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Crawford Howell Toy of Virginia

IN order to meet the demand for the education of Baptist ministers and in order to keep pace with other Protestant seminaries in America, President James P. Boyce recommended to the trustees that a fifth faculty member be secured for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Crawford Howell Toy of Virginia was elected to the faculty in 1869, four years after the American Civil War and ten years after the founding of the seminary. Toy signed the Abstract of Principles, the seminary's doctrinal statement, below the names of Boyce, John A. Broadus, Basil Manly, Jr., and William Williams, the original faculty members of the seminary.

At the time of his appointment to the faculty, an influential Baptist periodical noted Toy's "eminent lingual attainments, his sound judgment, amiable manners, and earnest piety" and confidently predicted that, should circumstances favour, Toy would "at no distant day rank among the foremost biblical scholars of the world."¹ It was only after a disruptive crisis ten years later that circumstances favoured C. H. Toy and that he was to become a leading biblical scholar.

That crisis is know popularly as "the Toy controversy". It has been described as "one of the oddest, most complex in the annals of American church history."² It was indeed odd that

someone of Toy's temperament should become embroiled in controversy, for he was evidently a very gentle and sensitive person.³ Even Toy's accusers held him in high esteem and had warm feelings for him.⁴ The seminary trustees committee which examined him reported that they had been "deeply impressed with the beautiful Christian spirit of our beloved brother. . ." Upon Toy's departure from the seminary, his colleague and former pastor, John A. Broadus, wrote to a friend, "We have lost our jewel of learning, our beloved and noble brother, the pride of the Seminary."⁵ Never was a heretic more beloved by his accusers!

The object of this article is to describe the strange case of Professor Toy, to sketch his life and to determine, as best one can the basic issues of "the Toy controversy".

Crawford Toy apparently inherited much of his intellectual curiosity and especially his interest in languages from his father, Thomas D. Toy, a Baptist deacon and Norfolk, Virginia, druggist who read widely and taught himself several languages. One can safely conclude that Crawford's home life was such as "to prepare him for scholarly pursuits and to teach him spiritual values."⁶ Accordingly to his biographer, "He came. . . of excellent stock, was inherited of the best traditions in regard to learning, enjoyed rare opportunities for education, and was endowed with the ability and the will to make the most of these."⁷

At the University of Virginia, Toy demonstrated a marked interest and ability in several fields, but especially in languages. The intensity of this linguistic interest was clearly evident to those about him, as will be indicated below in relation to Toy's experiences during the Civil War. While a student at the university, Toy was baptized by the pastor of the Baptist church at Charlottesville, the Rev. John A. Broadus, with whom Toy established a life-long friendship.

Having received his master's degree in 1856, Toy began teaching at a college for women in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1857, a young woman named Charlotte Moon entered the college; her friends called her "Lottie". In 1861, Miss Moon turned down Toy's proposal of marriage, but she accepted his renewed offer several years later. They were never married, however. During "the Toy controversy", she began reading the young professor's views and eventually broke off the engagement because of his theory of inspiration!⁸

Toy entered Southern Seminary in its initial session in Greenville, South Carolina, and he soon gained the respect of students and faculty alike. Toy boarded with Broadus who described his student as "among the foremost scholars I have ever known of his years, and an uncommonly conscientious and devoted man."⁹

In 1860, Toy was appointed as a missionary to Japan, but was unable to go because of the political uncertainty in the South. Evidently, he was greatly disappointed by the mission board's decision not to send any missionaries in 1860.

During the Civil War, Toy served first in the artillery and then in the chaplaincy of the Confederate forces. Even war did not totally interrupt his language studies. A former classmate from the seminary wrote Broadus that he had recently seen Crawford, who was a serving chaplain at the time: "[He] is looking well and seems to be enjoying himself. His Syriac books are in Norfolk [Virginia] and he has, therefore, been compelled to fall back on German for amusement."¹⁰ In 1863, Toy was captured at the Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and was imprisoned. It is interesting to learn that even his time as a prisoner of war was not completely unproductive: "The tedium of this confinement was relieved by the glee club, the daily mock dress parade with tin pans for drums, and the class in Italian, organised and taught by him."¹¹

After the war, Toy returned to his native Virginia to teach for a short time, and then he went to Germany for further study at the University of Berlin (1866-1868). Not unexpectedly, his specialisation was languages but the most significant aspect of his continental study was his exposure to a new approach to Old Testament literature as historical documents subject to scientific analysis and criticism.

Upon returning from Germany, Toy joined the faculty of Furman University at Greenville, South Carolina, upon the recommendation of his former professor and future colleague, John A. Broadus. The following year, Toy accepted an appointment to the faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a position which he was to hold for only ten years.

As professor at the seminary, Toy was recognised as a brilliant scholar and as an effective teacher. President Boyce acknowledged that Toy was easily the most promising scholar on the faculty.¹² As a lecturer, "it was his delight to guide his students to independent reading and research. He led them likewise into charming and instructive by-ways, as in a course of lectures on the fine arts, among which he included dancing."¹³ It was his views on inspiration, however, rather than his views on dancing and the fine arts, which resulted in his separation from the seminary in 1879.

After his resignation from Southern, Toy joined the faculty of Harvard University Divinity Schools, again on the recommendation of Broadus, who had attempted unsuccessfully a few months earlier to secure a place for Toy on the faculty of Johns Hopkins University.¹⁴ After Toy's acceptance of the offer to come to Harvard, President Ezra Abbot of that university announced in a letter to W. Robertson Smith that "an American

heretic" had been appointed to the faculty of divinity.¹⁵

It was at Harvard that Toy came into his own as a scholar. When he joined the university faculty, Semitic studies were limited to a few courses in Hebrew. Toy greatly expanded the scope of Semitic studies during his early years at Harvard. Likewise, his publications in that field were extensive.¹⁶ Furthermore, due to his efforts and the patronage of his close Jewish friend, Jacob Schiff, the Semitic Museum was opened in 1903. Toy was also noted as an interpreter of the Old Testament. According to C. A. Briggs, Toy was able to combine with integrity a critical approach to the scriptures with a basic sympathy for the religious message of the Bible.¹⁷ Although now of course in many respects dated, Toy's contribution to the *International Critical Commentary* remains a standard reference for any serious study of the book of Proverbs.¹⁸ But, the history of religions was apparently his favourite field of study.¹⁹ Besides his extensive publications in this area, Toy organised a department at Harvard for the study of *Religionsgeschichte*, a field of study in which Harvard still excels in the United States. One close to Toy and familiar with his thought has asserted that all of Toy's writings were characterised by "breadth and depth of learning, skilful sifting and massing of evidence, absence of partisanship and egotism, love of truth, boldness coupled with consideration for others, temperateness and poise, orderly arrangement, clearness of style, simplicity and force of expression."²⁰ Little wonder that Broadus had earlier spoken of him as "our shining pearl of learning" and, changing the metaphor, "not an ordinary star, but a brilliant meteor, dropped down among us."²¹

Even during Toy's first years as professor at Southern Seminary when it was located in South Carolina, he was avidly interested in the relationship between the sciences and the interpretation of scripture. Broadus records that Toy "had entered upon the study and teaching of the Old Testament with the idea that it was very important to bring the Scriptural references to physical phenomena into recognized harmony with all assured results of physical science."²² According to the same source, Toy had become "a pronounced evolutionist and Darwinian" soon after the circulation of *The Origin of Species*. As a result of his study in Germany, Toy had also adopted the views of Kuenen and Wellhausen in Old Testament studies even before he had been invited to become a professor of Old Testament at the seminary.

Apparently, however, it was not until several years later—after the seminary had moved to Louisville, Kentucky, from Greenville, South Carolina—that President Boyce asked Broadus to warn Toy against the wisdom of teaching critical methods of interpreting the Old Testament to the students at the

seminary.²³ According to Broadus' own account, Dr. Toy was fully convinced that the views he had adopted were correct, and would, by removing many intellectual difficulties, greatly promote faith in the Scriptures. Besides opposing that opinion, it was urged upon his consideration that these ideas could be taught in the Seminary, and moreover, that the great majority of the students were quite unprepared for fitting examination of any such theoretical inquiries, and needed to be instructed in the Old Testament history as it stands.²⁴

Toy considered the matter and promised to do what the President, through Broadus, had requested. He soon found, however, that he could not teach the Old Testament intelligibly in any other way than by means of historical-critical methods.

In the face of increased opposition to Toy's views within the denomination, when the seminary trustees met at the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1879, he submitted for their consideration a detailed statement of his views on inspiration together with an offer of resignation. There is some indication that Toy did not think that the board of trustees would accept his resignation.²⁵

At the outset of the document, Toy reaffirmed his adherence to the seminary's Abstract of Principles, the doctrinal statement which all its professors have signed since the seminary was founded. The first article states, "The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and are the only sufficient, certain and authoritative rule of all saving knowledge and obedience." Of this article, Toy specifically affirmed, "I have always taught and do now teach in accordance with, and not contrary to it."²⁶ Significantly, the board of trustees did not at any time deny Toy's claim to have taught in accordance with the Abstract of Principles; rather, the examination committee simply noted that "there is a divergence in his views of inspiration from those held by our brethren in general."²⁷

Toy emphasized that he did not reject the inspiration of the scriptures. He argued that his divergence from "the prevailing views in the denomination" concerned the *mode* of inspiration. One should note that the Abstract of Principles nowhere considers the question of the mode of inspiration. Consequently, since — as will be indicated below — the Abstract of Principles was regarded as the sole doctrinal guide for the seminary, Toy's views on the mode of inspiration did not provide sufficient theological grounds for his termination as a professor at the seminary.

Yet, almost all the interpreters of "the Toy controversy" have either insisted or assumed that the fundamental problem was

theological. Of course, in a qualified sense this is unquestionably true. One should not, for example, understate the theological distance between Toy and Boyce in particular. It is nevertheless the present author's thesis that at least from the perspective of the faculty and the board of trustees, the theological issue *alone* would not have warranted the resignation of Professor Toy. There is considerable evidence that their primary consideration was pragmatic: the danger of further alienating the seminary from the denomination, from whom the seminary desperately needed immediate financial support in order to survive as an institution.

In the first instance, it is certain that the controversy—insofar as it was confined to the faculty and the trustees of the seminary—was not a personal attack on Toy's integrity, piety, capacity or effectiveness as an instructor and scholar. This has been sufficiently indicated above.

In the second instance, tolerance of divergent doctrinal opinions among the faculty was already an established principle at the time of "the Toy controversy". Indeed, President Boyce had once written the following to Broadus concerning academic freedom within the faculty: "Upon divided points we must consent to be divided."²⁸ Furthermore, in an earlier controversy involving Professor Williams' views on baptism—views which were unquestionably contrary to those "held by our brethren in general"—Boyce had defended Williams' right to his own doctrinal opinions, stating, "I think some eyes would be opened to see that much could be said on the other side of a question on which they speak so dogmatically."²⁹ In the 20 June 1874 issue of the *Western Recorder*, a Baptist news magazine published in Kentucky, Boyce stated emphatically that the Abstract of Principles serves as the only doctrinal guide in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.³⁰

In the third instance, there was serious doubt in 1879 whether the seminary would be able to survive without increased financial support from the denomination and from individual benefactors within the denomination. If Toy were to remain on the faculty, there was fear that such support would actually decrease rather than increase. This practical consideration is usually mentioned in early references to the controversy. For example, Boyce is said to have expressed the opinion that Toy's views would give "gravest offence" to the seminary's supporters.³¹ It is perhaps not without significance that in 1880, the year after Toy's resignation at Atlanta, the seminary received a donation in the amount of £20,000 from a former governor of Georgia, Joseph Emerson Brown, who saved Southern from liquidation.

Given these three factors, the decisive consideration in the acceptance of Toy's resignation must have been practical, since neither of the other two factors accounts adequately for the

action of the trustees.³² Perhaps the most important problem which "the Toy controversy" brought into focus is the ethics of the relationship of the theological seminary to the denomination. The problem is how the seminary can both lead and serve the denomination which subsidizes its programmes. Although the tension between the denomination and the seminary has been more acute at times than others, most of the men who have taught at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary have nevertheless persisted in the view that they could best serve the needs of the denomination by leading it. Crawford Howell Toy was in this respect no exception.

NOTES

1. *Religious Herald* (20 May 1869).
2. Pope A. Duncan, "Crawford Howell Toy: Heresy at Louisville", *American Religious Heretics*, ed. by George H. Shriver (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p.56.
3. One of his former students eulogized his late professor as "most considerate, always interested in young men, always ready to advise and aid them, always eager to learn of their later plans and achievements. . . . His time and his learning he freely placed at the service of those who sought his help. He was not only unassuming but modest. Never a suggestion of a right to speak with authority because of the weight of his learning, never the slightest sign of pride in his achievements or his honors. He observed, indeed, a severe reticence in regard to what he had attained. He was magnanimous and temperate toward those who opposed him. . . . This moderation was an article in his creed, but it was the expression of a spirit essentially courteous and pacific. His poise was extraordinary. He saw life in true perspective, and was thus lifted above the petty cares which consume so many lives. He was a companion of winsome sympathy, whose conversation was always give and take, with never, even remotely, a suggestion of monologue. You felt as he spoke with you that he really cared for you and your opinions." David Gordon Lyon, "Crawford Howell Toy", *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, XXVIII (1919), 268-269.
4. See, e.g. John A. Broadus, *The Memoir of James Petigru Boyce* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), p.262.
5. A. T. Robertson, *Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1901), p.313.
6. Billy Grey Hurt, "Crawford Howell Toy: Interpreter of the Old Testament" (Unpublished Doctor's dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 1965; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms), p.14. A most useful source for information about the life and thought of Professor Toy. Much of the biographical data included in the present article was obtained from Hurt's dissertation.
7. David Gordon Lyon, "Crawford Howell Toy", *Harvard Theological Review*, XIII (1920), 2.
8. "Lottie" Moon later became a rather famous Baptist missionary to China. Her memory is perpetuated by an annual offering named after her that is taken by the woman's missionary society. For additional details about the relationship between

- her and Toy, see Hurt, *op.cit.*, pp.22-27, and Duncan, *op. cit.*, pp.57, 71-72.
9. Robertson, *op. cit.*, p.173.
 10. *Ibid.*, p.197.
 11. Lyon, *op. cit.*, (1920), p.5.
 12. According to Jacob S. Dill, "Our Seminary: The Transition from Greenville to Louisville", *Review and Expositor*, XXVIII (1931), 143.
 13. Lyon, *op. cit.*, (1920), p.11.
 14. Robertson, *loc. cit.*
 15. John Sutherland Black and George Crystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912), p.375.
 16. See bibliographies in Hurt, *op. cit.*, and in David Gordon Lyon and George Foot Moore, editors, *Studies in the History of Religions Presented to C. H. Toy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912).
 17. C. A. Briggs, *The Higher Criticism of the Hexateuch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), p.70.
 18. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* in "The International Critical Commentary", edited by S. R. Driver, Alfred Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke), 1899.
 19. According to Lyon and Moore, *op. cit.*, v. For Toy's general approach to the history of religions, see C. H. Toy, *Introduction to the History of Religions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924 [1913]).
 20. Lyon, *op. cit.*, (1919), p.268.
 21. Cited in Hurt, *op. cit.*, p.25.
 22. Broadus, *op. cit.*, p.260.
 23. *Ibid.*, pp.261-262.
 24. *Ibid.*, p.262.
 25. See Lyon, *op. cit.*, (1920), p.11.
 26. The full text of Toy's statement has been published in Duncan, *op. cit.*, pp.79-84.
 27. The following is the complete text of the previously unpublished, handwritten report to the board of trustees of the examination committee, signed by its chairman, James C. Furman:

"They have had under protracted and serious consideration the matter committed to them. They sought conference with Prof. Toy, and in addition to the carefully expressed paper presented to the Board along with his resignation, they had a very free and candid expression of his opinions on some of the points less fully expressed in his written communication".

"While deeply impressed with the beautiful Christian spirit of our beloved brother, they cannot but recognise, what he himself asserts, that there is a divergence in his views of inspiration from those held by our brethren in general. In view of this divergence, your committee feel constrained to recommend to the Board the acceptance of Prof. Toy's resignation. In this recommendation they concur unanimously."
 28. Robertson, *op. cit.*, p.301.
 29. Cited in George Boardman Eager, "Rev. William Williams", *Review and Expositor*, VI (1909), 418.
 30. This article was reprinted in *Review and Expositor*, XLI (1944), 18-24.
 31. Broadus, *op. cit.*, p.261. See also John R. Sampey, "Brief History

- of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary", *Review and Expositor*, VII (1910), 16.
32. Duncan surely overstates the case when he argues that the Toy controversy "in effect proclaimed the policy that professors in Southern Baptist seminaries would be held accountable for teaching only those views acceptable by the majority of Southern Baptists." *Op. cit.*, p.78. This simply is not the case. For example, in the so-called Whittsitt controversy a short time after the Toy affair, William H. Whittsitt was indeed forced by denominational pressure to resign the presidency of the seminary because of his views on Baptist origins, views which were unquestionably out of line with the patently naive views then current among Baptists that they stood in historical succession from the apostles. Nevertheless, even after resigning the presidency, Whittsitt continued to teach at the seminary, and continued to teach that Baptists had their origins in the English separatist movement, as did his successor.

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