

Contradiction or Complementarity? Confrontation or Dialogue?

At our present state of knowledge, it is not possible to explain every aspect of behaviour of light, with one single theory. Light sometimes behaves like a bombardment of tiny particles; at other times like an oscillating wave. Yet these two theories are mutually exclusive, indeed contradictory. To find a way through this dilemma, physicists have put forward a theory called **The Principle of Complementarity**, which asserts the following:

- ▶ We believe in the unity of truth
- ▶ We therefore believe that there will come a time when one theory will emerge, which encompasses both existing theories
- ▶ But for the time being we need both – we cannot dismiss either
- ▶ During this time of tension, we will continue the search, in an attitude of humility.

This principle exists in physics – but we need its insights in areas of theology. I am writing this on the day when we celebrate the Feast of two great leaders of the Church, Peter & Paul, who at times fundamentally disagreed, but found a way through their disagreements to work together for the extension of the Kingdom of God.

I have found it helps me to live with the apparent contradictions of God's sovereignty, and our free will, with which Christians have wrestled for centuries.

I think it could also help theologians and politicians in Israel/Palestine, as they struggle with the apparently intractable problems, which include:

- ▶ Two completely different views of history and law
- ▶ Within the Anglican Communion, two groups of Christians in the city of Jerusalem, who seem to have no time for each other

Could this Principle of Complementarity help us in the present painful debate which focuses at present around the appointment of Dr Jeffrey John as the next Anglican Bishop of Reading? The discussion is centred on the issue of homosexuality; but the underlying issue is how we interpret the Scriptures.

To overstate the case to make the point: some see the Scriptures, as they are written, as being true and valid for all time, for doctrine and behaviour. Others disagree, saying that the Bible was a creature of its own time and culture, and needs not just to be re-interpreted, but superseded. Our understanding of sexuality, they would say, for example, has now developed substantially – we cannot therefore take the biblical texts as mandatory for all time.

Even when this debate is carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect – which, sadly, is rarely the case – there is a fundamental dichotomy here. Is it possible that the insights of the Principle of Complementarity could help the Church to find a constructive way forward? How might this work?

- ▶ Each side holds its views with strength and conviction, which leads many to deduce "it is either/or – there is no both/and". But need this be the case? The Anglican Church is not a sect – it has always been marked (sometimes to

its own detriment) by its willingness to encompass a variety of viewpoints. To a certain extent this has happened over the issue of homosexuality – but the proposed appointment is stretching that willingness beyond what many can bear.

- ▶ Are the participants in this debate in danger of allowing their humility to be overtaken by their stubbornness or arrogance? Is it just possible that they might conceivably be wrong, in their view of the Bible, or their ecclesiology? One key issue in all of this debate is our attitude to those with whom we fundamentally disagree. Do we dismiss them, or seek to maintain a relationship with them of humility and respect?
- ▶ If we take seriously the doctrine of the unity of truth, is there not an argument for postponing further action on the consecration of Dr John? This would give an opportunity for the Bishops of the Church of England, and the clergy and lay leaders of the Diocese of Oxford, to meet for prayer and discussion; which might result in them coming to a common mind.
- ▶ Similarly, are the issues for the future of the Church not so vast, that the convictions of any individual, including “he is the right person” or “I am the right person” should be given less priority? Should not Dr John consider suspending his acceptance of this post until an opportunity is given for the Bishops, and the Diocese, to meet as suggested above?

Relationship is at the heart of our faith – our relationship with Jesus Christ, and (if we take seriously his prayer in John Chapter 17) our relationships with each other. If we follow this line of approach, then maintaining our relationships with those whom we disagree must take the prime position:

- ▶ We show a deep love and respect for those with whom we disagree, believing that they hold their views with the same sincerity and conviction
- ▶ We place ourselves (whatever our personal convictions) in between the two sides, seeking in humility to reach out to both, offering an inadequate bridge of love and understanding
- ▶ We commit ourselves to the sacrificial task of intercession for God to reveal His will; and to pray for those in leadership, that God will give them the spiritual gift of wisdom in this desperate situation
- ▶ We take the risk of being pulled apart, even torn in two, if the two sides decide to move further from each other.

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The Feast of SS Peter & Paul