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Fifty Years of Scottish Theology

Book Reviews

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Fifty Years of Scottish Theology*

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The purpose of this paper is to indicate the principal trends of Scottish Theology during the first half of the twentieth century. Within its scope no attempt can be made to give an exhaustive treatment, intensively or extensively, of the particular contributions of individual theologians; and references that may be made to those will of necessity be by way of illustrating more general movements of religious thought.

During the period under review there have been not a few individual contributions on particular aspects and doctrines of the Christian faith, contributions of considerable importance on the doctrine of eternal life, on the death of Jesus, on His Resurrection, and on Christology; but for the most part, as it happens, these have been the fruit, not of a dogmatic specialism, but of an unbroken concern to tackle the fundamental theological problem of the time, namely, that of understanding religion against the background of modern life and in the light of modern knowledge. It is not accidental that perhaps the most common theological title during the period has been one which has set in relation to each other the Christian faith and the modern world.

Apologetic in Character

This means of course that theological thinking in Scotland has been predominantly apologetic in character, and this is true even of the treatment of specifically dogmatic themes. Thus, while in his monumental work on *The Person of Jesus Christ*, H. R. Mackintosh not only made a clear-cut division between what he called the Immediate Utterances of Faith and what he called The Transcendent Implicates of Faith, but, writing in 1912, was also well aware that 'to abstain from all efforts to reach a constructive synthesis of the data which faith apprehends would, as is known, have been in harmony with well-marked and ably-championed tendencies of our time'¹, and while, further, few were more ready than Mackintosh to allow that 'we are much more sure of our facts than of our theories'², yet he found it impossible as an evangelical theologian to refrain from the work of synthesis because it did 'not seem possible to vindicate the absoluteness of Christ as an intelligent convic-

* By kind permission of the Study Department of the World Council of Churches.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

² *Ibid.*, p. 428n.

tion except by passing definitely into the domain of reasoned theory'. 'The revelation and self-sacrifice of God in Christ,' he says¹, 'cannot really be presented to the mind without raising problems of an essentially speculative character. Hence there will always be metaphysic in theology, but it is the implicit metaphysic of faith, moving ever within the sphere of conscience.' Such a statement of course does not deny any and every distinction between dogmatics and apologetics, nor indeed would it be wise to deprive oneself of a useful division in one's subject; but Mackintosh's outlook on this matter—and it seems characteristic of twentieth century Scottish theology—does suggest that the distinction is at most one of degree. If the modern world with its criticisms and indifference falls into the background when the dogmatic domain is entered, it is yet implicitly present, in the mind of the theologian himself, as he wrestles with obscurities in his subject: and the whole enterprise, dogmatic and apologetic alike, is sustained by a thoroughly evangelical motive. Scottish theology has certainly declined to stop short of speculation, but it has at the same time and in large measure eschewed speculation which is empty, abstract and academic. On the other side, it must be supposed, although admittedly salvation is not by argument, it is only by an artifice that apologetic thought can be confined to the negative task of nullifying objection and restrained from passing over to the positive presentation of the Christian Gospel. At any rate, as a matter of fact, the apologetic work of the twentieth century in Scotland has been at least as much concerned to affirm what it has taken to be truth as to deny what it has regarded as error. The reason for, and the justification of, this merging of apologetics and dogmatics may well be found in the realization that in the modern period, even in traditionally Christian countries, Christianity has found itself confronted by rival outlooks, and that in consequence the opposition to it must be understood as no longer concerned so much with special doctrines but as extending, as one distinguished writer and teacher put it², 'to the whole manner of conceiving of the world and of man's place in it'; but the method of meeting this new situation presupposes at least the conviction that the Christian faith can hold its own with its contemporary rivals, is rationally coherent, and even lends itself, in some measure, to what the same writer called 'a rational vindication'.³

Science and the Christian Faith

One topic which has persistently engaged the theological attention during the period has been that of science and its relation to Christian faith. The rapid rise of natural science with its transformation of the natural scene past, present and future, and in particular with the rich potentialities of its evolutionary hypothesis, together with its remarkably successful mastery of physical forces and its consequent alteration of the conditions of life, set a considerable problem to religious thought. To many people of simple faith, as is well known, science appeared as the enemy of all religion, while the thinker, on the other hand, confident

¹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

² James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (10th edition, 1893), p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

that reality could not contradict itself, was often tempted to try to discover in it a new ally and friend, as when James Orr, somewhat unconvincingly perhaps, found support in science for the Christian doctrine of man as the climax and end of creation, in that no evolutionist 'supposes that evolution is ever to reach a higher being than man; that whatever future development there is to be will not be development beyond humanity, but development within humanity.'¹

The confidence that reality is self-consistent remains an inalienable conviction of religious thought but reaches a deeper level in D. S. Cairns when he goes beyond the particular dogmas of a changing science and distinguishes between science as such and the world-view of naturalism which does not follow from, but erects itself upon, science. The omission of God from the scientific domain is simply a methodological device, 'but Naturalism takes this methodological omission and transforms it into denial'.² Thus science ceases to be friend or foe to religion and is neutralized; and yet this neutrality, in turn, proves no more than a half-way house. In a recent brief but important essay on *Natural Science and the Spiritual Life* (1951) Principal John Baillie carries the discussion deeper still when he considers science in its character, not as certain particular conclusions, not as the body of scientific knowledge nor as its method, but as 'a certain general state of mind in the modern world'³, and accordingly conceives science and faith to 'represent not so much the outlooks of two different kinds of men as two elements that are together present, though in very varying degrees, in the minds of most of us'.⁴ Dr. Baillie certainly agrees with Cairns that the scientific omission of God is only methodological, but in regarding science and faith, not as two abstractions set apart from human life, but as two elements in a single mind, he rules out the theory of neutrality as a final solution. Science is neutral, but only in the sense that it may be either an enemy or an ally to faith, although Principal Baillie believes that if it becomes an enemy to faith it is at odds with both its historical origin and its future development. It is then at odds with its historical origin because so long as the pagan idea held sway that the world emanated from God science was bound to work as best it could by means of deduction and it was the realization of the implications of the Christian doctrine of creation which wakened men's minds to the contingency of the world and set them working on experimental and inductive lines. Indeed not only is modern science an achievement of Christianity, but by virtue of the discipline of iron law and hard fact it is an indispensable element in the mature Christian life. On the other hand, as the enemy of faith science imperils its own future development which depends on 'the Christian virtues of humility, self-effacement, tolerance, impartiality, and a community of thought that transcends all distinctions of class or race or nation',⁵ and no less in the long run on the conviction that natural process serves some overruling end. Here, it is clear, religious thinking impinges upon the potentialities of our mid-century modern world and raises fundamental issues of crucial importance to Christian and non-Christian alike.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 133f.

² *The Riddle of the World* (1937), p. 48.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The Christian Faith and the Modern World

Indeed, during the period under review, Scottish religious thinking has been persistently concerned to understand this modern world to which science is one, but only one, contributing factor, and in particular to understand the place of Christian faith within it. The inescapable fact of the twentieth century situation has been a prolonged moral and spiritual decline accompanied by a series of crises and catastrophes; and it is not surprising therefore that one important strand of contemporary thought has understood the modern world under the category of crisis and judgement. Scottish theology, on the other hand, has found its ruling concept, not in the idea of judgement alone, but in crisis and grace together, yielding and implying a more comprehensive category of what may be called evangelical preparation, a category in which at times, it must be admitted, the element of judgement has received less emphasis than the other. Thus D. S. Cairns refers to the confusion of ultimate faiths which the twentieth century inherited from the nineteenth and raises the question whether the right road is onward or 'back to the old track'. He himself had no doubt on the matter. 'I believe,' he says¹, 'that a careful study of the conditions which have produced the current unsettlement of belief rather compels the conclusion that this great and apparently sinister movement of thought was inevitable, and that its necessity was not wholly or even mainly due to human weakness or sin, but that it lay in the very nature of the case'. Later in his argument he refers to three principal 'intellectual solvents', the scientific, the philosophical and the critical, and so far as the first of these is concerned, for example, he holds that the ages in which the traditional tenets of Christian faith were formulated were largely ignorant of the idea of natural law and of the uniformity of nature, and cannot therefore bind the Christian consciousness of a later, and, in certain respects, more enlightened, age. His conclusion on this point is quite clear and assured. 'No one who believes in God,' he says,² 'can doubt that it was His Hand which opened this new volume of His wisdom, and set His children the arduous task of reading the new knowledge into the old, and the old into the new'. And this conclusion is characteristic of his treatment of the whole topic, as is the title of one of his chapters, *The Modern Praeparatio Evangelica*.

Perhaps in this judgement, while rightly emphasizing the element of God's goodness, Cairns has under-stressed that of His severity. Perhaps, as we saw in an earlier connection, he has abstracted science and the other intellectual solvents too much from the human spirit whose activities they are, and perhaps, as a result, he has under-emphasized man's sin as a factor contributing to the human predicament. But it must be remembered that Cairns was here writing before the first World War. That too, when it came, was part of our education and preparation, and it served to direct attention to moral conditions and to emphasize the element of judgement in the discipline of life and history. In a later work, *The Reasonableness of the Christian Faith*, published in 1918, Cairns gave greater weight to the idea of sin as a necessary element in any Christian attempt to understand the modern movement

¹ *Christianity in the Modern World* (2nd edition, 1907), p. xiv.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

of history, although he tended to identify it most clearly in this connection in the area and condition of international relations.

This understanding of the confusions of modern life and the modern world in terms of an evangelical preparation was shared by a friend of Cairns, John Oman, who, though a Scotsman, born in the island county of Orkney, spent most of his adult life in England as a servant of the Presbyterian Church there. While, however, Oman approached his contemporary scene with the idea of preparation rather than that of judgement alone, and while, like Cairns, he raised the question whether the right path lay backwards or forwards and insistently proclaimed the latter alternative, he did not conceive the problem in the almost exclusively intellectual terms favoured by his contemporary. Life is more than knowledge, and its discipline serves more than a merely intellectual purpose, although it is of course a purpose which has an intellectual side. 'The spiritual problem cannot be solved by evading the intellectual. Obscurantism is already unbelief. . . . What is true for faith may be much greater, but it cannot be in contradiction to what is true for thought. Yet our experience is always more than we can explain and our vision deeper than our understanding, and every right guidance in the end depends on what we see.'¹ The fundamental character of present-day life is that 'All authority has been questioned, and moral as well as intellectual confusion has ensued.'² External authority has been undermined and the belief has grown up 'that only what we see to be true is truth for us and only what we judge to be right is righteous'. 'This,' he adds,³ 'is the principle of freedom, and the chaos of our time would seem to be its outcome. But is the cause freedom itself or failure to rise to its responsibility? This is our supreme question.' In such a situation the temptation to move backwards is not unintelligible, but then 'blind reverence for the past is made a matter of faith, though the chief lesson of the past is that the face of faith is always forward'.⁴ 'There is no breadth of judgement without help from the past, but there is no using the past to good purpose without independent judgement on it of our own conscience of truth and right.'⁵ The underlying problem then is the problem of faith and freedom, of vision and authority, of understanding grace in a way compatible with the mature nature of a moral personality; and its solution is not an attainment of the past but an aspiration of the future.

As Oman sees it and as he says again and again, the age of the infallibilities has gone and gone for good. There is no going back to it, the age of an infallible Church and the age of an infallible Book. He emphasizes that Christ Himself wrote nothing and so deliberately deprived us of a certain kind of security. 'The end of such a security of literal infallibility would have been to set up a merely external authority, to which men would have conformed their words but not their thoughts, their deeds but not their hearts.'⁶ But an external authority amid the confusions of the present time would be a sad

¹ *Vision and Authority* (2nd edition, 1928), p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ *Honest Religion* (1941), p. 9.

⁴ *Grace and Personality* (1917), p. 10.

⁵ *Honest Religion*, pp. 13f.

⁶ *Vision and Authority*, p. 127.

anachronism and its setting up a turning back of the clock. Historically men have sought security in various kinds of finality, such as fixed organizations, fixed ideals and fixed theologies; and yet these are 'just what life is appointed to disturb'. The way is forward, in faith and hope and love; but to say that is only to make a beginning and Oman never claimed to have done more. He was much more clearly and acutely aware of the magnitude of the task than that of his own contribution. The problem was a problem of life and history as well as thought, a practical problem as well as an intellectual one.

In Relation to Contemporary Radical Protestantism

The question arises, however, from the point of view of the radical Protestantism of today, whether even this more comprehensive concept of a *praeparatio evangelica* as a practical and not merely as an intellectual phenomenon is adequate to the Christian understanding of the modern world. Radical Protestantism would tend to answer this question in the negative, to set aside the concept of a *praeparatio evangelica* and to replace it by the category of judgement and crisis. But it will be recalled that we have already insisted that the idea of an evangelical preparation includes that of judgement and that the latter is capable of more or less emphasis. That being so, the alternative to Oman's outlook is not necessarily the category of crisis as a completely different concept, but may be instead an idea of the *praeparatio evangelica* which gives even greater stress to the element of judgement than Oman gave. It can scarcely be questioned that a vital factor in the modern situation, which cannot be neglected or ignored with impunity, is the spiritual pride and pretension, that is, the sin of modern man, the spiritual pride and pretension which largely stem from the vastly increased mastery over his physical environment which man has in the last century or two achieved, and which issue in the conviction that man is the supreme measure of life and destiny, 'the master of his fate, the captain of his soul'. It is this element in the modern scene upon which radical Protestantism has seized and which lends to it whatever justification it may have.

This insight has not been lacking from more recent Scottish theology, but it is especially noteworthy that it is given a prominent place in the work of an earlier theologian who was a Scotsman but who, both by religious denomination and by the chosen place of his life and work, stands somewhat aside from the movement of Scottish religious thought and belongs almost as much to England, P. T. Forsyth. In his eyes the fact of sin, 'world sin, sin in dominion, sin solidary if not hereditary, yea, sin which integrates us into a Satanic Kingdom',¹ is the predominant factor in every human situation and in ours; and accordingly history must be viewed 'under the category of judgement . . . and not under that of progress. Eschatology goes much deeper than evolution'.² It is not difficult to see why of recent years a revival of interest should have taken place in Forsyth's theology, and why it should have been hailed as in some degree an important anticipation of Dr. Barth's. Yet it is not clear

¹ *The Justification of God* (1916), p. 25.

² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

that Forsyth would have sided completely with radical Protestantism, nor whether, chronology apart, his thought is most adequately understood as a radical alternative to Oman's or as a radical development of it. To stress sin, as Forsyth does, as the essential human factor is not to rule out the idea of a *praeparatio evangelica*, for God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him and human sin to redound to His own glory.

What does seem, however, to be decisive in favour of Forsyth's classification as representing a radical development of a position like Oman's is the emphasis which he lays upon morality. This emphasis can scarcely itself be over-emphasized. 'In Christ', he says¹, 'God is not preached but present. . . . He does more than justify faith, He creates it . . . we believe because He makes us believe—with a moral compulsion'. Christ is 'the Redeemer, The Redeemer of conscience, the Holy Redeemer. Who thus masters conscience is King of men. He masters man's inner master'.² And he warns us against putting the old and the new humanity 'out of all organic connection whatever'.³ Forsyth complained that current religion was anthropocentric, concerned with 'man and his weal' instead of 'God and His glory'; and yet he could speak of the 'precious place' and 'great rights' of this kind of religion as 'the first stage of sainthood' for 'whereas we begin with "God for us" by His grace, we end with "We for God" by our faith'.⁴ Even more important in the present connection, he could speak of 'the great function of Christian history' as 'the moralization of love'.⁵ Judgement there is in life, but it is the judgement of the Cross. 'The last judgement took place in principle in that Cross' and 'we are living in the midst of it' and 'all history is working it into detail'.⁶ In the Bible 'a salvation without judgement is not thought of, nor a judgement without salvation' 'For the Bible as a whole, history, rising to the Cross and spreading from it, is viewed under this category of saving judgement and not that of civilized progress'.⁷

It seems permissible therefore, and indeed necessary, to take Forsyth's theology as contributing along with those of Cairns and Oman to an adequate conception of a *praeparatio evangelica*; and if this is so it almost compels the judgement that a striking characteristic of Scottish theology has been one which combines live movement with massive consistency. This verdict is in fact borne out by an examination of the theological understanding of the Christian faith from which the theological understanding of the modern world has issued and to which attention must now be turned.

Middle Course

During the period Scottish theology has been keenly aware of movements of thought in other parts of the world, particularly on the continent of Europe, but on the whole, although it has learned much indeed from these, it has steered a middle course of its own which is symbolized by the fact that it stands on one side of Ritschlianism at the beginning of the period and on the other side of Barthianism at its end. It has found both movements stimulating and provocative but has been

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

constrained to commit itself to neither. James Orr, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, was sensitive to the appeal of Ritschlianism, 'that, addressing itself to an age profoundly distrustful of reason in its metaphysical flights, enamoured of the methods of the positive sciences, yet craving a ground of religious certainty which neither philosophy nor science can give, it mirrors back to that age with unerring fidelity its own dissatisfactions and desires'.¹ Yet in the end Orr comes to a critical conclusion which represents evangelical faith as wiser than Ritschlianism in that it 'does not base its faith on theoretic reason; but neither will it place reason under the ban, or refuse what friendly aid reason can give it. It will welcome light from all quarters. It will not think a doctrine condemned because, besides being Christian, it can likewise be shown to be rational'.² Scottish theology was certainly greatly stimulated by Ritschl's thought without being captivated by it, and its fundamental objection seems to have been that in Ritschl's hands the important principle of value-judgement became a pruning-knife which cut off some of the fruits, as well as some of the roots, of Christian faith. It represented a curious combination of moralism with anti-rationalism in theology which attracted while it repelled the Scottish theological mind.

In the later part of the period a similar reaction is to be found to the theology of Dr. Barth and of radical Protestantism in general. Again Scottish theology has been keenly aware of this movement and very considerably indebted to it, and yet on the whole it has been unconvinced by its combination of anti-rationalism and anti-moralism. Thus, while he is in complete agreement with the contemporary emphasis upon God's revelation of Himself, Dr. John Baillie finds himself bound to reject the idea that it is by an act of omnipotence that God creates faith in the human heart. 'There is miracle enough,' he says,³ 'in what God does for us in Christ, but it is not a miracle of this kind. It is, in fact, not a miracle of sheer omnipotence, but a *miracle of grace*'. And, as a corollary to this, he insists that 'total wickedness is a self-destroying conception'.⁴

There have of course been changes of emphasis. It is sufficient to contrast Dr. Baillie's earlier definition of religion as 'a moral trust in reality' and his later account of it as the characteristic disturbance set up in the human soul by its confrontation with the transcendent holiness of God.⁵ But in spite of these and in spite of individual divergences of varying importance, certain broad features are undoubtedly discernible.

First of all, it is affirmed by one thinker after another that there is a close, intimate and indissoluble connection between morality and religion. In his later work Dr. Baillie was no longer content to define religion as a moral trust in reality, but he still regarded any 'dissociation of the ultimate springs of our moral consciousness from all that is religious . . . to be as fatal to a true understanding of the essence of morality as of the essence of religion'⁶; while H. R. Mackintosh declares that 'all higher

¹ *The Ritschlian Theology and the Evangelical Faith*, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 242f.

³ *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵ Cf. *The Interpretation of Religion*, p. 318 and *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 3.

⁶ *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 242.

knowledge of God comes through moral and religious experience', that 'revelation in quality is moral' and that 'it attests itself freely to conscience and feeling'.¹ The witness on this point is impressive in its unanimity; but it must be emphasized that in giving so central a place to the moral consciousness and its insights Scottish theology has not understood morality in terms of the natural law but as an awareness of an infinite claim whose content may be variously apprehended but whose clamour cannot be escaped. From this point of view, the idea of natural law would seem to represent an undue simplification and a misleading misrepresentation of the moral consciousness. Our awareness of duty is akin, not to the intuition of mathematical propositions for example, but to our knowledge of God. Indeed the claim of morality and the claim of God upon a man's life are in the last resort one claim.

Similarly, Scottish theology has been quite clear that there is a kinship between faith and reason, but it has been far from regarding religious conviction as if it were the conclusion of an argument. Faith is rather a moral and rational response to the reality of God as displayed in revelation. It is revelation and not reason that produces faith, but reason enters into the nature of faith and faith is neither an irrational nor a non-rational activity of the human spirit. The general view seems to be that reason helps to clarify the convictions of faith, not from without but from within, and, inside the area of faith, has its own legitimate interests; but it is always reason enlightened by revelation and unaided reason appears in this context as an unreal abstraction. In this connection it is interesting to recall that James Orr, who allowed that the cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments had a cumulative effect, hastened to add that corresponding to each of these there was 'a direct fact of consciousness which turned the logical argument into a real one—which translated, if I may so speak, the abstract proof into a living experience'.²

A third predominant feature of Scottish theology has been its evangelical concern for the integrity of the Gospel. If the mark of liberalism is not only as W. P. Paterson suggested, to magnify the importance of the general revelation to reason and conscience, but also to sit loosely to the whole idea of special revelation, then liberalism has in the period made little impression upon Scottish religious thinking, and consequently there is on the whole no movement to be discerned from liberalism to a more evangelical faith. What may be discerned, however, is something rather different, namely, a tendency in the early part of the period to contract the interpretation of the revelation of God in Christ within the scale of our ordinary moral understanding, and, so, not to deny, but to *minimize*, its effect upon the moral outlook of ordinary men, and to represent this effect as little more than the divine vindication of our morality. Further, since that is so, what may also be discerned is a movement of religious thought from this position to one which more adequately recognizes the element of disturbance, judgement and radical re-orientation present in this effect; and this movement corresponds closely to the transition already noted from an idea of the *praeparatio evangelica* which does not emphasize divine

¹ *The Christian Apprehension of God*, p. 70 and p. 90.

² *The Christian View of God and the World*, p. 106.

judgement to an idea of it which does lay considerable stress upon this element.

Writing in 1932, W. P. Paterson said of Scottish theology that it 'has taken up the mediating position which was to be expected from its spiritual and intellectual history. It is modernist in that it makes use of the scriptural data as they are expounded by Biblical Theology on the basis of the results of Biblical Criticism, and also in that, instead of feeling itself committed to polemics against the scientific view of the universe and man, it is prepared to profit by the new knowledge so far as it is relevant to the dogmatic task. It is positive in that it accepts it as a theological axiom that God was revealed in Christ for the salvation of mankind, and confidently values the Bible as the authoritative record and interpretation of the gospel of divine grace'.¹ The verdict remains substantially true. In its attempt to understand both the modern world and its own faith Scottish theology has steered a middle course between liberalism on the one hand and radical Protestantism on the other. Against the former it has displayed a constant concern for the integrity of the Gospel and the saving revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ His Son; while over against the latter it has on the whole insisted that the revelation is one of grace and man's response in faith to this Christian salvation is a moral rational response, but in doing so it has also implied that such ideas as those of 'natural law', 'unaided reason' and even 'natural theology' are inadequate representations of reason and morality and indeed unreal abstractions. As Dr. John Baillie has said, 'there is in man no *nature* apart from *revelation*'.²



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¹ *The Rule of Faith*, p. 408.

² *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 41.