have gladly promised my friend the editor of the International Review of Theology to do something to enlighten his readers on the present condition of affairs in the Church of England. My main contribution to their enlightenment must be to remind them that England is not like other countries in regard to freedom of debate on Church matters, but that people here say very readily what they think, but are slow to take any action which will break up or seriously injure any of our national institutions. Further I would bid them remember that much of the agitation has been sedulously fostered by some of the newspapers, which, in a time of political stagnation, have been glad to have a topic to interest their readers—and Englishmen and Englishwomen *are* largely interested in religious questions. Again it is to be remembered that there have long been two parties in the Church of England, one honestly attached to the Puritan and (as we call it) “Protestant” side of religion, the other, as honestly, to the Ecclesiastical and (as they would call it) “Catholic” view of things: and that there are some, though few, on both sides, so eager and bitter as to wish to drive out their opponents. On the other hand, the great mass of the clergy are perfectly loyal and free from exaggeration of any kind in either direction. It is most unfair to them to represent them as disobedient and self-willed, fond of party strife, or given to conspiracy. They are as a body willing to be guided by the Bishops, where the latter are united, and willing to obey the law of the Church. But it must be remem-

bered that under our constitution Presbyters have a representative House of their own in each Province, the concurrence of which is necessary before any Canon can be enacted, and that therefore long before the Reformation, and even before the creation of our famous Parliament, they had a freedom and quasi-independence practically unknown (as far as I am aware) in other countries. Their tenure of benefices is also more secure than is usual on the continent of Europe. They are on good terms, in most places, with the people, who nevertheless do not as a general rule care very much about the questions which are being discussed in the newspapers. Our people desire and feel that they have a right to have the ministrations of the Church, and they are friendly with the clergy, but they have no very definite opinions on the points so bitterly controverted. They are content to let things grow quietly and do not much mind what the clergy do or say, provided that they preach well, teach diligently and visit constantly and sympathetically, and set a good example in society. The Bishops of course take a much more active cognizance of what has been going on: but ever since the failure of the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874 and the change of policy inaugurated by Archbishop Tait towards the end of his life, they have attended much more to practical work than to controversy. Since I became Bishop in 1885 our minds have been principally occupied with the Disestablishment agitation, the support of voluntary Schools, the organisation and growth of our communion abroad, and all sorts of financial and disciplinary measures at home, in which we have achieved considerable success.

The general peacefulness and progress of Archbishop Benson's fourteen years (1882 to 1896) was, if I remember right, only broken, as regards ritual, by the case of Read versus the Bishop of Lincoln. The result of that case was no doubt a general and quiet advance in ritual usage, and a sense that many things were lawful and even expedient which up to that time had been hotly debated. Then came the controversy as to Anglican Orders in which the new Archbishop of Canterbury and the recently appointed Archbishop of York took up the defence of our ordinal on the old lines of the seventeenth Century controversialists, a course which was generally approved among us.

There can be no doubt that under all these circumstances the "ecclesiastical" party (to give it a non-controversial name) has greatly grown in strength, and that when an old usage is revived or a new development introduced, it is much more common to receive it with a "Why not?" than used to be the case. It has been seen that the danger of actual conversions to Rome on the part of the clergy is much less than it formerly was. It has been seen that ritual and hard work frequently go together. It has been seen that the uneducated, although perhaps not greatly attracted by ritual, are in many places not repelled by it. Those who have poor and sordid homes certainly like to have the use of beautiful and well ordered Churches, and to be removed for a time into an atmosphere of reverence and joy. The Sunday evening service, at any rate, is popular in nearly all neighbourhoods: and in this way many who used never to attend public worship have been brought to do so.

But with this general advance, has also grown up a desire in the minds of a number of the clergy—especially it must be said among those who have rather narrow conceptions of history and a limited intellectual horizon—to introduce a great deal more of system into Anglicanism than it has hitherto possessed or can wisely and reasonably assimilate. They have naturally looked for this quality to Rome the mother of systems. Roman Canon Law, Roman views of the Sacraments, Roman logic as to the unseen world, Roman methods of moral theology, have all been largely drawn upon, and the results popularised in little books of devotion and instruction, which have done, I venture to think, on the whole, great mischief. The teaching contained in these books has been proclaimed to be „Catholic”, and under the guise of that noble word much that is of very secondary importance, and really part of a temporary system, or actually obsolete and defective has been proclaimed to be binding on the conscience. The tacitly assumed premiss with such teachers seems to be that whatever is found in the Greek and Latin communions of today must be Catholic in such a sense as to be binding: and that whatever can be proved to have ever been accepted in England must be binding now, unless it has been absolutely and in so many words repealed. The idea of lapse by desuetude does not seem to be intelligible to such minds. They want a text and a formula for everything,

and live mentally on little scraps of rules, as many people of weak health now-a-days do on drugs in tabloid form. At the same time they wish to remain in the Church of England and do not desire submission to the Papal system.

A dangerous inclination has therefore grown up, in a comparatively small circle, and in a few Dioceses to adopt three kinds of error—error as regards the Holy Eucharist, error as regards the communion of Saints, error as regards the duties of the priesthood and people in the matters of private confession and absolution. We all confess that in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper "the Body and Blood of Christ are verily and indeed taken and received", but it is only comparatively lately that any English theologians have so closely identified the sign with the thing signified as to press adoration of our Lord in the holy Sacrament, "in usu" and "extra usum", as if it were a duty as important as the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice and the great act of Communion itself. I must make honourable exception in regard to the Rev. Vernon Staley's popular book *The Catholic Religion* in which there is no mention of Eucharistic adoration: the author no doubt perceiving that it had come to take a very disproportionate and exaggerated position in the teaching of many of those with whom he was naturally connected.

Similarly the quickened sense of communion with the departed, and an observation of the practice of both Greeks and Latins, has led some among us to desire to revive those personal addresses to the Saints which pass imperceptibly and almost of necessity into a treatment of them as minor divinities especially amongst the uneducated. And again the desire to apply moral laws more explicitly to the conscience, and to increase what they consider to be the wholesome and proper power of the priesthood, has led some to press the duty of private confession and to preach the benefit of absolution indiscriminately and sometimes where it was not only undesirable but positively harmful to independence of character. In all these directions, and in others that might be mentioned, the teaching of history has been largely ignored and the value of system and logical inference exaggerated.

It was therefore inevitable that there should be a trial of strength between the two parties, inopportune and disagreeable as it was for many reasons. It was left in fact for two almost

unknown persons Mr. Walter Walsh and Mr. John Kensit to come forward as champions of the Protestant cause. I confess that to this day I know nothing more of Mr. Walsh than his name and his book entitled *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement*. The preface to this book is dated 4 September 1897. It has been largely circulated and has attracted considerable attention, partly because of its clever mixture of documents with startling inferences, partly because of its pretence to reveal secret machinations, in which a number of well known names were involved. It is obviously written by an outsider, unfamiliar with the persons about whom he writes; but I should hesitate to say that it was intentionally unfair. Mr. John Kensit—a bookseller and publisher—began his demonstrations in one or two London churches in December 1897 and January 1898. He certainly succeeded in drawing attention to some irregularities, which were possibly known to the Bishop of the Diocese (who had recently succeeded Archbishop Temple), but were to most of us unknown and certainly are not common in any Diocese. My friend and colleague the Bishop (Creighton) of London would no doubt have been able to deal with these irregularities much more readily, had not Mr. Kensit's rough methods aroused a reaction, as is always the case in England when anything like unfairness or meddlesome interference is observed. Notwithstanding this inconvenience the Bishop has effected very largely what was necessary.

The matter became more notorious by the opening in April 1898 of a correspondence in the *Times* newspaper which has continued almost ever since. To this correspondence one prominent politician, Right Hon. Sir William Harcourt, M. P., grandson of a former Archbishop of York, became a constant contributor for about six months from 18 July 1898 to 2 January 1899 or thereabouts. I must confess to have read very little of this correspondence. But its general tenor is of course well known to everyone from the constant allusions to it in the press and in private conversation. I hope that those who have read both sides have learnt something, though it has imported a certain amount of bitterness and suspicion into our church life, and has led to some excited public meetings, to resolutions and counter-resolutions, protests and counter-protests, and to several debates in the House of Commons and to one at least in the

House of Lords. But on the whole the progress of the Church has been uninterrupted. Not only have the Bishops been calm and united in general policy, quietly discouraging excess and teaching the truth in love, but public men generally have kept aloof from the controversy as far as may be, and above all the leading Churchmen of Evangelical opinions have abstained from mixing in the fray. The occurrence of the centenary of the Church Missionary Society this spring has been a distinct gain, and it has shown that there is no real cleavage of parties where the great duty of supporting Christian Missions is concerned. We have also to be grateful to the leader of the House of Commons, Mr. A. J. Balfour, for not only perceiving, but for having the courage and the tact to point out, the true lesson of the controversy. It is that the Church of England needs greater autonomy. The House of Commons has long ceased to be an assembly only of Churchmen, and it constantly refuses to give time even to measures of obvious practical utility affecting the Church for which it is desirable to gain legislative authority. What is needed is that the ordinary powers of Parliament should be delegated to an assembly of Churchmen, representing both clergy and people, and that the country, which is very homogeneous, should, for important purposes, have only one Church assembly or joint Convocation. The constitutional authority of Parliament might easily be 'saved', as we say, by giving it a veto on any legislation which was held by the majority to be unjust or revolutionary.

The great advantage of this change would be that it would interest the mass of lay Churchmen much more thoroughly in the organisation of our religious life. As it is, many take an earnest interest in our voluntary Church assemblies, Diocesan and Provincial, although their resolutions have not the force of law. But a great number do not do so, merely because these assemblies are lacking in coercive and regulative power. They work hard as magistrates, and on County or Borough or District Councils, because in that way they can act effectively and make or administer laws. They would certainly take a similar interest in Church assemblies if those assemblies had more power. So of course would the Clergy: and in this way their interest would be detached from the private (it is not fair to call them 'secret') societies, which at present represent to many of them

too important an element in the direction of their conduct. The regular consultation of the living Church in this practical way would also enable us to demand from the State a change in the Final Court of Appeal on Ecclesiastical questions, which is really necessary if its decisions are to be brought under the Fifth Commandment "Honour thy Father and thy Mother". At present the best that can be said for the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council—our present Court of Final Appeal—is that it represents the opinion of able and generally unprejudiced lawyers, obtained at very little cost to the Church, on the meaning of the formularies and canons by which the clergy are bound. As such it is undoubtedly valuable. But it is impossible to say that this is the judgment of the Kingdom of Christ, and that a decision so arrived at is to be accepted in other cases as a general rule. Yet it is the proper and inevitable tendency of all lawyers to be governed by precedent, and very soon the question asked is not what the law of the Church itself is, but what have lawyers previously inferred about it. It is this obvious weakness of our Final Court, and the unfitness of the penalties it is able to inflict, that have made religious men of all parties unwilling to bring cases of doctrine or ritual into the ecclesiastical Courts at all, and consequently we have had to look about for a substitute for litigation in order to decide certain ritual questions which do need immediate decision.

This substitute has been found in a proposal of the two Archbishops, made with the full concurrence of all the Diocesan Bishops, to exercise the power of interpretation, which they already possess, in a formal and almost judicial manner. At present if any persons have doubts as to the interpretation of the Prayer-Book they are directed to take them to the Bishop and if the Bishop is in doubt he is directed to refer to the Archbishop. Such questions, which frequently occur, have hitherto been answered informally, simply by letter, and no record very likely has been kept of them. The two Archbishops are now prepared to sit together to hear the persons concerned personally or by deputy, and, after hearing both sides at length, as in a court, to give their decisions openly. Such decisions will not be legally binding, but they will probably be accepted by all but a very few, as the best representation of a spiritual tribunal that can be obtained under the circumstances, and until such time as

an amended Final Court of Appeal can be constituted. In this way various rather pressing questions of ritual are likely to be settled by general consent and without resort to litigation and the serious consequences involved in it. As yet no decisions have been given by the Archbishops, though they have heard two arguments, so that no definite result can at present be reported. But there is no serious cause for anxiety. Only our friends should pray for us that good may grow out of evil, and that a better mutual understanding and a united policy may lead to that increase of autonomy which the wisest among us see to be the special need of the Church of England, which is not only an important body in itself, but is the centre of the whole Anglican communion. If this be so we may have cause in the future to thank God for what it is the fashion to call the "Church crisis".

Nativity of St. John Baptist, 24 June 1899.

JOHN SARUM.
