

GOD, RELIGION, CHURCH

By ROBERT MURRAY

Many people believe in God but have no religion and belong to no church. Others believe in God, would like religion but cannot find it in church. Many belong to a church but have no religion and present a caricature of God.

WITH THESE WORDS the editor begins his request to me for an article to deal with the renewal of the Church. Obviously religion, in some sense, is what the Church is all about, but the word is one which makes many today uneasy. Traditionally we use it in speaking of our faith and practice, but the criticism of 'religion' begun by Karl Barth and popularized by Dietrich Bonhoeffer has gradually influenced many who have not read or understood them, causing a vague sense, even among catholics, that 'religion' is something of ambiguous value. If we are to use the word, therefore, we must agree on a sense for it.

The meaning of 'religion'

Religio is rarely used in the latin bible. The biblical sanction for the christian use of the word is entirely contained in James I, 26-27, on 'religion pure and undefiled'; the greek word is *threskeia*, 'cult', yet it is defined in terms of love of neighbour and 'keeping oneself unstained from the world'. Since 'the world' here, as in the johannine writings, denotes the spiritual sphere of opposition to God, this phrase can be understood as expressing, in ethical terms, the idea of consecration to God and therefore as connoting worship. Certainly, whatever way we use the word 'religion', worship of God must enter into the notion, and likewise no christian could regard religion as not essentially involving love of neighbour. In short, it concerns the two commandments of the gospel. It has been said (by enthusiastic barthians, perhaps) that religion is not a biblical concept. This may be a superficial comment: the idea corresponds closely enough to the hebrew idea of 'fear of the Lord' and to important aspects of *hesed* (covenant loyalty) and *sedeq* ('righteousness'). St Augustine, in his short work 'On the True Religion', stresses *worship* and true *knowledge* of God with no creature getting

in the way. St Thomas in his 'question' on religion¹ sums up the latin tradition, which makes fundamental the idea of 'binding' (*religare*) us to God, in St Augustine's words 'let religion bind (*religet*) us to the one almighty God'.

This is not the place to dwell on Karl Barth's polemic.² Fighting on the one hand to free protestant christianity from enslavement to the results of comparative religion study, and on the other hand renewing Paul's battle against justification by works (and seeing Roman Catholicism in the forefront of his field of vision), Barth vigorously attacks any idea of religion as an ideal that man can achieve, though he fully accepts the idea of religion as man's bounden response in faith to God who alone justifies by his free gift.

Bonhoeffer, living through the failure of german institutional christianity in face of the evil of nazism, came to see the formal expressions of 'religion' – dogmatic, liturgical or social – as of merely relative value compared with the simple human task of living with Christ; and thus was coined the watchword 'religionless christianity'.³ Since his lonely martyr's death, Bonhoeffer has become the prophet for a christian world in which many, across the divisions of denomination, feel that the formal or structural expressions of 'religion' are to a great degree, in the fashionable word, 'irrelevant'. Yet the same people (at whom I do not mock; I am too nearly one myself) usually *do* find meaning in another fashionable word, 'commitment', and this is near enough to St Augustine's 'relig-io' as the acceptance of a bond to God – an idea which, in turn, is close to the authentic biblical idea of the Covenant. In fact, as so often, Augustine and Thomas show a truly evangelical faith which can take us back behind later polemics. To conclude this discussion I suggest, as a sense for 'religion' to bear in this article – a sense faithful to the bible, to christian tradition and to the common acceptance of the word – 'a commitment based on faith, entailing obligations in worship and behaviour'. The reader is invited, before going further, to re-read the editor's three sentences quoted at the beginning of this article, supplying the above phrase in the place of 'religion' where it occurs,

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, II, II, q 81.

² *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, §17 (Standard english trans., pp 280–361). For a brief treatment, cf Hartwell, H., *The Theology of Karl Barth: an Introduction* (London, 1964), pp 87–91.

³ Cf *Letters and Papers from Prison* (3rd ed., London, 1967), pp 153–7. Some may need reminding, however, that Bonhoeffer by no means proposes 'Christianity without Church'. Here, as in his early work, *Sanctorum Communio* (english trans., London, 1963), p 112, Bonhoeffer regards the Church as *taking the place* of the kind of 'religion' which, with Barth, he rejects.

and to test whether the phrase (clumsy though it is) gives an acceptable sense. If it does, we may attempt to proceed without too much ambiguity.

The elements of religion

The christian concept of religion as commitment through faith essentially involves the two elements of worship and of an ideal to be worked out in interpersonal relations. The former is due to God because we are his creatures; the latter is commanded by God as proper to the social nature he has given us, but also as an essential mode of our response to himself whom we cannot see. This is why James defines, precisely, *religion* in terms of (or by the test of) practical love of neighbour;¹ and likewise John says 'He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen'.² These two modalities of our religious response to God – that through prayer and worship, and that through love of neighbour – are often characterized schematically as the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal' aspects of religion.

Now it is observable that today these two aspects are not getting an equally good press. The 'vertical' aspect, if emphasized in terms of duty to God or love of God expressed without explicit reference to love of neighbour, is regarded by many christians as problematical, compared with the 'horizontal' aspect which enjoys an almost self-evident status. This has become increasingly apparent in the activities of the World Council of Churches; an orthodox observer at Uppsala, 1968, wrote critically of 'the almost monstrous hypertrophy of the horizontal element in relation to the vertical'.³ A theological tendency is to be observed which tries, to a great extent, to express our response to God in terms of our response to our neighbour; Karl Rahner's essay in this direction⁴ has evoked a critical reply, all the more striking for its comparative unusualness today, from his former companion, Hans Urs von Balthasar, reaffirming the supreme value set by christian tradition on a love of God shown in the sacrifice of one's life for the faith, even though no immediate expression of the 'horizontal' element is apparent.⁵ At a less profound level of dis-

¹ Jas 1, 26-27.

² 1 Jn 4, 20.

³ The late Fr Peter Struve in *La Croix*, 27th July, 1968; cf *Eastern Churches Review* II, 3 (1969), p 315.

⁴ 'Über die Einheit der Nächsten- und Gottesliebe' ('On the oneness of love of neighbour and of God'), in *Schriften zur Theologie* VI (Einsiedeln, 1965), pp 277-98.

⁵ *Cordula, oder der Ernstfall* (2nd ed., Einsiedeln, 1966). Cordula is a legendary virgin martyr who first fled in fear, then returned to face death. The difficult subtitle might

cussion we seem to hear, on the one hand, echoes of 'Why this waste? This ointment might have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor', while on the other we observe panic reactions against what is most infelicitously criticized as 'desacralization'.¹

Religion and the Church

In the present tension between these elements of religion, christians are stumbling and the Church is suffering. The Church is the gathering of those human beings who have learned to recognize the gift of faith and have responded to it, so as to commit themselves to Christ and follow him; the local church is the realization of this gathering in one locality. The local church meets primarily to worship God, that is, to exercise the 'vertical' aspect of religion. At both local and wider levels the Church organizes itself to exercise the the 'horizontal' aspect through works of charity. Each church member individually tries to 'practise his religion' in its two aspects, by prayer and by showing love to parents, marriage partner, family, friends and all who may be 'my neighbour'. In fact, it is *religion* in the true sense, christian commitment based on faith, which creates the Church. Where there are christian believers, there is (in some sense) the Church;² it is not the other way round, that the Church is established first, as an organized society, and then sets about 'practising religion'.

But many christians seem to feel today that precisely this reversal of values has, to some extent, developed over the centuries, and to that extent has made true religious commitment and practice harder. Joy and love have often seemed driven to take second place to a religion that 'binds' in a different sense from that of St Augustine. The institution of the Church with its complicated structure, its 'hierarchy' (or caste of 'sacral rulers'), its rigorously determined liturgical life and system of law, seems to have been accorded primary – almost absolute – value. Before Vatican II this was, for many, a matter for pride; it did much to attract a steady annual flow of converts.

Pope John's call for renewal, however, set in motion a process of

be paraphrased 'when it comes to the crunch' or 'when we have to stand up and be counted'.

¹ Infelicitously because, if the word 'sacral' is used correctly, hardly any single word expresses so comprehensively what kind of religion christianity is not and must never become (though man's carnal religious aspirations are always trying to make it so).

² We must say 'in some sense' to allow for the historical divisions which have confused the situation and made christendom no longer reflect the simplicity of this statement.

self-examination which has already caused many structural elements to topple. Some were simply overdue for entirely necessary change; others have collapsed because they had been maintained, in the western Church, only by a concerted effort at all levels of teaching to suppress embarrassing truths about the legitimate variety which had existed, or still existed, within the authentic catholic tradition. Other elements are still collapsing, and collapse they must; they need not be mourned. True religious commitment, however, must not collapse, for it is this that creates and re-creates the Church – the reality which Jesus, not a levitical priest but a layman in Israel, exemplifying simple and perfect ‘religion’ or total commitment to the Father, founded with an unpromising band of fishermen, peasants and social outcasts, in challenge to a grandiose religious structure which had been raised in the name of God. Can true religious commitment re-create the Church today, continuing the necessary twofold work of testing (and, if necessary, demolishing) wherever a structural element has been given a priority it should not have had, and of rebuilding with a care for the preservation of right priorities?

This question has a fateful openness which has us hanging between hope and despair, for many are asking it and some are answering ‘no’. Some cannot see change except as the destruction of essentials, and so conclude either that the gates of hell have now prevailed against the Church, and therefore it is time to flee like Lot to the mountains, or that all talk of change is a diabolical temptation which must be resisted in every detail. Thus an inflexible misunderstanding leads in divergent ways, to the extreme ‘right’ or to departure on the ‘left’. The trouble is that christians inevitably and naturally see religious truth in the light of church structure and practice. It is not only that the Church (in the broadest sense, not just the holders of authority) *teaches* us religious truth; the natural reaction of christians at home in the Church is to experience church life *as part of religion* and not to differentiate between them. This is why a period of change, even of evidently necessary renewal, is a time which profoundly upsets believers, and not only the naive.

An extreme example of this is seen in seventeenth-century Russia, when the patriarch returned from a journey to Constantinople and Greece, introduced some minor corrections in the russian liturgical books and announced that Russians should ‘correct’ their slightly deviant way of placing their fingers when making the sign of the cross. This announcement caused a schism which has weakened

russian christianity ever since. Christians in conscientious revolt went into exile and even to the stake, as did the heroic archpriest Avvakum, who saw antichrist in these small innovations. This is an extreme case, but in the last few years we have all seen – and many have felt for themselves – a disquiet among christians in a changing Church, which is different only in degree, not in kind, from that of the russian ‘Old Believers’, as the heirs of the seventeenth century schism are called. (Their name illustrates the fact that many more schisms, even so-called heresies, have been caused by the inability of conservative christians to accept new developments in formulation or practice than by the itch for innovation).

‘Faith-Religion’ and human religiosity

The fact is that in this human situation of ours and of the Church the incarnate Word founded among his carnal creatures, true religion – true christian commitment – no sooner becomes rooted, ‘incarnate’ in human nature, than it becomes involved with man’s carnal religious tendencies – the ‘religion’ which Karl Barth castigates at such length; the desire to take part in a structured dispensation of worship and salvation in which rewards are guaranteed if sacral ceremonies are correctly performed, so that one can rest assured that one has done one’s bit and propitiated the mighty powers. This ‘religion’ shows its head many times in the bible. The trouble with ancient Israel was too much of this ‘religion’ and not enough of the true, essentially precarious, hopefully trusting, religion of the covenant. To the worshipper seeking security through sacrifice, even of his own child, God replies through Micah:

He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?¹

Jesus in his time had to fight the same battle. To the ‘lost sheep’ he had only to show love and they came running; with the profoundly religious pharisees, in whom true religion was ‘incarnate’ in a meticulously elaborated human structure, he inevitably came into conflict (though it was not the pharisees but the cynical high-priestly set, – mere institution men – who determined his death). Paul, again, had to fight the same battle, and he gave christianity its

¹ Mic 6, 6-8.

classic expressions for the conflict – justification not by works but by grace alone, and by God’s gift, faith. All down through the history of the Church the battle has had to be renewed, because true religion – covenant religion, commitment by faith – through its very ‘incarnation’ in human nature and human society, becomes encrusted with the creeping fungus of human religiosity. Then a new prophetic word has to be spoken out of the eternal gospel, the standing challenge of God. There is joy and new life when a prophet wins a hearing, as did Francis of Assisi; there is disaster when he meets a new Annas and Caiaphas, as did Jan Hus. The repeated frustration of attempts at reform in the later middle ages caused such confusion that finally, when a prophetic word was needed more urgently than ever, men could no longer hear the gospel speaking with a single voice. Western christendom split into those who rejected long-accepted ideas of religion and Church in favour of naked, precarious faith, and those who saw God’s will in a reform of religion and Church which emphasized institutional stability and the sacramental dispensation. Then human history went forward; the protest became institutionalized, in its way, no less than the Church against which it had protested. In the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries the Roman Catholic Church intensified its centralization and legalism; and yet, when Pope John called Vatican II, it was not long before Karl Barth himself was drawing attention to the spectacle of a Church listening to the Spirit in a more self-testing mood than he found among many of his fellow protestants.¹

This is the tension we find ourselves in now, an age-old tension between ‘faith-religion’ and carnal human religiosity; it has to be fought out in the Church, which is a human society as well as the body of Christ.² What wonder if some, growing weary with the institution, lose sight of the God the institution has presented too much in its own image? What wonder if some, though committed to God in faith and prayer, find they can no longer see, like Newman’s Gerontius, ‘Holy Church as his creation, and her teachings as his own’?

¹ ‘Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council’, in *The Ecumenical Review* XV (1963), pp 357–67.

² On this tension, cf Mary Douglas, ‘The Contempt of Ritual’, in *New Blackfriars*, 49 (1967–8), pp 475–82, 528–35. As a theologian I am forced to join issue with Dr Douglas. The ‘bog irishism’ she defends with so much learning and feeling does not need to be defended against the accusation of being *wrong*. It is simply what I have called ‘carnal religion’. But can the central message of the prophets, of Jesus himself and of St Paul be located anywhere else than on the ‘other side’, challenging all human religiosity?

Priorities in renewal

One thing is certain: it is man and his ideas and constructions which need reforming and healing, not God. God is the creator, redeemer and healer; his word gives light and life. He offers his gifts and teaches man how to respond; man responds, halting and stumbling, and tries to formulate his ideas of God and of religion, and to give appropriate structure to the community of believers, the Church. In all three of these – the idea of God, religion, and Church, there is the element of God's revelation and command which man cannot challenge or change but must accept, and the element of human response which is subject to challenge and change – challenge by the word of God itself enshrined in scripture or spoken anew through men filled with the Spirit. The too human, carnal response in terms of religion and church can be symbolized by the tower of Babel, man's bid to reach heaven by his own insight and will; the christian vision is just the contrary, that the holy city descends from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, and yet God's gift is totally 'incarnate' among men: 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men'.¹

The Church, then, is constituted by God's gift of faith; wherever men respond to the gift, the Church is born. This means, as we have seen, that religion in the true sense is prior to the Church as a social entity; the latter develops as man's response develops, and is affected both by the command of God and by man's native, carnal religious aspirations. When it becomes evident that an overhaul is needed, it is *the Church* as a social entity that needs it in the first place; though man's ideas of God and of religion constantly need overhauling also, this is primarily because they easily become too much determined by the patterns of human life in the Church. Check the patterns against the word of God, and the resultant ideas of God and religion will be liberated again.

Structure and function

The great question, however, is this: how do we know what in the structure of the Church, is there by God's command and as an essential expression of the true religious commitment which constitutes the Church, and what are the human patterns which are essentially changeable and must sometimes, in fidelity to the gospel, be changed? Biologists and sociologists, from their differing points of view, agree that structure is related to function. Structure needs

¹ Apoc 21, 2-3.

looking at when it either fails to serve the function for which it exists, or when the function ceases or changes and therefore the related structure loses its purpose. In living organisms the usual result is harmless atrophy; in human society this may happen, but also a structural element which has lost its functional reason may have acquired such an unquestioned right to exist that a new function may be invented for it, often with the aid of curious symbolism which was either absent or of marginal significance in the original relationship of structure to function. There is also found, both in living organisms and in society, the phenomenon of morbid hypertrophy of a part, uncontrolled by the good of the whole. I leave the reader to reflect for himself whether these remarks are applicable to any elements in the Church's social structure, life and liturgy as we have known them in recent centuries.

Structure is related to function. The Church is constituted by religious commitment and exists for the function of living out religious commitment by worship and love of neighbour – by the two commandments of the gospel. But christianity has another essential characteristic. These commandments, as we understand them from gospel records, essentially involve leading more and more of our fellow-men to join us in christian religious commitment. Therefore to the elements of worship and love of neighbour we must join 'witness' or spreading the good news, whether by personal contacts, preaching or teaching; this christian element is not, perhaps, evidently analyzable from the concept of religion in its strict sense. These three elements, worship, love of neighbour and 'witness', are the Church's function, and these must be effectively served by its structure, liturgical and organizational; against these functions the structure must periodically be tested.

Church, society and marriage

Before we pursue any further, however, the structure serving these functions, we must consider another aspect of the Church – not 'what it is for' but 'who it is'. The Church is made up of human beings who themselves constitute human society. There have been long (and always disastrous) attempts to give an account of the Church as a 'perfect society' distinct from 'secular society'. The augustinian doctrine of the 'two cities' hardened into a long tradition of conflict, reaching its climax in the italian *risorgimento*, and its extreme doctrinal expression in the drafts prepared for Vatican I on Church and state. The modern reaction against this separation has now

gone far the other way and has become intoxicated with the 'theology of secularization' till some have failed to recognize the point at which the vertical becomes swallowed up in the horizontal, the Church becomes the 'secular city', religion becomes humanitarianism and 'God' is dead. But these positions are both excesses. The true position can be stated thus: wherever human beings are christian believers, one aspect of human society is that it is also 'Church'; 'Church' is a dimension, a value (of course, the supreme value) realized in human society, to some extent having its own special structure, but to a great extent not fully analysable out of society. The relationship of the Church to human society was better expressed in the early christian *Letter to Diognetus*¹ than in almost any work written on behalf of the Church till Vatican II.

The partial coincidence of Church and society, and therefore of church structure and general social structure, finds its theological expression in the statement that what catholic theology calls the 'supernatural' order and the 'natural' order are not distinct in the concrete reality; John the christian believer in a state of grace and John the good human being are one and the same John. The *social* coincidence is most clearly seen in the fact that what is in a sense the basic structural unit of the Church, the christian marriage and family, is (at least in a monogamous society) identical, in the concrete reality, with marriage and family as the basic structural unit of society in general. The difference is only that among believers it is not merely a social fact but is a sacrament, involving qualities of commitment which society at large may propose as an ideal, but does not regard as an inviolable law of the marriage bond.

Marriage has, in fact, a special significance for the theology of the Church today, which can be expressed in two main ways. First, as an actual social phenomenon, it presents a reality, available for all to observe, which is *at the same time* a 'natural' human institution and a 'supernatural' sacrament, a shared life of christian commitment which naturally gives rise to the basic unit of church structure, the family. Secondly, the bible and christianity represent marriage not only as a state in itself commanded and blessed by God from the beginning, but as the model for the covenant, given by God to men and renewed by Jesus, which is the central and essential expression of our religious commitment. Marriage is itself a covenant, a bond

¹ *Epistle to Diognetus*, 5-6; cf *The Way* I (1966), pp 74-5, or *Early Christian Writings*, tr. Maxwell Staniforth (Penguin Classics, 1968), pp 176-8.

of 'mutual self-commitment leading to personal communion',¹ and it is adopted in both Old and New Testaments as the model to express the commitment demanded by the divine covenant and the union of Christ and the Church.

It is no accident that today there is a great increase in the number of books on the theology of marriage, or presenting the witness of married people. The pity is that it was not so for many centuries before; the disastrous tragedy of the contraception controversy need then never have developed with such bitterness and mutual incomprehension. Today it is seen that marriage, however many and sad may be its failures, is one of the more luminous and intelligible realities in the Church, precisely because of its 'ordinary' human character as well as its sacramental status; the commitment of marriage makes it a suitable starting-point for any theology of personal commitment and faith, and likewise for sacramental theology, which will make best sense and will avoid false questions if we remember that it is concerned with the consecration of human encounters (forgiveness, healing, the shared meal) so as to become instruments of grace as they were in the lifetime of Jesus.

Finally, the structure created by the marriage-commitment is, I suggest, the most suitable model, at the basic level, for the structure created by faith-commitment or religion, that is, for the Church. The structure of life demanded by marriage has its essentials for any measure of success (mental, physical and material sharing, honesty, tolerance, self-denial, etc.) but is also extremely flexible. A given marriage will develop some 'essentials' of its own, which will vary from case to case; some things *always* have to be flexible, at risk of disaster. (For example, preferences as regards the daily time-table have to be adjustable to sickness, pregnancy, changes of job, etc.) In the same way, the Church has its essentials, due to its being constituted by the religious commitment of its members; within the Church, certain institutions develop essentials of their own, in relation to their special function (for example, the vow of chastity taken by religious to give witness to their eschatological hope, or the missionary promise of certain societies), but other elements are freely variable *and ought to remain so*; the flexibility of marital structure ought to be found in the structure of the Church.

¹ Cf Murray, Robert, 'Authority and the Spirit in the New Testament', in *Authority in a Changing Church*, by Dalrymple, J., and others (London, 1968), p 20.

How much about church structure did Christ command?

We know that we have records of only a fraction of Jesus' sayings. He may well have given the apostles a lot of particular instructions after the resurrection; but if so, they did not see fit to write much down. They *did* record that he spoke constantly on a few simple themes – the Father's love, the need for repentance, the dispositions for forgiveness, the urgency of his call for self-commitment. Among all the themes of Jesus' recorded utterances, matters of church structure hardly get a look in. The New Testament records, however, that he authorized his disciples to act in his name, and implies that it was in accordance with their mission from Jesus that they ordained ministers in the churches they founded; likewise that the symbolic rites performed by the primitive Church went back to the actions or instructions of Jesus.

How much he specified, however, is far from clear. It was once a matter of principle for Catholics to maintain in controversy that, for example, the threefold order of bishop, priest and deacon went back to the express precept of Jesus: today a theologian like Seamus Ryan is only summarizing a consensus when he is content to say that Jesus empowered the apostles to equip the churches with appropriate ministries, and admits that the classical pattern developed irregularly and not simultaneously during the first three centuries.¹ Though the Catholic and Orthodox tradition regards itself as permanently committed to episcopacy, many new questions can appropriately be asked about what sort of ministry this has to mean. For example, 'ministry', service, is an essential function in Christianity and therefore it must have structural expression; and Christian ministry entails real authority, of the unique kind which Christ gives. But does the concept of 'hierarchy' belong to the gospel at all? Does it not rather come from the same world as sacral kingship – one of those concepts of human 'carnal religion' which all too often have enthroned themselves in the sanctuary but which, like Peter's well-meant exhortation to our Lord, are 'man's thoughts, not God's'? Again, the criteria on which the ministries of separated Christian bodies have been declared invalid will need re-examination; there may be a true prophetic or pastoral ministry even where a Catholic judgment finds serious defects in eucharistic doctrine.

There are many questions about church structure and about the

¹ Ryan, S., 'Episcopal Consecration: the Fulness of the Sacrament of Order', in *Irish Theological Quarterly* XXXII (1965), pp 295–324, especially pp 297–303.

criteria for approving or disapproving of variations, questions which have not been allowed to be asked, though the asking is often long overdue, if we are to accept the principle that structure must always serve function. Here we cannot do more than hint at some of these questions as they affect the ordering of dioceses or parishes. It is clear today that many of the liveliest activities of christian charity have to cut across these structures and even denominational boundaries. Those whom catholics acknowledge as the successors of the apostles are not all, or not always, the most active in these primary concerns of christianity.

It cannot be denied today that the structure of diocese and parish needs radical examination. Obviously there must be an ultimate local unit of the Church with its place of worship. But does it need to have a rigidly fixed structure? Could the focus not vary – a church and social centre, a school, or a monastery? The word ‘parish’ comes from *paroikia*, a settlement, but the first christian use of the word and its related forms and synonyms has a totally temporary and precarious sense.¹ Would true religion not be better served in the local area by recovering something of this sense of ‘sojourning’? Again, ‘diocese’ comes from *dioikesis*, the activity of household management or financial administration. The word came to be used, first by the roman state, then by the Church, of an administrative area. That is to say, it was first a ‘functional’ word, for what someone *does*, and then it became a ‘structural’ word, eventually interchangeable with ‘see’ (the place where someone *sits*).

Is the time not long overdue for bishops and all the clergy to see themselves again as primarily functional organs of the Church, inspiring and encouraging the Church’s activities wherever action is needed, rather than as local dignitaries who rule over an area? And are not dioceses far too large for proper human relationships between bishop and clergy, clergy and laity? Vatican II has pointed the way clearly if cautiously, but so far the inertia bred of habit in the old structures seems insuperable. We urgently need to rediscover the primitive christian idea of the *local church*, a unit far smaller than present dioceses in most countries, in which the clergy can be a truly united brotherhood around the bishop, a ‘college’ or team which shares out the essential functions of leadership between its members, and all lead the local christian community at its heart. This would mean, of course, a radical revision of the idea of episcopal jurisdiction which has hardened since the middle ages, for each head

¹ Cf 1 Pet 1, 17; 2, 11; Heb 11, 9, 13.

of such renewed 'local churches' would be a very modest figure. In matters of financial and national policy local omnipotence would have to die in favour of collegial action. The required return to modesty began with the example of Pope John XXIII; nothing could help it more than a further lead by the first among the bishops, the universal 'father', communion with whom is the practical test of catholicity.

When reforms of this kind have been seriously begun, then at last we can hope for a restoration of healthy structures serving the Church's function of witness. In recent centuries acknowledgment that this function is properly and necessarily exercised by the laity as well as by bishops and clergy has become largely restricted to the 'witness' of casual contact and the extraordinary witness of martyrdom (the layman's only way to canonization?). The witness of teaching (which, as a function, is the meaning of *magisterium* till the nineteenth century) has come to be claimed more and more exclusively by the pope and bishops, so that a new sense of *magisterium* has crept in and become universal since Vatican I; now it usually denotes the leading functionaries rather than the function which they share with their own parents and teachers and the whole Church. True, they lead the Church in teaching, and they teach the Church (after they have themselves been taught); they have responsibility to correct teaching at variance with the gospel as it is understood in the Catholic tradition. But the pope and the bishops are not the teaching Church. Only the whole Church is that. This sharing of the teaching, witnessing or 'prophetic' function of the Church must find proper structural expression at every level, through consultation and cooperation of all Christ's members who have received his Spirit.

These remarks are, of course, very general. My object in this article has been to discuss the proper relationship of religion and Church and the principles for a restoration of right priorities if these seem to have been reversed. I do not offer easy comfort, for disorder will inevitably increase for some time yet, till the lessons of the Covenant and of true christian commitment have become the essential subject of religious education and have been given expression in a greatly simplified, strong but flexible church structure. Now is a time for faith and hope, for going out like Abraham from his city into the insecurity of the desert, 'for he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God'. In this hope we must be patient. It is religious commitment which creates the Church, and we are the Church, all of us who believe.