

Report of the plenary discussions

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Report of the Plenary Discussions

Dick J. Schoon

Introduction

In this volume the results of the International Anglican – Old Catholic Theologians' Conference, held in Leeds (UK) from 29 August to 2 September, 2005, are made available in written form. It seems appropriate to include an impression of the reactions of the participants at the conference in response to the presentation of the papers. This impression is a personal reconstruction in hindsight, reflecting the compiler's understanding of the discussions and selection of the themes.

Responses to the papers by Ploeger and Avis

Mattijs Ploeger and Paul Avis presented papers on the ecclesiological basis of Old Catholic and Anglican theology. During the discussion it was supposed that the concept of apostolicity, as found by Ploeger in Old Catholic theologians such as Rinkel and Küry, gives a rather static impression. How does the idea of mission relate to this? According to Ploeger, it is correct that Rinkel and Küry did not particularly reflect on the concept of mission, and that the concept is not (yet) as much on the agenda in Old Catholicism as it is in the Anglican churches. Another question related to Rinkel: Did he, as some Roman Catholic theologians do, work out the difference between apostolicity in contents and apostolicity in form, so that discussion with non-episcopal churches is made possible? Ploeger confirmed that Rinkel advocated a broad understanding of apostolicity that is based on its contents, although he always saw the episcopal form as an element within this broader view on apostolicity. Another participant feared that the sociological structure of the church becomes too static when the emphasis is laid on the diocese as the local church around the bishop. Is there not a more dynamic vision of ministry? Ploeger answered that such a dynamic vision is possible as soon as the bishop is not perceived as a manager but as a presider (liturgically and beyond), enabling all charisms to fulfill their different ministries. Another commentator warned of a sometimes romantic view on the Early Church in some Old Catholic theologians. In Avis's paper, one participant missed the Protestant traditions within Anglicanism itself and within the churches with

which Anglican churches are in communion. Avis confirmed that it is desirable that Protestant ecclesiologies, especially of the Porvoo churches, be included in Anglican reflections on ecclesiology in the future.

Responses to the papers by Podmore and Esser

In response to the papers by Colin Podmore and Günter Esser it was remarked that terms like ‘power’ and ‘suffragan’ should be cautiously applied in the context of the jurisdiction of a metropolitan, because they are foreign to the texts of Councils such as Nicaea. It was suggested that the term ‘suffragan bishops’ was used when ‘auxiliary bishops’ were meant. Another participant asked when, in the process of reception, the time has come at which it can be concluded that a certain view has been ‘received’ by the church. The answer was given that this is not a matter of some particular moment in time, but a stage in a long process. One can legislate on decision-making by episcopal bodies and on formal reception by local churches, but not on the long-term question as to whether a decision is finally received by the church as a whole.

Responses to the papers by Aebersold and Wright

The papers by Sarah Aebersold and J. Robert Wright evoked the following discussions. It was acknowledged that Orthodox ecclesiology, as an example of an ecclesiology of the local church, suffers empirically from the problem of how common decisions can be made when local churches are relatively independent. According to Wright the recent consensus model of the World Council of Churches is not a real solution to this problem of decision-making, as Wright emphasises the WCC’s tendency to play off Scripture and primacy against each other. To what extent is the Old Catholic model able to enhance international decision-making? Is the principle that decisions by the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference are to be received by each local church a formal act of ratification or rather a matter of practical implementation? How are the Old Catholics to overcome a tendency to ‘diocesan congregationalism’ – as one contributor asked? And does the same question apply to the Anglican understanding of the relationship between local (or national) and worldwide?

Responses to the papers by Hind and von Arx

In the discussion after John Hind's and Urs von Arx's presentations, it was asked how Anglicans proceed in the problem of the recognition of ministries. Hind answered that at the basis of the Anglican approach is the attempt to avoid the traditional stereotypes, misunderstandings and prejudices between the churches. For example, the Roman Catholic Church is not a monolithic whole, and the Anglican – Old Catholic relations are not the only expression of the model of the Early Church. Hind described the way Anglicans deal with the ministries of other churches as a gradual process (from recognition to reconciliation) in which sometimes pragmatic steps are taken. Paul Avis commented on some of Hind's citations from the Lambeth Conferences. The 1920 statement should be read in context, that is, as the negation of the Roman Catholic pretension to be the only visible universal church. Terms like 'only', 'sufficient' and 'constitutive' recall the language of the 39 Articles.

Affirmations and questions

In the final plenary session, the following affirmations and related questions received significant support:

1. Ecclesiological convergences and some questions that they evoke

- a. Anglicans and Old Catholics affirm that the local Church, interpreted as the diocese, is the basic ecclesiological entity.
 - How should we relate this common ecclesiological understanding of the local Church to the situations of parallel jurisdictions in mainland Europe? Is the Prague model, where congregations of one church come under the oversight of the bishop of the other, helpful?
 - How can we find wider (national, regional and universal) structures for decision-making without violating the 'local' emphasis of our ecclesiologies?
- b. Anglicans and Old Catholics affirm, with different emphases, a 'eucharistic ecclesiology'.
 - How does 'mission' fit into a eucharistic-ecclesiological approach?
 - What is the significance of baptism for eucharistic ecclesiology?

c. Anglicans and Old Catholics are in ‘full communion’ through the Bonn Agreement: this is a sufficient and definitive basis for any steps to deeper unity.

- What is the significance of the fact that many of us feel that we are already ‘one Church’, even though we are actually constituted as separate churches?
- How does ‘full communion’ relate to the goal of the ‘full visible unity’ of Christ’s Church: does the imperative of visible unity impel us to look for further development of our relationship?
- What structural model would enable us to be ‘united, not absorbed’, so that the distinctive traditions, theologies and practices of our communions were preserved?
- Are our ‘bonds of communion’ strong enough (what about common structures for consultation and decision-making)?
- Could the Old Catholic communion and the Anglican Communion become more fully united, perhaps in a united province of mainland Europe that would incorporate the various Anglican and Old Catholic jurisdictions?
- Is the Anglican Communion receptive to the presence of traditions that are not distinctively Anglican? Is the fact that the United Churches of South Asia and the Portuguese Lusitanian Church are members of the Communion a helpful precedent?
- Would a deeper structural expression of our communion be a matter of concern for our relationships with the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and episcopal Lutheran Churches?
- How can we connect a ‘top down’ approach (at the theological and episcopal level) to further steps with a ‘bottom up’ approach that helps Anglican chaplaincies and Old Catholic parishes to work together more?

2. Convergences in mission and the practical questions they evoke

a. Anglicans and Old Catholics preach the Gospel in a pluralist and increasingly secular Europe.

- To what extent should we be prepared to let ‘belonging’ (community-building; exploring spirituality) precede consensus in faith and theology?

- b. Anglicans and Old Catholics ought to work together more closely than they currently do.
- Anglicans and Old Catholics need to get to know each other better locally, in order to overcome ignorance or prejudice and to learn to trust one another.
 - Anglicans and Old Catholics could be encouraged, when on holiday, to worship in one another's churches.
 - During ordination training, finding out about the other Church should be included in the teaching, and study exchanges should be encouraged if possible, taking account of language ability, time, and finance.
 - There is scope for more exchanges of parish clergy.
 - Should the election of bishops in the Old Catholic Churches become open to candidates from the Anglican Communion (and vice versa)?