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Samuel Johnson (1709–1784): Christian moralist

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It would be unfitting to let the two-hundredth anniversary of the death of Dr Johnson pass unnoticed in *Churchman*. Everybody else seems to have noticed it. A learned conference on this most characteristic of Englishmen, held at Oxford, has drawn together scholars from far beyond the English-speaking world. An exhibition on this staunch upholder of the Church of England has been organized in London by Sir William Rees-Mogg, a Roman Catholic. The profound scholarship of Johnson endears him to all who love learning, his profound humanity to all who love mankind. His profound Christian devotion must similarly endear him to all who love Christ.

Johnson's name is one of the most famous in English literature, and like other writers he gained his reputation by his writings. Yet he has kept his reputation mainly by his life and table-talk, as recorded by his admiring disciple James Boswell. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is one of the greatest books in the English language, but what makes it great is its subject, not its author. That is not to say Boswell had no ability as a biographer: quite the reverse. He gives us a more graphic and intimate picture of Johnson's life and habits than the biographer of any earlier worthy had succeeded in achieving, or perhaps had realized it was worthwhile to attempt. He also makes good use of Johnson's characteristic letters. But the bulk of Boswell's record consists of his tireless jottings of Johnson's conversation, and Johnson was a conversationalist without equal. His opinions and his prejudices, his learning and his wit, his wisdom and his piety, are chiefly known to the world today from his conversation, as recorded by Boswell.

Yet those who never move on from Johnson's conversation to his writings deprive themselves of the greatest treasures that he has to offer. It is in his writings that his variety and depth of learning, his power of thought and his moral earnestness are most clearly and amply displayed, and displayed through the medium of his unique literary style. What his conversation hints at is here expressed fully, and what his conversation exaggerates for the sake of emphasis is here expressed with judicious precision.

Johnson is important as a historian, especially as a historian of language (in his epoch-making *Dictionary* and its preface) and as a historian of literature (in his *Lives of the Poets*), though there is also a

great deal of history in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. He is still more important as a literary critic (in his *Lives of Poets* again, and in his famous *Preface to Shakespeare*). But it was as a Christian moral philosopher that he chiefly wished to excel and was chiefly esteemed by his contemporaries. His series of periodical essays called *The Rambler*, his story *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, and his powerful satirical poems *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are all really the reflections on life of a great moral philosopher. His directly religious writings (his *Prayers and Meditations* and a number of sermons composed for others) make explicit the religious presuppositions which are present, though often only implicit, in his works of moral philosophy.

As a Christian, Johnson was not only a member of the Church of England but an old-fashioned high churchman (the only fashion of high churchman which existed in his day), and he had been greatly influenced as a student at Oxford by William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. The school of thought to which he belonged had always laid great stress on duty, and considerable stress on reason, but it was repelled by Puritanism. Two questions may be suggested by this: Did Johnson, the great reasoner, place *too* much reliance on reason? And did his emphasis on duty exclude a proper emphasis on *grace*? There are good grounds for giving reassuring answers to both these doubts.

As regards the limits of reason, Johnson writes in *The Vision of Theodore* (a work to which he attached considerable value),

> I looked then upon the road of Reason, which was, indeed, so far as it reached, the same with that of Religion, nor had Reason discovered it but by her instruction. Yet when she had once been taught it, she clearly saw that it was right; and Pride had sometimes incited her to declare that she discovered it herself, and persuaded her to offer herself as a guide to Religion, whom, after many vain experiments, she found it her highest privilege to follow.

As regards dependence on grace, Johnson's constant emphasis on Christ's atonement in the things he said and wrote during his last illness are sufficient evidence. For example,

> I commit to the infinite mercies of Almighty God my soul, polluted with many sins; but purified, I trust, with repentance and the death of Jesus Christ.

It has even been supposed that Johnson finally allied himself with the evangelicals, which is unlikely (though he had a few evangelical friends and was not unconscious of the good they had achieved), but his recognition of the necessity of sincere repentance and of trust in

Christ and his cross was in essential agreement with the characteristic evangelical insistence on conversion and on justification through faith.

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For further reading

Reprints of several of Johnson's works and of Boswell's *Life* are available in Dent's 'Everyman's Library' and in other economical forms. A valuable critical edition of the *Complete English Poems*, with annotations, has been produced by J. D. Fleeman for the 'Penguin English Poets'. An attractive modern biography is John Wain's *Samuel Johnson* (Macmillan, London 1980[2]) and an excellent critical study is J. P. Hardy's *Samuel Johnson* (Routledge, London 1979). There is a critical edition of Boswell's *Life*, edited by G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1934–64), and a critical edition of Johnson's *Works* is currently being produced at Yale—several volumes edited by various hands, have now appeared. American scholarship has recently contributed much to the study of Johnson, and on the matters that most concern us in this brief article the following are important: Robert Voitle, *Samuel Johnson the Moralist* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1961); M. J. Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1964); C. F. Chapin, *The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1968); C.F. Pierce, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson* (Athlone Press, London 1983). On the question whether Johnson became an evangelical, Quinlan provides the fullest discussion, but he suffers somewhat from an imperfect grasp of evangelical teaching.

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