THE CHURCH IN COUNCIL

Conciliar Movements, Religious Practice and the Papacy from Nicaea to Vatican II

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Introduction

This work contains a second collection of my earlier publications. The first collection was published by I.B.Tauris and Co. Ltd in 2009 under the title: *The Ages of Faith: Popular Religion in Late Medieval England and Western Europe*. I am most grateful to I.B.Tauris for accepting this work as well as for the fine production and marketing of the earlier volume.

Church councils are the focus of this second collection. They have been at the forefront of my academic study for a long time, through my editing *The Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (1990) and thereafter. Five articles on church councils were included in *The Ages of Faith* and this volume gives me the opportunity to include the other significant publications in this field that can be readily reproduced. A full list of the relevant books and articles may be found in the Appendix (pp. 215–217).

The first piece in this volume – *Is the Church too Asian?* – reproduces the published version of the Placid Lectures (2001), which were delivered at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, India. The work seeks to counter the modern perception that Christianity is too Western by arguing, rather, that the Christian church of the first millennium – at least as represented by the ecumenical councils of the time – was more Eastern than Western. This Eastern foundation, it is maintained, has remained with Christianity ever since.

The second piece – *Was the Church too Democratic?* – is based on the Bishop Jonas Thaliath Endowment Lectures, which were delivered in Rome in 2003. It confronts another controversial topic through the prism of church councils, namely the church and democracy. The main theses advanced are that during the first millennium AD, church councils were ahead of their time in consultative procedures and that this tradition resurfaced vitally during the second Vatican Council (1962–65).

These two pieces, which were originally published in the form of short books, constitute around half the text of the book.

The rest of the volume comprises nine articles on various aspects of conciliar history. They are printed in the chronological order of their original publication.
The Church in Council

The first of the nine, ‘The African Church and the First Five Ecumenical Councils’, outlines how African bishops and theologians played a major role in the early councils and thereby made a decisive contribution to the development of the Christian church. In this way the article seeks to redress the lament that the Church is too European and Western, by highlighting the African contribution. The article complements the booklet Is the Church too Asian?

The second article, ‘The Eucharist in the Ecumenical Councils’, was based on a lecture given at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2000. It retraces conciliar teaching on the eucharist from Nicaea I in 325 to Vatican II. While the early councils were concerned primarily with the people present at the eucharist, medieval councils as well as Trent focused more on the presence of Christ and on the priest. The second Vatican Council revisited the early Church’s interest in the congregation, but with somewhat different emphases.

The two publications of 2002 are ‘Mary in the ecumenical councils of the Church’ and ‘Historiography of the council (Vatican II) in the Anglophone world’. The former traces teaching on Mary through the councils, most notably in the Council of Ephesus’s proclamation of Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God) and in the chapter on Mary in Vatican II’s decree on the Church. The second article examines the reception of Vatican II in English-speaking countries, principally the UK and USA.

‘Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Councils’ looks at the present quest for reunion among Christians and seeks to draw inspiration from previous councils. The approach is both theological and commonsense. Unity within the early church should not be exaggerated; Christians then were quite a fractious body of believers. In many ways Christians are more united today than they have ever been before, except perhaps briefly after Pentecost. Full unity may be the ideal, but in the meantime imperfect unity should be appreciated and treasured.

There are three publications for the year 2004. The first is The Book of the Councils: Nicaea I to Vatican II. The article begins thus: ‘The ecumenical and general councils of the Church have produced arguably the most important documents of Christianity after the Bible’. Thereafter an attempt is made to justify this challenging statement. Second is ‘Ecumenical Councils and non-Christian Religions’, which examines the changing emphases of the councils towards other faiths, including Vatican II’s positive appreciation. Third, ‘The image of John XXIII and Paul VI in the Anglo-Saxon World during and after Vatican II’ looks at appreciation for the two popes on the part of people in English-speaking countries – principally the UK and USA – and, reciprocally, the popes’ understanding of the Anglophone world.
The final contribution is entitled ‘Greek Metaphysics and the Language of the Early Church Councils: Nicaea I (325) to Nicaea II (787)’. First published in 2009, the article applauds early Christians for their courage in embracing Greek, the *lingua franca* of the time. Then, focusing on various key words in the creeds and other doctrinal statements of the early councils, the article argues that these councils, rather than being seduced by Greek philosophy, fashioned a theological vocabulary that expressed with remarkable fidelity and ingenuity the key concepts of the Christian message.

I am most grateful to the various owners of copyright for permission to reprint their material. In this regard I wish to single out Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, for generously granting permission to reprint the two booklets, *Is the Church too Asian?* and *Was the Church too Democratic?*