

# ON THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING CHURCH DIVISION

BY

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There could be no question of providing in this brief article a complete study of the cultural and social factors influencing division between the churches. The description I propose to give will be not exhaustive but illustrative.

Two limitations should be noted right at the start. First of all, I am taking into consideration mainly the French situation. The churches are placed in very widely-varying circumstances in the different countries of Europe: we cannot employ the same analytical methods in examining the Spanish-Italian-Portuguese bloc (where Catholicism is the official religion and tends to exclude all others), the German-Scandinavian bloc (where the population as a whole is Christian, but is split into mutually-opposed churches), and France (mainly lay, with a 70% majority of non-church members). This figure has been contested: it represents the average between the number of those baptised, which is as high as 70% — though the percentage is showing a constant drop: in Paris no more than half the children born are now baptised — and the number of communicants, which is about 10% of the population. Church members are divided into approximately 25% Catholics and 1% Protestants. It is not, therefore, certain that what can be observed with regard to France is applicable to other countries also.

I shall, in addition, leave on one side, in dealing with factors influencing division, all problems of temperament, psychological differences, terminological lack of understanding, distinctions of liturgy and form, and diversity of ethical and cultural conceptions.

I shall concern myself solely with analysing two factors which appear to me to be essential ones — conservatism and the political situation.

## Conservatism

When we speak of conservatism, it means that we are studying a situation actually existing in fact. (In the same way, when we speak of administration, this concerns only the administration which is definitely in existence, not the one which ought to exist.) Again our purpose is not to explain the origin of these church divisions, only why these divisions are still with us today, why they go on and on. In the oppositions between churches, conservatism plays a fundamental part.

We may note three forms of conservatism. Firstly, there is psychological conservatism : the members of a church are accustomed to certain religious forms. They have not as a rule any very definite views, from the religious point of view ; they simply remain attached to a familiar system, to familiar habits, and shrink from any innovation. Anything new in the religious field is regarded as, in varying degrees, sacrilegious. Since, furthermore, people have no very accurate grasp of their faith, they do not see why they should change, or why they should make it up with the others. Their tendency is to stay where they are, because they will not take the trouble to make comparisons between themselves and other people. This is a serious matter in so far as it is the expression of an unavowed conviction of being in the right. It is a refusal by the faithful to place themselves in submission to the Cross.

A second aspect of this conservatism is the historical one : people continue to be attached to one particular religious or ecclesiastical form out of respect for their forefathers and fidelity to the past. This attachment to tradition is found more frequently in minority groups such as, in France, Jews and Protestants. There are in France many nominal Protestants to be found who are no longer Christians but still assert that they are Protestants, and when asked what that means to them they invariably have recourse to history : a Protestant is one descended from the Huguenots. People thus continue to belong to the Protestant Church out of opposition to Catholicism, which in turn arises from the Catholic persecutions. They may be defined sociologically as belonging to a historical group by basing themselves on the past and opposing a former enemy.

This leads to startling consequences : many of the most ruggedly anti-Catholic Protestants in France are among the least faithful members of the Church, and no longer adherents of the Christian faith. What matters for them is thus to distinguish themselves from the Catholics.

And anything appearing to tend in a Catholic direction, even something wholly in line with the Revelation, is rejected. I know Protestants who will not accept the Miraculous Birth of Christ because it is "Catholicism." Such rejection is, therefore, purely historical in character. The same applies to certain antagonisms towards ecumenism in the local churches : it is in the name of fidelity to tradition that people seek to remain apart. For only a closer understanding of their own faith can enable them to detach themselves from the past and attach themselves to ecumenism.

But the third and most serious factor in conservatism, as the bulwark of division in the Church, is administrative conservatism. It comes into play not, like the other two factors, at individual but at organisational level. Every church is and must be organised ; there could be no denying the validity of an organisation which embodies and should be the instrument of the Spirit. For this reason the Church has its administrative and financial structures, its ministries, its hierarchy, its synods and charities and accounts. But when the Church organises itself in this way, we must not forget that in so doing it ceases to be a purely spiritual body and becomes an administrative one. It becomes *an organisation*. Now the whole action of the life of the Church is to succeed in remaining faithful to its Lord although it is an organisation, to succeed in subordinating that administration to the Spirit of God. But that is no easy matter. For as soon as the Church becomes an administration it becomes subject to the sociological laws governing administration : it is overborne by the weight of its integration into the world, and any hope that it might evade these sociological determinatives is wholly vain and idealistic. If it is to succeed, it must be all the time reviewing in the light of faith the validity of its organisation, and renewing it the instant it comes to represent a danger of immobility.

Now it may be noted that organisation is an element of conservatism tending to maintain separations between churches (considering the situation as it actually is). This is part of the inherent character of all administration. This character, as I see it, comprises the following features.

(1) Administration is of its nature *rigid* : its tendency is to lay down fixed patterns and definite, coherent rules difficult to amend and render flexible. It likes to manage and foresee everything, and to establish statutes and regulations ; it transforms human relations into legal ones. All this comes up against one of the spiritual temptations of the Church,

the temptation to turn simple living by faith into a moral law. For this reason the Church very readily accepts that administrative rigidity which grows to be the encouragement and expression of its spiritual bankruptcy.

(2) Administration is of its nature *rational*: it does not give way to the impulses of the irrational. It seeks to produce the most effective organisational or financial formula, and in so doing it gives its allegiance to mathematics and technology, and ruthlessly excludes flights of fancy in any shape or form. In the Church, administration lays down exact lines of demarcation as to what one particular church is in contradistinction to the rest; it carries out statistical inquiries; it lights upon financial methods which yield a good return; *et cetera* and so forth. It works to establish an outward coherence of the Church, holding together by human means elements more or less dissimilar, and finds in its rationality its justification: it alone is able to reduce to order the sphere where spiritual efforts can (from the point of view of organisation) only sow disorder.

(3) Administration is of its nature a *stabilising* force, in a dual sense. First of all, it is stabilising in that it seeks to establish exact rules, and to enclose all movement within these patterns — spiritual movement along with the rest. It sets up barriers between groups in order that it may function more efficiently: thus it strives to fence off its own special field, because it can only work properly in a stabilised setting. Secondly, its nature is to endeavour to perpetuate itself. Any administration which considers itself justified at all seeks to maintain itself, to continue, even when it has no longer any reason for doing so. Administrative patterns last longer than any other, longer than the political or sociological or economic systems which gave them birth. And so it is in the churches also: one particular spiritual life, one particular theology are embodied in one administrative form (it could not be otherwise, in the beginning), but after the religious and spiritual bases have disappeared the form of the organisation still continues, so that there is a simulacrum of life with no reality to it. Such administrations, which at a specified moment were of value and expressed legitimate religious divisions, are so no longer after certain developments, and serve only to maintain divisions which often possess only a shadow of reality. That is the position as it exists at present in many churches.

Now the more conscious an administration is of a threat to its foundations, the more rigid it becomes. Whether it is the men in it

or the organisation itself, both of them strive to maintain and justify themselves: the administration is stricter and stricter the less justified it seems. Ecclesiastical administration frequently deepens the gulfs which the Holy Ghost works to fill in. We must always, for instance, take care not to do what the Roman administration did at the Council of Trent, and stand foursquare on positions previously indeterminate and antagonisms potentially resolvable.

Whenever the Church seeks to be perfectly organised, it tends towards hardening and unjustified separatism.

### **Nationalism**

A further deep-seated factor leading to rupture is nationalism. Nationalism not only provokes division between the different denominations, cloaked to a greater or lesser degree by national feeling, but prevents union between churches of different nations but the same denomination.

In the first case, for the average French Protestant (and it is the average people who form the Church, so that their view is an essential one) Baptism is "an American sect," and Lutheranism a German church. It is most unfortunate that this estimate (not necessarily a contemptuous one) should dwell so on the national aspect of a confession.

In the second case, the churches of a single confession are broken up by their integration into the different national patterns. (This applies even to the Church of Rome, despite an appearance of unity administrative in character.) Thus the Reformed Church is split up into fragments by the fact of belonging to England (and Scotland), France, Switzerland, Holland and Hungary. Each of these fragments reaches its decisions independently, organises its debates and researches in separation. It is impossible to be satisfied with a purely spiritual and theological union — such union exists, but it must take definite form. It is entirely abnormal for this nationalist rupture to subsist at all. We cannot accept the consolation that union in Christ is enough. For these decisions lead to oppositions imperilling that union.

The rupture in question is based, in my view, on three foundations.

Firstly, decisions by the State, as for example, in history, the decisions of the French monarchy concerning the Gallican Church. At the present time, we have the nationalist decisions of the People's Democracies, forbidding union — and to some extent even exchange — between

churches which belong to the same confession but to mutually-opposed political camps. Naturally, these decisions crystallise on the outbreak of war : people become traitors or collaborators if they have been on friendly terms with Christians in the enemy country. These State decisions are not, however, constant, nor in all cases determinative.

The second aspect is more serious — nationalist feeling among Christians themselves. It is a matter for great regret that in the churches the members almost always feel more bound to their nation than to the Church of Christ. Thus they will accept for the country and the State sacrifices, such as taxation and war, that they will not make for Christ. Who would agree to pay the Church a subscription equal to what he pays in taxes ? Who would agree to devote a year, or two years, or three years of his life to the service of Christ, as he does to his term in the Army ? But, even if we do not go as far as that, we find church members rubbing along quite happily with the cleavage in the Body of Christ ; we write even on the highest official level, "Reformed Church of France," whereas the Church may in fact be *in* France, but can only be *of* Jesus Christ.

We should have a great deal to do, therefore, first of all by way of education, and then in practice, to teach Christians that they belong to Christ before their country, that everything is God's and must be rendered unto Him, that only *after* this total gift has been made have they the right to render anything to Caesar. They must learn that a French Christian is, because he is a Christian first and foremost, more closely linked to a German Christian than to a French non-Christian. It is absolutely vital to create in this way an international Christian attitude of mind.

The third facet of division is provided by the national administration of the churches. They are organised on a national level, and have constructed their organisation within this pattern, *i. e.* their supreme authority is always national in character. This dependent condition is laden with consequence, for such administrations prevent any international union among churches : thus the French National Synod would not be willing to restrict its sovereignty, and nor would any of the other governing bodies. Hand in hand with this goes the financial problem — would a wealthy national church agree to assume joint financial responsibility with a church burdened under a mass of deficits ?

Here again we are up against an anti-Christian obstacle. The principle must be admitted that the normal administrative framework for a church is not the nation but the world. And there we find ourselves confronted by an institutional task which does not correspond exactly to the task of the ecumenical movement, since it is at once more restricted (not being interdenominational) and more coherent (presupposing a supra-national authority in a church). But if we are not capable of overcoming these divisions, how are we to make others believe that we genuinely belong to Jesus Christ ?

There are a great many other things I could say concerning further factors in our divisions, but I think the two that I have indicated are the most important at the present time. We are thus faced with two questions :

What concrete action are we to take in order to make the administration of the Church more flexible and subordinate it wholly to the operation of the Holy Spirit ?

What concrete action are we to take in order to induce the administrations of national churches to approve, and later to take part in, a supra-national body, once the work of educating church members has been carried out (which can be begun immediately) ?