

Paper read by David Cornick at Leeds Cathedral seminar on the 50th anniversary of Unitatis Redintegratio, 11 November 2014.

Two ecumenical conversations were happening in England in 1964, largely independent of each other. The first was a largely Protestant conversation which gave birth to what became known as ‘the modern ecumenical movement’. It gained impetus from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, continued after the first world war with discussions about how to create a kind of Christian version of the League of Nations, and resulted eventually in the formation of the World Council of Churches. That international conversation, guided by such eminent English churchmen as William Temple and J.H. Oldham, also had a national dimension as they sought for the unity of Christ’s church.

By 1964 that conversation had born considerable fruit - fractured bits of the Church in Scotland came back together in 1929, some very different members of the Methodist family united in 1932, the British Council of Churches had been formed in 1942, the Church of South India (designed largely in the Senior Common Rooms of the English universities) came into existence in 1947, the World Council of Churches first Assembly took place in 1948, and an Anglican-Methodist scheme was on the table which showed every sign of succeeding. Those who had been at the New Dehli Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 had caught the South India vision of the union of all in each place in the mission and service of Christ’s world. As British representatives like Oliver Tomkins, the Bishop of Bristol, looked around them they saw united churches happening or being planned around the world, and they returned home to encourage a similar process in England. That process came to a head in the Faith and Order Conference which met at Nottingham University in September 1964. It was profoundly exciting. Michael Ramsey preached at the opening service at Southwell Minster. Across the seas in Rome, Vatican II had survived the death of John XXIII, and a new world seemed possible. Paul VI had that January travelled to Jerusalem and met with Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople. No Pope had left Italy, except as a prisoner of a foreign power for more than 500 years, and not since the Council of Florence had a Pope and Patriarch met. Hopes were therefore high in September 1964. In his opening address Tomkins stressed the urgency of union ‘...because a divided church was disastrously the wrong-shaped tool for doing the work that God wanted the church to do in the modern world.’¹ The Conference heeded his passion, asking the churches of England to covenant together for unity no later than Easter Day 1980, and authorising what it called ‘Areas of ecumenical experiment’, later to be known as ‘Local Ecumenical Projects’, in anticipation of that coming union.

That was the first conversation. The second was happening in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome, and its implications for ecumenism were momentous. It is difficult, some fifty years on to appreciate its revolutionary character. The 1917 code of Canon Law forbade Catholics from sharing in meetings with other Christians, and Pius XI’s 1928 encyclical ‘On fostering religious union’ (*Mortalium Animos*) stated that the only possible route to unity was ‘...the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it; for from the one true Church they have in the past unhappily fallen away.’² During the Blitz, Cardinal Hinsley

¹ *The Times* 14 September 1964, accessed from the digital archive

² Pau Murray ‘On celebrating Vatican II as Catholic and ecumenical’ in Gavin da Costa and Emma Harris (eds) *The Second Vatican Council: celebrating its achievements and the future* (London, Bloomsbury 2013) pp.85-104, at p.92

was reproved by his fellow bishops for having the temerity to share a platform with Bishop George Bell and to lead the meeting in the Lord's Prayer, and it was only in 1950 that a Catholic bishop referred, in the letters page of *The Times*, to the Archbishop of Canterbury as 'a doubtfully baptised layman.'³ The reason that the Nottingham conversation was essentially Protestant is that until the Council Catholicism and Protestantism were different worlds. England's Catholic leadership on the eve of the Council was deeply cautious. Cardinal Godfrey had been part of the planning group, but he was old, very ill, and so in love with the traditional church that he stretched all his failing nerves to stem the liberal tide. Archbishop Heenan took over in 1963, and was at the Council, but his instinct too was conservative, and his ecumenism practical rather than theoretical – 'I fear experts and those bearing gifts' – was his most notorious intervention. Christopher Butler lived in a different world. So, although ten places at Nottingham were offered to the Catholic church, only six of those places were filled.

But what happened in Rome was remarkable. It was game-changing. The ecumenical movement was recognised as a work of the Spirit, Catholics accepted part of the responsibility for the divisions of the sixteenth century, the church re-defined herself by arguing that the true church 'subsisted in' rather than was defined by the Roman Catholic Church, which opened up possibilities of dialogue with other ecclesial communions which manifestly exhibited some of the signs of the true church. [check timetable of discussions – O'Malley]. John Moorman, bishop of Ripon and the historian of the Franciscan movement was the chief Anglican observer at the Council. He realised the import of what was happening - 'A new pattern has emerged as a result of the Council (he noted), and much of the thought and language which was valid five years ago is now obsolete.'⁴

He was also at Nottingham, against his better judgement, because he was no great lover of conferences like Nottingham, nor a friend of the Free Church unity, nor later of the ministry of women, particularly if that threatened relationships with Rome. His anxiety was the inevitable Anglo-Catholic concern that Nottingham was focusing on 'local unions rather than unity' - that is to say on England and its Free Churches rather than the universal catholic church.⁵ Reflecting after the Council he wrote, 'The result of the Council has been to alter the whole ecumenical pattern and to carry the ecumenical discussion into a new field...Rome has, at last, begun to interest herself in the problem of unity, and things can never be the same again...The ecumenical problem of 1966 is quite different from what it was in 1961.'⁶

He was, of course, right. It is one of church history's sad ironies that Nottingham Faith and Order Conference reached a climax of ecumenical decision just a month before the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated by Paul VI on November 21st 1964. What might have happened if Nottingham had been held in December is one of those tantalising 'ifs' of history.

Since Nottingham, of course, those conversations have no longer kept on parallel tracks, but have come closer to each other. Easter 1980 came and went. The heady optimism of Nottingham 1964 crashed to the ground as the Anglican-Methodist scheme died at the first session of General Synod in 1972 (but, note, by a mere seven votes in the House of Clergy), and despite the formation of the URC later in the year it was clear that the Nottingham

³ Adrian Hastings *A history of English Christianity 1920-1985* (London, Collins 1986) p 395 (for Hinsley); Nicholas Lash *Theology for pilgrims* (London, DLT, 2008) p. 228 (for *The Times*)

⁴ Quoted in Fagioli *op cit* loc 685

⁵ *The Guardian* Sept 16 1964

⁶ Quoted in Massimo Faggioli *Vatican II : the battle for meaning* (Mahwah NJ Paulist Press 2012) loc 702

motorway was heading up a cul-de-sac, confirmed by the failure of the English covenant in 1982. Yet 1982 also saw John Paul II and Robert Runcie joined in prayer at Canterbury, and the papal visit played a role in deepening Catholicism's commitment to English ecumenism, and a new form of ecumenical encounter, 'Churches Together', growing from the ashes of the old British Council of Churches. In other words, we have emerged from the Nottingham cul-de-sac into a richer encounter which simply couldn't have happened before Vatican II. And if so nationally, then also internationally as Catholicism's rich dialogue with both eastern and western partners has redrawn the theological landscape. Who would have thought in 1964 that by the end of the century Catholics and Lutherans would have issued a joint statement on the doctrine of justification, the very cause of the reformation that had created Protestantism in the first place.

But other forces were also at play in England. The first, and most obvious, is that successive waves of migration have changed the face of country and therefore of English Christianity. In 1951 4.3% of the population of England and Wales were born outside the UK. In 2011 that had risen to 13% (1.9 million to 7.5 million people).⁷ The mosques, temples and gurdwaras of our burgeoning Muslim, Hindu and Sikh neighbours are on our High Streets, but so too are the world's churches. World Christianity is now an English phenomenon. The 2005 church census revealed that 1 in 6 of English worshippers was either Asian or Black.⁸ Migration has dramatically altered the religious landscape. It has transformed the life of some historic congregations, particularly in London and large urban conurbations and brought a welter of new Pentecostal and independent denominations and grouping which behave very differently to historic English denominations. There are now, it is estimated, about a million black Christians and about 4,000 black-led congregations. Estimates of the number of black Pentecostal denominations varies, but it is at least 300, serving a community which is 2% of the British population and 6% of the worshipping population.⁹ The dynamics are profoundly different to those of the historic denominations - missional, entrepreneurial and centripetal rather than centrifugal. Spinning off new churches and networks, often based around individuals, is understood as a method of growth.

Another force in play, more contentiously, is what is sometimes called 'secularisation'. That is a slippery word, and a much debated word, but for all its problems, let it stand as a description of what has happened to the church since 1964. Measuring people's religious commitment is a profoundly difficult exercise, and it can never be reduced to churchgoing, which is why secularisation is a bad explanatory word. What we can say with some certainty is that on the eve of the first world war about 25% of the population would have been in church on any given Sunday, but now that figure is about 6%. During what some historians are now calling 'the long 1960s' (1958-75) England changed from being what Roy Jenkins once called 'a Christian country' to 'a civilised nation'. One historian suggests that during the 1960s we experienced the 'final crisis of Christendom'. However long the roots of that crisis may have been, they bore devastating fruit in the sixties. Anglican confirmations fell by 36% between 1963-69, ordinations by 25%. Methodist membership fell by 24% between 1960-75. The biggest drop in Anglican Easter communicants in the century was between 1962-64.

⁷ *Immigration Patterns of non-UK born populations in England and Wales in 2011* (Office of National Statistics 2013); http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_346219.pdf (accessed 12 Feb 2014)

⁸ Peter Brierley *Pulling out of the nose-dive: a contemporary picture of church going: what the 2005 religious census reveals* (London, 2006) p.90

⁹ Adedibu *op cit* p.50

That wasn't something the church engineered. It was something that happened to the churches, and we can speculate endlessly about its causes. What we cannot ignore is that since then the churches have been trying to cope with its consequences, which is one reason why mission has been the dominant note of discourse for the past twenty years or so.

What will shape the future? The continuing convergence of the two ecumenical conversations of the 1960s, the continuing process of engaging Pentecostal and charismatic churches in dialogue about our common mission, and the handling of diversity – ethnic, cultural, theological and spiritual. The conversation in 2014 is far richer, profounder and puzzling than it was at Nottingham and in St Peter's fifty years ago.