

Agreed Statements. Hazards and Possibilities

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At the end of their frank and comradely talks, the Presidents issued an agreed statement. . . . Not only politicians, it would seem, should concern themselves with such things. Official custodians of doctrine in Churches which claim to teach truth on an important range of issues are showing marked enthusiasm for talks – *le dialogue* even, in some places – and for issuing agreed statements. Precisely what, however, is being agreed on in an agreed statement? Or, what is it that political negotiators or separated brethren are to be understood as really doing when issuing an agreed statement? That question will not quite be answered in the present inquiry, but enough hazards risked by the well-intentioned when they make such statements will be exposed, to make it easier for someone with enough real knowledge of a wide enough and fair enough sample of agreed statements in doctrine and in politics alike to work out a good answer. My direct interest is in theological doctrines here, and in hazards arising from inadequate analysis. It may well be, however, that in producing agreed statements in doctrine that are of real worth, the crucial issues are neither theological nor analytical, but rather political. I conclude therefore by discussing some of the significant points raised by a jurist only a few years ago in a paper which should be taken into account by those concerned before a new wave of agreed statements comes out.

Agreed statements, it should be acknowledged, have played no inconsiderable part in christian doctrine and in christian theologies: 'It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .', 'This sacred *synod* decrees . . .' 'We believe in God . . .', and so on. They have played their part in *Heilsgeschichte* too: *There came false witnesses, but their witness did not agree. . . . Then came two false witnesses, who said . . .* Simply by agreement false witness does not become true, nor false doctrine trustworthy.

So let us examine some hazards in agreed statements, which are hazards no matter how sincere those agreeing may be. *C'est avec les beaux sentiments . . .* that some very unhelpful things can be done. 'Statement' in what follows is being taken in no peculiarly technical way, but in any of these common ways recorded in the big Oxford Dictionary.

1 'The action or an act of stating, alleging or enunciating; the manner in which something is stated.' We speak of statements in this sense as concrete items in the world which take place in identifiable circumstances and with some particular duration, intensity or other describable characteristics. 'The Chancellor's statement to

the House lasted over two hours and was interrupted with cries of "Why don't you join the Tories?" ' 'The first statement is louder than the last, and some of the variations are ear-splitting.'

2 'Something that is stated: an allegation, declaration.' Statements taken in this sense can be said to be true or false, probable or improbable, known, indubitable and so on; and the circumstances and manner of their expression can be left out of consideration.

3 'A written, or oral communication setting forth facts, arguments, demands or the like.' That speaks for itself.

Purely for convenience, the examples of agreed statements used below will usually be brief. In practice agreed statements are often longer, and that does not make it any easier for fallible and fatigable humans to check them for concealed error or worse. In practice too they are often resorted to in matters where even those most generously disposed are wont to recognise a strain of the limitations of the language available. I can offer no remedies for that affliction: only some ways of avoiding hazards that can with decent care be avoided, and sometimes are not avoided. Purely superficial hazards which intelligent punctuation, emphasis or parsing can remove will usually be ignored. Only an irreverent humorist, for example, would suggest that the Athanasian Creed is inculcating either despair or salvation or else the indispensability of scepticism towards salvation when, in the Breviary version, it says *Quicumque vult salvus esse ... sine dubio in aeternum peribit*. And no more than a moment's puzzlement need have been occasioned by the headline in a religious newspaper of some years ago, WOMEN LAY OBSERVERS AT VATICAN COUNCIL. Examples of the hazards to be considered now follow.

1 *Aio te, Aiacida, Romanos vincere posse*. Two oracles could sincerely issue that same formula, yet assent to at least some propositions of their own which could not simultaneously be true. Notably, the formula can be used to express both 'I [truly] tell you, son of Ajax, that you can conquer the Romans' and . . . 'that the Romans can conquer you'. When Pyrrhus, the 'son of Ajax' in question, consulted the oracle, he was looking for practical assurances on a practical problem, not logical trivialities he could have formulated for himself. So we can dismiss in the present connexion the abstract 'can' of logical possibility: in virtue of which there need be no logical contradiction implied in 'my conquering the Romans', even if the Romans are going to flay me and roast the skin for crackling. In the practical sense of 'can' which is to the point here there is all the difference in the world between 'the Romans can conquer you' and 'you can conquer the Romans'. And a defeated but surviving Pyrrhus, back at the oracle with murder in his soul, is not going to be satisfied with the defence that the formula used by the oracle was 'patient of', even 'ambitious of' the sense which happened to be true, if it was not that

sense which he had been led to guide his life by. More generally, if it is sense A of formula S I am using to guide my life, and it is not sense A but (the incompatible) sense B which is true, then the fact that F is also 'patient', even 'ambitious' of sense B gives me no justification whatever for using sense A to guide my life, or for making a living disseminating the corresponding doctrine. 2 "Croesus having crossed the Halys, will destroy a mighty empire." This raises a different set of problems, when we once more suppose two oracles chanting the same formula.

There is at least one interpretation on which the oracles can genuinely agree: 'There is at least one mighty power, such . . . Croesus will destroy that power'. The main hazard however, is that it is not this agreed or agreeable interpretation which is to the point. 'I love a lassie', sung as a serenade, will be saying something true provided that there is at least one lassie such that I love her. That remains true even if I am Don Juan and am loving 243 in Spain besides and 85 in Florence. The lady to whom I addressed the song might fault me nonetheless, if she were to know, no matter how ready she might be to grant the possibility of the interpretation on which my song could well be saying something true. Suppose then that what interests her is the truth or falsehood of this other plausible interpretation: 'There is one and one only lassie such that I love her'. And this time the hazard is not merely in getting the "right" interpretation, but of getting the right lassie, too, or the right mighty empire . . . or the right God. In more general terms, the hazard here is where we can have genuine agreement on one possible interpretation of the formula – but agreement by an analysis which, though not excluded, may be uninteresting or beside the point. We can even have specious agreement in addition on the analysis which is interesting and to the point, and yet fail to achieve agreement if we fail to anchor the right interpretation to the right referent. 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church', we may all bawl lustily at the drumhead service. But do we so believe?

To be referring to the same thing, however, we do not need to have the same image – or perhaps any informative image – of what we are referring to. If you are blind and I am deaf we are likely to have widely different images of Paris, without being unable to refer successfully to the same city. A fair tolerance must be allowed in the fit of any image we may have of some referent to the referent itself. (In referring to God, for instance, we might not be allowed any fit at all between any images we could think to devise, and God himself.) A view which fails to allow enough tolerance can be found in Bremond:

"Of a hundred men who sing the Creed within the walls of a church, there are not two who are really saying the same thing. Vain repetition, lukewarmness and sanctity use the same formulas, and beneath these superficial resemblances we have to divine something inexpressible and incommunicable – the tone, the sense, the colour and the warmth of the soul."

With respect, we do not. Not, at any rate, when considering the common recitation of the Creed as a possible instance of making an agreed statement. It is not at all necessary, in such a case that we agree completely as to the "tone" and the associations we may have in saying what we do. (This is Bremond's concern in that last sentence quoted. Even his 'sense' is not what philosophers, following Frege's *Sinn*, commonly mean by the word, but is rather the feeling we may have towards what we are saying.) But it may well be necessary that we agree on some minimal Fregean "sense" at least, on some minimal propositional content. An example will show the difference. Two newsreaders announce: 'A fierce fire swept through a Liverpool department store this afternoon. A fireman was killed.' One newsreader knows nothing more; the other, that the fireman was his brother. They are in perfect agreement on the sense of what they announce. It is in their background knowledge – and even more importantly in their associations and feelings – that they differ. We can also differ in tone while not only agreeing on the sense but also being in possession of the same background knowledge. (Compare 'He is a good critic, and admires Wagner' with 'He is a good critic, but admires Wagner'.)

It might seem that in the agreed statements with which this study is chiefly concerned, it is agreement in sense merely which is in addition, all that is essential. I do not, however, think that matters will always be so simple (and in practice it is not always easy to say which features of an utterance should be assigned to tone and which to sense, anyway). Where there is marked discrepancy between tone and sense, we may be thrown by the incongruity, and may even begin to suspect that either the one or the other is not what it seems. Week after week, in *Itma*, Mona Lott used to proclaim that it was being so cheerful that kept her going: so lugubrious was her tone, however, that the audience found what she was saying to be laughably incredible. Incongruities as great could be found in less plainly comic circumstances. It is by no means fanciful to suppose a case where the Vicar of Bray professes periodically that the Mass is a piece of idolatry and popish superstition, but is regularly observed to indulge in reservation of the consecrated elements, in genuflexions and other *prima facie* signs of reverence, and in the most scrupulous observance of Romish rubrics; or to suppose a case where the Vicar of Bray professes a belief in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, even outside an actual liturgy, but observably treats the consecrated elements with no respect at all. In both cases the discrepancy between the sense of the profession made and the tone surrounding it might well lead observers to wonder whether the sense or the tone was to be trusted as a guide to the Vicar's intentions.

4 'Is it true that God is wicked?' 'No'. Suppose Sartre and the Pope to subscribe to that No, as both could in all sincerity. What sort of agreement would there be? The Pope subscribes to the

formula because, he would certainly hold, it is not true to say of God that he is wicked. Sartre on the other hand could equally firmly subscribe to the same formula, but – I would jalouse – on the grounds that the sentence ‘God is wicked’ has no application, since there is no God to be wicked. It was another Pope, an Englishman born in the year of the Glorious Revolution, who spoke just mildly sardonically of a cross – or was it a breast? – which Jews might kiss and infidels adore’. A formula, expressive of a doctrinal proposition, to which atheists and professing christians could equally subscribe, might seem of little appeal to the earnest and sincere – as I am supposing those concerned with framing agreed statements to be. Yet perhaps we should not be too hasty to dismiss the possibilities offered under this head.

5 ‘Glory’ and ‘There’s a nice knockdown argument for you’. Even in the Middle Ages there were those who were keenly aware of the arbitrary elements in the signs humans use. Lactantius used the word *arbitrarius*, and Boethius *secundum placitum*, in this connexion: and both men contributed signally to the language in which the Latin West framed its doctrinal statements. To acknowledge an arbitrary element, however, is by no means to be confused with imagining random or haphazard arrangements. *Arbitrium* at its most typical is a deliberate, enlightened choice. The putting of a Henry Cotton is strictly arbitrary, in that he decides where and when the ball will go; but is not at all haphazard. It takes into account the run of the green, the height of the grass, and so on: which are all there before the golfer ever putts, and which have to be taken into account for a good putt to be made.

Good use of language, even by someone introducing a technical term by stipulative definition, takes into account existing usage and associations and the teachability of the audience. Think of the volumes of confusion generated by Descartes’s innovative use of the word ‘idea’; or by Hume’s use of ‘moral judgment’ to designate an activity which excluded what most philosophers and indeed most careful speakers of English had previously understood by ‘judgment’. I can of course stipulate, with Humpty Dumpty, that ‘Glory’ shall mean ‘There’s a nice knockdown argument. . . .’ But I hate to recognise, if I am wise, that when I first use the word to mean that, it may succeed in getting my meaning across only in a world which does not yet exist, and may never exist. Only when others can be persuaded to accept or at least appreciate that usage, will ‘Glory’ come actually to have that meaning in any genuine human communication. If I ignore the run of the linguistic green, if I ignore the ways in which people use certain words, even generations after reasons could have been given for using those words in that way, I do so at my peril. I may mark my elementary experiences successfully, by a word newly uttered, much as Ali Baba marked the oil jars for his own future benefit; but I shall ‘signify’ only by good luck, if at all, and not by good guidance. Doctrinal

language can have a 'marking' function, tying new tokens of use to old anchorages. It can thus serve to conserve teaching. But to be *doctrinal* at all it must be capable of signifying, of communicating something to others.

Lewis Carroll's objection to extreme versions of the arbitrary-signs doctrine – and that, I take it, was what he was making through Humpty Dumpty – was that although signs are imposed arbitrarily, they are imposed by choosers who are part of a community and who, in order to communicate in the real world, must either adapt to a community already in existence or create a community which will understand the newly imposed signs. Creating a community which can understand and accept the harder sayings of the Gospel – any of its sayings, perhaps – in more than a notional way, may indeed be one of the most profound of the Church's tasks. A very famous agreed statement, containing a use of *ousia* – 'out of the *ousia* of the Father' – which was importantly in conflict with the way many good speakers had been using the word, may have run ahead of its community in this way. Only when the old resonances had died away and the new had been "artificially" reinforced, could the new statement be understood in the community as the term's introducers presumably meant it to be understood.

The 'could' there is important. If I am a powerful emperor, or control television, newspapers and so on, I can perhaps manipulate the language of a community so that by 'Glory' people will understand 'There's a nice knockdown argument', or that by *ousia* is to be understood *hypostasis*, or vice versa. Manipulating the *things* to which my language, to be non-trivial, has to be tied, may not be so easy. 'I can call spirits of the vasty deep' 'Yes, but will they come, when you call?' We can produce agreed statements which will win universal acceptance – that is as easy as a Final Solution, if we eliminate those who disagree. Whether we obtain thereby an agreed statement of any worth is another matter. If we do not *have* the words of eternal life, or whatever, merely eliminating those who do not profess *our* words will not necessarily give us them. That 'out of the *ousia* of the Father' won acceptance may very well have been crucially a matter of imperial politics or persuasive language; That it is true or otherwise, is not. An obvious enough point, of course, but none the less important for that. Finding an acceptable formula may be a kindlier way of producing consensus than burning dissenters at the stake or crushing them under boards, but all it produces is – consensus. Even without any emphasis on the *con*.

6 'It is evil to use napalm against humans': affirmed in turn by a descriptivist who thinks it certainly true, but (perhaps) not necessarily binding; by a universal prescriptivist who thinks it not strictly true, when understood as a moral judgment, but certainly intelligible and (as in the best-known theory of this kind) of its nature

binding; and by a Humean moral sentiment moralist, who thinks it neither true nor even intelligible, but (possibly) inescapable and inevitably action-guiding.

The object of agreement here is apparently some sort of policy, and conduct ensuing in some way from the adoption of the common policy. This is surely of some practical importance, so perhaps agreed statements would be acceptable if they were of this sort: common formulations (no matter how they are to be understood) connected in some specifiable way – even by incompatible specifiable ways by the different parties to the agreement – with some common behaviour. ‘We are prepared to agree with you when you say “Christ is really present in the Eucharist”, to the point of going along with you in certain practices: genuflections, reservation, disregarding or not disregarding consecrated elements left over from a eucharistic liturgy, and so on. We are prepared to agree with you in this way even though we know that what you are saying is just meaningless (aristotelian) mumbo jumbo. You may even put your own gloss in a footnote, if it keeps your people happy: but remember, it is not part of the agreement and, in view of the nature of our agreement, it is not really important anyway.’ There are difficulties here of both restricted and more general application. As in the napalm case, agreement here can work on the understanding that the prescriptivist and the descriptivist are both using ‘It is evil to use napalm . . .’ or ‘Christ is really present. . .’ in some broadly “prescriptive” manner, to the extent that *holding* that Christ is really present, say, entails *doing* (or avoiding) certain things on appropriate occasions. Where one of the parties to the agreement has the kind of theory in which I can say ‘This, in the light of morality (or faith) is what you ought to do, nevertheless don’t do it’, the possibility of the “napalm” type of agreement is either not available or is going to be manifestly unacceptable to one of those intended to be parties to an agreement. And I suspect that Catholics, at least, with their teaching about the possibility of *fides informis*, might not be able to be honest, knowing and consistent parties to an agreement in doctrine of the “napalm” sort.

The more generally applicable difficulty – and even a more parochial one, excluding only the Catholics and their fellow-travellers at the outset, must make agreements in doctrine rather less interesting than they could be – is that much of what theologians or custodians of doctrine might be most anxious to have in agreed statements is not amenable to the napalm test. How do you devise a test (of a kind that does not simply shift the problem a stage or two back) to distinguish ‘I believe in the life of the aeons’, say, which is found in the early creeds and is still regularly recited by christians, from ‘I believe in [the myth of the *Phaedo*]’, ‘I reject metempsychosis’, or whatever. How for that matter do you devise a test to distinguish a belief in an unseen etc. God from at least

some beliefs incompatible with it? This sort of hazard is not peculiar to theological topics. How do curators of museums distinguish 'Woman without a necklace' from 'Woman without seven army blankets', or indeed 'Empress without any clothes on'?

7 A common, published text. This might seem an innocent and easy enough way of issuing an agreed statement, and might seem to have been done when the RSV was authorised, with the addition of notes and some minor tinkering with the text, for use by Catholics. It was of course a translation, and an excellent one, made by and for Protestants chiefly. That authorisation, by Cardinal Gray (after years of reluctance or vacillation from Archbishop Godfrey, it has been said) may prove of some historical importance. Later, however, when a common text was issued, it was claimed that a "common Bible" had been issued. But had it? A Bible with pious apocryphal accretions, a thematically organised text and more or less scholarly annotations is arguably still a Bible – though older Protestants often denied that it was. It is what Catholics have had for a long time in standard editions of the Vulgate, which usually carried notes and, in an appendix, such works as *3rd* and *4th Esdras*. It is what Protestants are now being asked to tolerate, and something their fathers, in more than one tradition, did not tolerate. For what we are being offered in the so-called 'common' Bible is not a common *Bible*, but merely a common collection of texts, of importantly different status. It may be convenient to have such texts between two black covers instead of assigning them to different volumes. But either the juxtaposition of texts is of no greater significance than a Great Pious Books collection, or the Protestants (or the Catholics) are being sold as a Bible something that is not a Bible. Adding the Koran might make for greater convenience still, but the result would not be a "common sacred book" of Jews, Christians and Mohammedans, and might not be *an* agreed statement of anything much.

Possibilities. In listing some hazards I have already shown some possibilities, but it may be useful to point to these more explicitly. When issuing an agreed statement we – you and I – may be asserting the same proposition. We might assert it for similar reasons, or dissimilar ones, or none. If our reasons are different, both may be justifiable, or either may be, or neither; and in all cases we might still be agreeing in asserting the proposition. (Equally, we might not.) Also, even where both our reasons were unjustifiable, what we were asserting could still be true. I would jalousé that this sort of thing – asserting propositions identical in content – is what sincere makers of agreed statements hope they are doing. I would in addition suspect that, in matters of any complexity, it is more than most of us can hope for *in statu viae*.

Another possibility considered was that in issuing an agreed statement, what we are to be understood as doing is uttering the

same words or subscribing to the same formula. The multiple hazards in that need not be recalled. Yet from a jurist's point of view we cannot be held to much more; and from an epistemologist's point of view hardly as much can be verified.

A further possibility considered was that in issuing an agreed statement we could be expressing a sentiment on which we are prepared to act, or continue to act, in broadly comparable ways. I was unwilling to dismiss this out of hand, but had to acknowledge that this sort of sentiment is unlikely to be useful where a fine discernment between conflicting views is required; as it is in a number of cases in which theologians or custodians of doctrine might be most anxious to have an agreed statement. High in power, perhaps, the sentiment-expressing approach is liable to be low in resolution.

A different hazard. The hazards considered earlier were largely hazards of analysis, which attempts to formulate an agreed statement might encounter. Some were hazards of superficial, and others of more profound, ambiguities of sense or reference. Some were consequent on disregarding either sense or reference, while others appeared where the intentions of the makers of the agreed statement were in some way inhibited from coming across clearly enough. The hazards now to be considered are by contrast those arising when the makers of the agreed statement can make themselves perfectly clear to pretty well everyone concerned.

In the normally doctored pages of the *Aberdeen University Review*, vol. 46 (1976) pp. 346-54, I seem to detect a first muted winding of the trumpet against the eventuality of a monstrous regiment of agreed-statements. Churches of any size tend to accumulate enviable properties and large powers of preference. The affairs of such bodies rightly attract regulation from the state, and it is an Act of 1921, regulating for the Church of Scotland, which is Professor Lyall's starting-point in the article cited. The state's concern, he says, is not whether a given doctrine is true, but whether it is 'an essential principle of the sect [as by law established, that is, or recognised, or otherwise regulated, we should perhaps add] and, if so, has there been a deviation from it? Has essential doctrine been departed from? (Lyall p. 351). The articles by which the body is regulated are of course open to interpretation, but 'a genuine interpretation – and that is not the same as a majority vote' (p. 352). I shall return to that point. What Lyall is warning against, I take it, is our being blind to the *Realpolitik* which really "serious" agreed statements – statements the acting on which might entail a redistribution of power or property, as against the sort of agreed statement that may be quite acceptable in private and among consenting clerics – must expect to run into. Lord Haldane put the point in 1921:-

'If a number of burglars got into the Carlton Club . . . ousted the committee and declared it an institution for the promul-

gation of Bolshevism, I think it would not be in vain that appeals would be made to the Courts, notwithstanding that there would be a new committee or majority of members to mould the constitution, and I think that the Courts would say that identity had ceased and continuity was non-existent, and at an end between the two bodies. So it may be if the Church of Scotland or even the United Free Church were to go over to the creed of Mahomet or even to adopt the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome. . . .’ (Cit. Lyall p. 353).

I am not concerned with weaknesses in Haldane’s argument. If adoption of the Bishop of Rome’s jurisdiction is enough for legal constataion of non-continuity, then so is rejection of that jurisdiction. So, according to Haldane, the Catholics ought to have the medieval cathedrals? (If not, then what are the other, presumably contentious criteria that Haldane is leaving unmentioned?) Also, and more importantly, Haldane’s burglars make things too easy. The interesting case is where the old committee of the Carlton Club sees more clearly or has a change of heart, and in consequence seeks to promote Bolshevism; while a minority of members – or interested non-members – whether on ideological grounds or with an eye to obtaining the armchairs and the port, appeals to the courts.

It is not hard to envisage a case of the sort which would present the difficulties anticipated by Professor Lyall. Let us suppose that an agreed statement is issued by the Church of Scotland and the Church of Rome. It is far-reaching and plainly made, and is approved, the supposition continues, by the General Assembly and most, perhaps all, of the parishes of the Church of Scotland. A no-popery faction, however, or a commercially astute faction with an eye to ecclesiastical asset stripping manages to co-ordinate resistance which, in the real world, is likely to be found to some extent in most if not all local churches. Let us further suppose some contentious features in the agreed statement: that it is arguably consistent with the *Confessio Scotica*, say, but perhaps not with details of the Westminster Confession (or of the 1921 Act). This is not inconceivable, especially as the Church of Rome might very well recognise the presbyterian church order (small ‘p’, small ‘c’ here please) as being enough, and even desirable, for a christian church to have. It is, after all, at least as strongly “hierarchical” as the church order indicated in the *Didache* or in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. A lot of money is at stake, so a lot of lawyers are likely to be involved. And deep cultural roots may seem threatened, so at least some “freedom-fighters” outside the law are likely to get involved.

That is a distinct hazard for “serious” and plainly formulated agreed statements. It can of course be obviated by abstaining from “serious” agreed statements altogether, keeping to matters which may occupy theologians and bemuse church members, but will not

concern lawyers or politicians. Or it could be obviated by a graduated series of agreed statements, moving only slowly, perhaps in honeyed formulas, towards statements which are both substantive and fundamental. For perhaps it is the possibility of *sudden* shifts in doctrine which disturbs the jurist or politician. Change every plank, every nail of the Saucy Sue – but gradually, not all at once – and it is still the Saucy Sue, so far as jurists or politicians should care. Is that it? Change every Confessional Article, but one at a time, and gradually: and 39 steps later you still have the same church . . . well, don't you? Collapse the 39 steps into one, and you do not (unless in Parliament *le roy le veult* that no fundamental change has been made, presumably). This raises two difficulties. One was already touched on by Professor Lyall: 'a genuine interpretation . . . is not the same as a majority vote'. That, in its most obvious sense, is logically unobjectionable. So, in a like sense, is the equally platitudinous point that a genuine interpretation (of a doctrinal formula: Lyall's concern was with legal formulas) is not the same thing as a legal stipulation either, even if made by a king in his council, or parliament. But both platitudes obscure the more practical point that a majority vote (or legal ruling) might well be the way to pick out a genuine interpretation. We could well have criteria for picking out a genuine interpretation, without ever being able to say just what a genuine interpretation is, or to provide an analysis of 'genuine interpretation'. For practical purposes we do not usually need to be able to provide any such thing, and even to call attention to the (speculatively interesting) question of semantics or metaphysics could be a serious distraction from the practical question, which might be of vital importance to us, of telling a genuine from a bogus interpretation, in a concrete case. Without study, after all, many of us could not define 'dangerous radiation' without tempting a scientific schoolboy to smile, but most of us can be taught to know that, when our little safety-tab turns pink, dangerous radiation is in prospect.

The second difficulty of which I spoke, is that a genuine interpretation of a given doctrine by a given body might have to be fundamentally different from the interpretation held in recent times by that body. People can be mistaken. In the case of bodies professing to be christian churches, it is obvious enough that if there is even one instance of genuine and fundamental inconsistency between the current confessions of any two such bodies -- and they surely cannot all be totally muddled in everything -- then while both such bodies could be wrong, both could not be right. At least one and perhaps both bodies would then need to repent, to reject the interpretation(s) currently held. Why not suddenly? Why over 39 generations, or whatever, just to keep the lawyers or the politicians or the gunmen at bay? *Metanoia* may be an embarrassment to the scribes and bishops, but a very basic element of the

Gospel is that it is in principle possible. Unless the Gospel is badly wrong, even bishops and session clerks can be converted, and live. If they do so, there is likely to be trouble, of course, of the sort mentioned above.

Can that hazard be avoided, and agreed statements of the christian faith still made clearly, plainly and honestly? One possibility should perhaps be considered here. Some power, some means of defence, some "property", is practically necessary *in statu viae*. Both Covenanters and Catholics can tell you what happens if you lack those means: the king's men drive you into the snow, the paras or the plain-clothes Army gunmen shoot you in the back, the law laughs at you. But having shelter from the elements and protection from evil men or evil laws - which christians in the United Kingdom currently lack anyway -- does not entail ownership of costly schools, for instance, or power of preferment to clerical livings. Get rid of such trappings and the hazards to which Professor Lyall's article drew attention will lose their practically central importance. Blessed are the poor, for they can make their agreed statements as serious as they wish, as soon as they wish, and as free from fudging as they may wish?

Catholic **Herald** *Morale Booster*

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