

Some inherent ambiguities

1 Ambiguity in religion itself

For the rest of the book an attempt will be made to take up and develop some of the ideas which were raised in the Introduction. There it was stated that all religions contain ambiguities. Such ambiguities arise initially out of the very nature of religion itself in trying to bridge two orders of reality – that of this world and that of the world beyond, a transcendental world. All religions have had to come face to face with such ambiguities or ambiguities dependent on their premises. They have either to accept them fairly and squarely and perhaps say they are irresolvable, or else to attempt to deal with them in such a way as to satisfy man's intellect but never completely gratify it. If ambiguity is resolved, religion itself disappears.

Neither Christianity nor Anglicanism nor Anglo-Catholicism can claim exemption from such analysis. Different systems contain different ambiguities, and perhaps it is true to say that each system has tried to solve ambiguities in various ways, often by introducing further ambiguities. It is to the ambiguities specific to Anglo-Catholicism that we now turn – ambiguities in which the movement was trapped from the very beginning.

Two lines of procedure will be adopted. One is to look specifically at those ambiguities which are unique to Anglo-Catholicism, but which may also be present in a less acute form in Anglicanism itself. The other takes up the problem from the standpoint of the individual and asks how it is that people can remain in systems of ambiguity; and, if they cannot, what are the paths open to them to try to solve the dilemma?

2 Catholic or not Catholic?

The problem *par excellence* for Anglo-Catholics is their claim to be Catholic within an institution which for several centuries has

generally been reckoned to stand in the Protestant camp, certainly not in the Roman Catholic camp. Some Protestants in the past, and still some today, have gone so far as to see in the Church of Rome the Antichrist. How can one be an Anglo-Catholic in a church in which only a proportion of the members openly claim they are Catholic and the rest say they are Protestant, or at least non-Catholic? Here is the ambiguity of using the self-designation Anglo-Catholic, or more simply, Catholic. Anglo-Catholics claim a loyalty to the 'One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church', which is

their first and largest loyalty . . . and Catholics within the Church of England consist of those to whom this allegiance comes always and instinctively first, and for whom all other loyalties, to the Church of England, or to the Anglican Communion, are made to rank as subservient to this overriding, all-embracing, loyalty to the One Holy Church.

(Hughes 1961:146)

The ambiguity is further seen in the tendency of those who would press the Catholic claims by emphasizing part of the name, Anglo-Catholic. So a true Anglo-Catholic would refer to himself as *Anglo-Catholic* whereas he would contend that the weak and woolly would stress the first, *Anglo-Catholic*.

It might be noted by way of introduction that the high church party, certainly in the nineteenth century, did not in common parlance use the term Catholic extensively and they may have had a number of reservations about using it widely. Tractarians indeed thought of themselves as being Catholic but they did not parade the term as one of identity.

Of course, it makes sense to refer to various Catholic churches. One speaks quite rightly about Polish Catholics but, in addition to pointing to the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, one can also legitimately refer to the National Polish Church which came into being at the turn of the century in the United States and which has a diocese in Poland. This Church and other Old Catholic churches like it split off from the Roman Catholic Church in 1870 over the question of papal infallibility. Members of these churches universally call themselves Catholic and no one for an instant would think of them as Protestant, although the Roman Catholic Church might refer to them as schismatic. The liturgical and cultural ethos of the groups is very close indeed to that of the Roman Catholic Church before the reforms of Vatican II. The difficulty over the term Anglo-Catholic is that it stands for a party

in a church which does not as a whole, or at any authoritative level, accept the ideals projected by Anglo-Catholics. In the Roman Catholic Church (who can deny that is Catholic?), one does not say of two members, both fulfilling religious duties according to their consciences and the generally accepted requirements of the Church, that one is a Catholic and the other is not! But, in Anglo-Catholic terminology, it is common to refer to one member of the Church of England as 'Catholic' and another as 'just Anglican'. Indeed, to this very day it is not unknown for someone to say: 'I'm not Anglican; I'm Anglo-Catholic,' or even: 'I'm not Anglican; I'm Catholic.' It is clear from such statements that not all members can be called Catholic in the sense in which Anglo-Catholics use the word. Those who are Catholic are so by self-designation. The dilemma is this. The Church of England must be Catholic, since it adheres to the Scriptures, the creeds, and the ecclesiastical orders of bishops, priests, and deacons created by apostolic succession (ch. 1.2). Hence the Church is *Catholic* and all members must therefore be *Catholic*. Yet not all are Catholic! But numerically most are just 'ordinary C. of E. people'. What kind of Catholicism is it when in the one church some are held to be Catholic and some are not? Quite recently there was a letter in the *Church Times* which began: 'Sir, As a Catholic in the Church of England I find' (*CT*, 11 July 1986). The Federation of Catholic Priests composed a constitution in 1917 which started: 'The Federation is for Catholic Priests in communion with the See of Canterbury' (in *Cross* 1943:129; and see ch. 4.2).

To make matters more complicated there are held to be degrees of Catholicism amongst Anglo-Catholics. Thus, one person is 'fairly Catholic' and another is 'very Catholic'. Anglo-Catholics actually disagree amongst themselves as to who among them is 'truly' Catholic and who is not. A follower was heard to say in the presence of the author: 'I don't call *them* Catholic at all,' referring to some people who called themselves Catholic. When Fr Algy Robertson, who was certainly an Anglo-Catholic was made vicar of St Ives in Huntingdonshire, the retiring incumbent was reported to have said: 'I am very much afraid that my successor, Father Robertson, is jeopardising the Catholic religion. I am credibly informed that he has already abandoned the Asperges' (quoted in Denis 1964:94).

One senses a feeling of arrogance on the part of those who delight in referring to themselves as being Catholic for they see

themselves as being in an elite. In the competitive game of who can be the most Catholic, Anglo-Papalists obviously win (see ch. 1.2). Small wonder that they are referred to as 'more Roman than Rome'.

Anglo-Catholics, in their constant use of the word Catholic, want to suggest a meaning which is not accepted by society at large, and this fact alone demonstrates the assertion that Anglo-Catholicism as a movement has not influenced society sufficiently to convince it that Anglo-Catholics should generally be referred to as Catholics. Their identity remains firmly Anglican or Church of England, although they may want to pass as Catholics.

In their preaching and theological writing both Anglo-Catholics and Tractarians appealed to what they called 'the Catholic church'. By this they did not mean the Roman Catholic Church but a larger Catholic body in which the Roman Catholic Church was included. It is difficult to know, in sociological terms, what is meant by the Catholic church. Anglo-Catholics doubtless know. A few examples of how the term has been and still is employed by Anglo-Catholics may indicate some of the problems. 'The Catholic church teaches'; 'to preach not Roman Catholicism nor Anglo-Catholicism but a Catholicism complete and "unhyphenated"' (in ACPC 1921:195); 'fellow Catholics of the Roman obedience' [that is, we along with you are Catholics]; 'In spite of falsehoods, in spite of compromise, the catholic Church is still in every place the treasure house of all the grace and truth which is the legacy of Jesus Christ to His redeemed' (Gore 1889a/1905:184). What, then, is this Catholic church? Doubtless in the minds of the users of the term it is associated with the 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church', reiterated every time the creeds are recited in public worship. Theologically the term could have some precise meaning, although exactly what is meant by it depends on the interpretation given by theologians. But in concrete social terms no such church exists, no institution can be found bearing the name One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Anglo-Catholics might argue that, while it is not a sociological entity, it consists of those who hold to principles found in churches up to say the fifth century (see Simpson 1932:296). But this is a definition set up by Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics to their own advantage.

In the minds of many Anglicans who refer to the Catholic church there is the idea that it consists of a number of churches which have common characteristics, of which the chief is the Roman Catholic Church but to which other churches can be added according to some selected criteria. Such an attempt was enunciated

in a book called *Northern Catholicism*, edited by Williams and Harris and published in 1933. Apart from the Roman Catholic Church and Anglican churches, the list included the Old Catholics and other small Catholic churches. The issue of the Orthodox was a problem. Should they be included in the Catholic church or not? On the whole Anglo-Catholics wanted them to be within the group. All these may be said to constitute the Catholic church, but none of them *is* the Catholic church and each of them contains variations in the matter of doctrine and liturgy. It is doubtful if they all would reach unanimity as to what constitutes the Catholic church. The Catholic church to which Anglo-Catholics so frequently refer does not in fact have any concrete, universally recognized existence. Anglo-Catholics and Tractarians indeed define Catholic in their own way. N. P. Williams, who had a great liking for Gallicanism, wanted to see emerge a northern Catholicism which suited Nordic and Anglo-Saxon races, somewhat differentiated from a southern Catholicism ideal for Latin races. Such a combination was based on socio-psychological criteria rather than theological doctrine.

One way of dealing with the notion of many Catholic churches at a theoretical level has been to put forward the notion of branching. Quite simply the theory is this. Christ founded the church, it continued through the disciples and apostles to the bishops, who, through apostolic succession, determined the basic structure of the church which in the course of time dominated all Europe up until the Reformation. The Reformation shattered Christendom and as a result some churches persisted in Catholic church order and others severed themselves from the tree by rejecting apostolic succession. One result was that two churches emerged out of the ecclesiastical holocaust, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, which in the west are the two main branches of the Catholic church. They continued as separate churches and their divine nature was not profaned by the Reformation. The Orthodox churches had branched off earlier at the schism of 1054 but these had maintained Catholic concepts of the nature of the church. This theory of branching remains central to the thinking of Tractarians and most Anglo-Catholics. Sheila Kaye-Smith has written:

It rests on a view of Christianity which is wider than that held either by Papal or Eastern Catholicism, since it holds that every part of Christendom which has maintained continuity with the past by a true succession of Apostolic Orders and

teaching is part of the visible organization of the Body of Christ on earth.

(Kaye-Smith 1925:169)

Although the theory is an attractive rationalization of the Tractarian position, it did not satisfy Newman, who became convinced that in social reality, as we would say today, there could not be more than one Catholic church. The logic of his position left him no alternative but to become a Roman Catholic. This theory, were it acceptable to the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, might have some validity in it, but as is well known, it is rejected by these bodies. They define the Catholic church in different ways.

So to another possibility. One generally accepted meaning of the word Catholic is universality. The Catholic faith – the Catholic religion – is intended for the world and for the world in its entirety and is held to be basically the same no matter where it has extended itself to. Catholicism attempts to transcend geographical, national, social, and racial lines of demarcation. St Paul himself speaks of the universality of the church (Romans 10.11ff.). So the Catholic religion is seen to be coextensive with a global church. All such adjectives as Roman, Latin, Polish, and Anglo- weaken the notion of the universality of Catholicism (see Pickering 1987). In practice the Catholic church, if it is to be found anywhere, is the Roman Catholic Church, for, on grounds of geographical universality, there can be no other contender. Roman Catholic theologians assert categorically that there is no Catholicism outside their Church. When Anglo-Catholics claim to be Catholic they are hardly adopting a universalist position but one which is essentially sectarian (see ch. 7).

Some Anglo-Catholics have realized the dilemma over their designation but have been unable to solve it by embracing another name which encapsulates their ideology and at the same time does not lead to ambiguity (see Mackenzie 1931:38–9). Without a great deal of success followers in the late 1960s tried to introduce the names Catholic Anglicans or Anglican Catholics. The effort did not really lessen the ambiguity. The old term, Anglo-Catholic, is best kept but inevitably it is misleading. Within Anglicanism the term has become acceptable and people know – at least many Anglicans know – what is implied by it. That does not, however, eliminate the inherent ambiguity of it.

Realizing their predicament some Anglo-Catholics have found another way out. They reject the notion that the Church of England is essentially ‘a bridge church’ or that its nature is

comprehensive. This idea was strengthened by the thinking of Mandell Creighton (1843–1901), scholar and bishop of London, who encouraged the idea of the Church of England as a great national church which upheld a distinctive Anglican point of view (see Hughes 1961:35). Dean Stanley of Westminster Abbey was one who pointed to the many advantages of comprehensiveness (see Slessor 1952:13). But to admit to the comprehensiveness of the Church of England is to admit that it has Protestant elements and so weaken the argument for its Catholic characteristics (Slessor 1952:13). Further, it gives rise to a high church outlook in which ‘Anglican’ takes precedence over ‘Catholic’. Any notion of compromise or uniqueness is not acceptable to the Anglo-Papalist. The Church is Catholic or it is Protestant: it is true or it is false. To maintain their position Anglo-Papalists have asserted the Church of England to be ‘totally’ Catholic. But then they are put in the extremely difficult position of explaining how it is that the Church has gathered unto itself so much that is not Catholic, i.e. that is Protestant. So one ambiguity is changed for another. Again, the firmly entrenched Protestants of the Church of England have had reservations about the Church being held to be comprehensive. The idea could be a cover for the Catholic-minded to introduce alien beliefs and practices. W. E. Bowen wrote in 1904 that comprehensiveness should not be confused with toleration whereby ‘every clergyman was free to deprave its [the Church’s] doctrine and discipline as he pleased’ (Bowen 1904:vi).

In practical terms the patchiness of Catholicism in the Church of England comes out in the fact that Anglo-Catholics have to know where they can find a ‘Catholic’ church. As we have already observed, an individual has to rely on hearsay, his ‘internal radar system’, looking at the advertisements in the *Church Times*, or consulting an ecclesiastical guidebook. The English Church Union began to help people find churches which had ‘Catholic privileges’ from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s in the publication of *The English Church Union Church Guide for Tourists and Others* (see ch. 4.2). Such is the notion of Catholic universality.

The ambiguity which faces Anglo-Catholics is that they will not accept the fact that Anglo-Catholicism is a very different social entity from Roman Catholicism. To compare the two in a positive way can all too readily obscure their greatly divergent characteristics. A case might be made out for not comparing them or for denying that one is a better form of Catholicism than the other.