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# Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

## CHRISTIAN ASIA SPEAKS OUT

**B**ANGKOK 1949 marks another significant milestone in the history of world Christianity. For just over one week in December of last year nearly a hundred Christian leaders from fifteen Asiatic countries met together in a joint conference of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council. It was the first regional conference of this sort, though the project had been discussed at the Madras Conference of 1938. The years of war had prevented such a gathering hitherto, but when the members assembled at the Wattana Wittayer Academy in Bangkok just before Christmas, they were faced by the necessity of grappling with the unparalleled difficulties which confront Christians in East Asia. As a result of the war, five empires—British, American, French, Dutch and Japanese—have collapsed in this region. India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia and the Philippines have achieved a new nationhood and are experiencing the initial difficulties of self-government. Those features of modern Western civilization which we have come to recognize as least desirable—the dynamic of nationalism, the unrestricted drive for complete industrialization, and an abounding optimism in the power of scientific technique to solve the baffling problems of human life in society—have received a new lease of life in East Asia. The submerged masses who for so many centuries have been exploited by their masters have at last begun to realize that misery and poverty need not be their life-long destiny. Such an awakening leads inevitably to conflict and violence. China and Burma have been torn by civil war, Korea has been rent asunder. Japan faces the terrifying problem of rebuilding a national life shattered by humiliating defeat. Malaya, Indonesia and part of the Philippines are disturbed by continuous unrest. The birth pangs of a new world are indeed prolonged and severe. In this context of an emerging new orient, the Christian Church must live and witness in obedience to its divine Lord. More than half of the entire population of the world—almost 1,200 millions—lives in East Asia, but the Christian Church can number scarcely fifty million souls. Only about 35% of that number consist of non-Roman Christians, who, except for the unfortunate absence of Chinese delegates, were all represented at Bangkok.

The statement which was issued under the title *A Message from the East Asia Conference* was marked by a realism which is not always apparent in the utterances of ecclesiastical assemblies. "All our countries have entered upon a period of far-reaching change and upheaval . . . and are conscious of new and powerful forces in the life of Asia which hold possibilities both of good and evil for the future". There were no extravagant assertions about unprecedented opportunities before the Christian Church, no gloomy predictions designed to

make the flesh of Christians creep. If God is indeed the Lord of history, then the future is in His hands, so that "the break-down of political hopes does not destroy the freedom of the Christian man or the Christian Church". The central task of the Church was defined as the proclamation of the Word of God "with a profound sense of its relevance to the ideological political conflict of the Orient". The conference went on to emphasise the supreme importance of the witness of the Christian congregation and the Christian family in the fulfilment of that responsibility which God has laid upon His Church. It is only in the worshipping congregation that human worth and mutual responsibility receive sufficient recognition and so become the motive for the outreach of love in work and service to the neighbourhood. In the concrete reality of its corporate life of worship and witness "the Christian congregation has revolutionary significance in the East Asian political situation". An eager concern for a greater measure of visible Christian unity was another marked feature of the conference.

#### DECISION AGAINST UNION

THE movement towards unity which has been so marked a feature of twentieth century church history, has gained more widespread influence among non-Roman Christians in America than in any other country. Amongst many schemes under consideration, the proposed union between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical Reformed Church was to have been inaugurated in June of this year. It had been carefully discussed and approved by large majority votes in both denominations. But the Cadman Memorial Church was one of the minority which disapproved the union and it appealed to the civil courts to declare the union unauthorised and illegal. On January 26th, Justice Steinbrink of the New York Supreme Court gave judgment in favour of the plaintiffs which amounted to an injunction against the consummation of the union. The judge ruled that the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches had no power to unite itself with the Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church or with any other body; that it had no authority to make any commitments which would be binding upon Congregational Churches. Such churches can only vote themselves individually into a church union. The ruling was based on the definition of a congregational polity as that system which "recognises the independence and autonomy of the local church in all matters temporal and spiritual" and any association or union as a voluntary organization devised for co-operation "without ecclesiastical authority".

Several important issues are involved in this judgment, which illustrates (as did the famous case of the Free Church of Scotland in 1904) the extent to which the concept of a free Church in a free State can be a misleading and even irrelevant ideal. The General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, in giving its assent to the union, did but give expression to the clearly expressed will of the majority of the churches and church members in the denomination. It did not initiate the action which produced this judgment, but following the apostolic admonition shrank from bringing church affairs

into a civil court. Yet now it is faced with the dilemma either of appealing against the Steinbrink judgment in a higher court or of accepting a decision which allows a recalcitrant if sincere minority to frustrate the endeavour of the majority to obey the leading of the Spirit. A church which is allegedly free again finds itself in bondage to the civil courts.

The assumption which governed the decision given by the Judge was that a denomination of the congregational order is no more than a number of unrelated congregations which neither have committed, nor can commit to a representative central body any power to do anything on their behalf. The implication of this assumption is that no congregationally organized denomination can ever unite with any other Christian body, or have representatives to speak in its name on such a body as the World Council of Churches. Indeed, it would appear to be uncertain whether it is right to speak of a congregational denomination. The judgment also raises doubts about the validity of previous actions of congregational unions or councils in taking an integral part in the United Church of Canada or in the Church of South India. The Congregational Christian Church involved in this court action is itself the result of a union between two denominations. Secondly, the judgment has a still more serious implication, particularly when it is read in the light of a decision given in 1949 at Des Moines, Iowa. A Baptist church at Algona had voted to abandon its membership of the Northern Baptist Convention and to join the Conservative Baptist Fellowship. The judge ruled that if the majority of the members persisted in this course, the church property would have to be left in the possession of the protesting minority. The autonomy of a local church may well come to mean the infallibility of the minority, even if that minority consist of one person. The judgment declared "where there are factions in a church congregation, its property and custody belong to those who adhere to the principles, practices and forms of worship for which it was founded and dedicated and which were accepted by the congregation before the dispute arose,"<sup>1</sup> and such a conclusion explicitly ignores the numbers of persons who may be involved on either side. Thirdly, those judgments declare unmistakably that no church has a right to change anything in its polity, formularies or practices from those which it possessed at the moment of time when it became recognised by the law as a property owning body. Those members who claim to stand by the original formularies can always by law secure control of the property and presume to appear publicly as the church from which others have dissented. No living church could possibly accept these conditions as governing its life. Yet the Congregational Christian Church of North America is a free church! Future developments in this case will be watched with interest not unmixed with anxiety.

#### HOOKER REVIVED

**T**HERE was a time during the second half of the last century and the early years of the twentieth century, when the majority of candidates for ordination in most English dioceses were required to read

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Century*, January 8th, February 8th, March 22nd, 1950.

at least part of Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* before they presented themselves for the deacon's examination. The sober and moderate position which he occupied and expounded so eloquently was still capable, even at three centuries' remove, of fashioning a distinctive type of English churchmanship, which, while jealously guarding its own rich heritage, was yet glad to acknowledge a fundamental community with reformed evangelical churchmen in other parts of Christendom. The triumph of the Oxford Movement led first to the attempt to reinterpret Hooker as an early Anglo-Catholic, and then to his eclipse, so that few Anglican clergymen to-day are as well versed in the thought of the father of Anglicanism as were most of their predecessors half a century ago.

A recent study of the influence of Hooker by Canon F. J. Shirley, *Richard Hooker and Contemporary Political Ideas*<sup>1</sup> has little to say which is new, but it reveals the power of the judicious Hooker to convince and convert the honest reader even at this late date. The author confesses that he began his study from the Anglo-Catholic position, in which he had been brought up, but found himself obliged to conclude that Hooker could not properly be regarded as a High Anglican. From being an advocate of disestablishment, Dr. Shirley found himself converted into an upholder of the establishment. To describe the establishment as the sole cause of the feebleness of Christianity in this country "is so grievously to over emphasise a case as to make it nonsense". The danger of parliamentary tyranny over the church is negligible compared with the anarchic dangers of disestablishment. Dr. Shirley cites the latter history of the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874 as evidence that Parliament is not willing to impose its will against the conscience of the church. He might have added as a further illustration, parliamentary acquiescence in the liturgical freedom which has been so marked a feature of modern Anglican history. It is clear that disestablishment would not in itself be of any assistance in the solution of the grave internal problems with which the Church of England is beset at this moment, and would inflict grievous injury on the prestige of Christianity, beyond the borders of this country. To defend establishment is not to be blind to the need of a resolute period of personal renewal and administrative reform in the church, but to insist on a truly Christian doctrine of the State.

Dr. Shirley has rediscovered through Hooker, the truth that the Church of England is by history and design comprehensive, so that when this is set alongside the great need for Christian union, it leads him to urge a wider measure of Christian co-operation and unity. The mantle of the Puritan who insisted that there was only one church order allowable in Scripture, has fallen on the modern Anglo-Catholic, who is thus subject to the criticism which Hooker passed on those who proposed one divinely given church order. It is evident that the father of Anglicanism still has a relevant word to speak to modern churchmen and this book will have been worth while if it promotes a renewed study of the *Ecclesiastical Polity*.

<sup>1</sup> S.P.C.K., pp. 274. 14/6.