



The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill
administrator@latimertrust.org
www.latimertrust.org

Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 01

THE ANGLICANS AND THE ORTHODOX

The Church of England has for many centuries sought to have friendly relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Back in the early years of the seventeenth century, Dean Field, in his classic work *Of the Church*, argued that the Orthodox Church, whatever errors it might have made, was not committed to error and confirmed in error in the way that the Church of Rome had been since the Council of Trent; he concluded from this that the Orthodox Church should be regarded as belonging to the true Church, and not as a heretical church (like Rome). Contacts with the Orthodox Church were always difficult, however, for geographical and political reasons, and have only recently become easier, through the improved facilities for travel and the influx of Orthodox refugees and immigrants into Western countries.

Theological discussions between Anglicans and Orthodox have taken place from time to time in the twentieth century, but not in a sustained way until the last few years. In 1966 pan-Anglican and pan-Orthodox commissions were set up for doctrinal discussions between the two communions, with a view to establishing closer relations, and the present warden of Latimer House was appointed to the Anglican team. During the same period, the Anglicans have been holding international discussions with the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, and the Orthodox with the Old Catholics and the Monophysite Churches, though the Orthodox plan talks with the Roman Catholics and Lutherans as well.

It is easy for the Church of Rome to set up international teams, being a highly centralised body, but less easy for the Orthodox Church, consisting as it does of fifteen self-governing regional or national churches. These fifteen churches, however, are more or less identical in doctrine, liturgy and canon law, and since the Orthodox ethos is extremely conservative, they are likely to remain so. With the self-governing Anglican churches, on the other hand, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to act together, owing to the amount of change that is taking place within them and their consequent growing diversity.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Anglican Communion has been, in practice, an unstable mixture of evangelical, traditionalist and free-thinking elements. As these three elements ran through all the Anglican churches (though with a different preponderance in different countries), there was no immediate disintegration, and while the official formularies remained in most places the same, the Anglican Communion retained a clear identity. But now that every province is producing its own revised Prayer Book or 'alternative service book', taking as its starting point not the work of Cranmer but the elusive 'primitive church'; now that the Church of Rome has introduced its own vernacular liturgy, no more different from some of these Anglican service books than they are from each other or from Cranmer; now that the 39 Articles have been downgraded in several Anglican churches, and in one or two discarded; now that some Anglican churches have decided to ordain women priests, and others not to; the identity and unity of the Anglican Communion has become considerably blurred. These divergences within Anglicanism have been increasing rapidly since the Anglican-Orthodox Commission was set up, and have so concerned the Orthodox that there is now danger of the Commission's work coming to a complete stop. Whether other international Anglican negotiations will be similarly affected remains to be seen.

It is ironical that this crisis should be occurring just as the Anglican-Orthodox Commission is producing its first

agreed report. The report covers the subjects of the knowledge of God, Scripture and tradition, the seven general councils, the Filioque (the phrase 'and the Son' in the Western text of the Nicene Creed) and the Holy Communion, and represents the measure of agreement that has been possible on these controversial topics between the representatives of the two communions at the present stage. The report was published last October by S. P. C. K. in an official edition, with supporting documents, at £1.95, and a smaller edition, with a commentary by the warden of Latimer House, may follow. As the prefatory material to the official edition makes very clear, there is not complete agreement on any of these subjects, and with the Orthodox so conservative and the Anglicans so disunited progress towards a greater measure of agreement will take time. Nevertheless, the measure of agreement reached is not negligible, and it is sad that the future of the talks should be jeopardised by domestic Anglican developments, particularly our lack of doctrinal discipline and the ordination of women priests. Both of these the Orthodox find deeply offensive, as striking against both Scripture and tradition; and it is not as difficult for an evangelical to sympathise with their feelings as for Anglicans of some other schools of thought.

The conservatism of the Orthodox Church has been a natural defence-mechanism in the historical circumstances which it has experienced for centuries, under hostile Moslem and Communist governments. Theologically, this conservatism has been justified by the doctrine of tradition, a concept which dominates Orthodox thinking. Their tradition is essentially patristic, and has never become corrupted to the same extent as Roman tradition, but they find it even harder than Rome does to contemplate change. The experience of churches which have introduced change, such as the Anglican Church, gives them no encouragement to follow suit. We Anglicans will have to treat biblical theology more responsibly than we are doing at present if we are going to help them to get the authority of tradition rightly related to the authority of Scripture.

Of course, a revival of biblical theology in the Anglican Communion would serve other ends than helping the Orthodox. It would enable us to put our own house in order. It would restore the Articles and the Prayer Book to the place of honour which they once held, and ensure that any objections to new services were not of a theological sort. It would cause innovations like the ordination of women priests to be tested on grounds of principle, not of expediency. On the other hand, it would free our church from bondage to customs which are nothing more than that, and renew it in spiritual unity and spiritual purpose to take a position of leadership among the churches in the task of extending the kingdom of God in the world.

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Roger Beckwith, Warden