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The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God. An Irish Scholar, The Church and an Irish Church. A Review Article.*

R. Buick Knox.

Theological students of my generation were brought up upon Bethune-Baker's Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine. Its basic premise is that the early Christians had experience of the presence of the living Christ and of life in the company of believers and this experience compelled them to ask the basic questions, Who is Jesus Christ? and Who is the God whom he reveals? To help them answer these questions they drew upon the memoirs of Christ's life which had been preserved in the Four Gospels and inevitably they related these memoirs to the world of Hebrew and Greek thought which was the mould which shaped their thinking. Out of this world of life and thought there gradually emerged the credal formulas which became ever more precise and refined as Christian leaders sought to refute the various heretical views which threatened to channel the faith into gnostic, mystical and philosophical by-paths or dead ends. Thus, the Church reached the formulas approved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. These formulas brought together insights into the being and character of God, the person and work of Christ and the nature of the Christian life.

Bethune-Baker did not leave the impression that a final doctrinal position had been reached or that the doctrine of the Trinity was a final explanation of the being of God and the person of Christ, however valuable it was as a reliable aid to worship and a sound signpost to understanding in the present state of knowledge. In this, he reflected the thought of many of the German scholars to whom we were introduced.

When I had to start preparing lectures on Christian Doctrine, the Bethune-Baker star had waned before the rising star of J. N. D. Kelly, just as the continental stars had had to compete with the ascendant Barth.

Kelly has been an excellent scholar with a fine grasp of history, patristic literature and theology. In his Early Christian Creeds and Early Christian Doctrines his

basic premise is that the definitions reached at Chalcedon were already implicit in the New Testament which itself was the reliable deposit of the faith and life of the early Church. The Chalcedonian position is the expression of the authoritative revelation already given to the Church in and through Jesus Christ from the earliest days of the Church's life. Kelly is too much of an Anglican Oxonian to be counted as a Barthian but he has the parallel stance of seeing in the doctrinal tradition of the Church the revelation of who God really is and of what he has done in the Incarnation for our salvation.

Kelly has held the stage for the last twenty years and he has stabilised much theological thought in the traditional scriptural, incarnational and patristic mould. Other scholars have cultivated the same ground over recent years but the next major stage in the story is the publication of the late Richard Hanson's magnum opus bearing the title of this article and in which he has dealt with the Arian Controversy, 318-381. I had a long friendship with Richard Hanson stretching from student days through the time when I was a minister in the Banbridge Presbytery and he was the curate in the same parish; this was maintained through his years as professor, bishop and professor. He was a stimulating friend and we had many conversations during his years of research in preparing this vast work which he was able to see completed before his death. He was an acid commentator on what he saw as the shallowness of much contemporary theology. He was a strong believer in the importance of theology as a discipline with its own terms of reference, especially the regulative place of Scripture in the formation of Christian doctrine. He had an amazing knowledge of patristic literature, as this book reveals.

In the early chapters, Hanson seems to have returned to be very close to the position of Bethune-Baker; the word "search" in the title seems to indicate a quest for an explanation of the experience people have had when within the circle of Jesus and his followers. He starts from the teaching of Origen who, for all his biblical scholarship, had a graded God; the Son could not be on a level with God though he was in a moral accord with his purpose. this

influenced Arius, for whom any incarnation, revelation and redemption had to be a lowering, a work done by a being who, though divine, was less than fully divine; "God does not condescend to human contacts nor to human flesh", but the Son has mediatorial functions and has aims in accord with the purpose of God.

The New Testament is not without texts which can be used in this sense: "God made Jesus both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Arians tended to think of Jesus as a mere man who was open to suffering and therefore could not be of the essence of God who is impassible, that is, immune from suffering. When Arians were faced with claims for the divinity of Jesus they conceded at most that he was a lesser God subordinate to the High God.

The Emperor Constantine regarded the issue as "a futile irrelevance" and urged reconciliation. Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, did not see it as an irrelevance. He held that Jesus Christ had an inherent and not an adoptive Sonship. The Council of Nicea was summoned to resolve the issue. Meeting in 325 A.D., it produced a statement of the Faith in which Arius' teaching was condemned. Eusebius of Caesarea tried to take the credit for the outcome. He held that the Council adopted the creed of his church at Caesarea. This view had often been challenged but Kelly tended to rehabilitate it. Hanson, however, notes what he calls "startling innovations" in the Nicene formula, particularly the use of the word homoousios to signify that Christ was of "the same essence" as the Father. Athanasius, a presbyter of Alexandria, became the champion of this position. Following the Gospel of John, he held that God had revealed himself in Christ in whom people had seen all they needed to see to be in the presence of God; whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father. Athanasius so emphasised the completeness of the presence of God in Christ that Hanson is led to conclude that he was in danger of undermining the humanity and freewill of Christ. Hanson also thinks that Athanasius'

disciple, Hilary of Poitiers, went even further and came to a view which meant that "at the very point where Christ's solidarity with humankind is most crucial - in his suffering - he was not really human!"

Nevertheless, Athanasius stood firm for the central claim that in Christ God himself had achieved our redemption and provided the medicine of immortality for corruptible and sinful human beings.

The foundations laid at Nicea were built upon by others, notably the three Cappadocians. Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia was, according to Hanson, a serious theologian who clarified the thought of the Church on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. There was a note of bitterness in some of his actions; he had been forced to surrender part of his bishopric to another bishop and Hanson says "it is as difficult to persuade a bishop to surrender part of his see as it is to persuade a dog to part with a bone"! Yet, he was a man of vast and useful activity, founding schools and hospitals and defining canon law; Hanson calls him "the bright start of the Eastern Church." Hear the splendid opening words of his commentary on Genesis:

God is blessed nature, unstinting goodness, the object of love for all who share reason, the deeply-desired beauty, the origin of all existing things, the fountain of life, intellectual light, unapproachable wisdom - he it is who in the beginning made heaven and earth.

Gregory of Nyssa had a mind of great subtlety and power and he illumined many of the darker corners of the Church's doctrine. Hanson holds that he also had "an extraordinary incapacity to face crises when they occurred in his career, as they occur in all careers." However, he took important steps towards a doctrine of the persons of the Trinity, separate but inseparable. The destiny of redeemed souls is to spend eternity exploring the inexhaustible infinity of God which could only be fathomed in part in this life.

Gregory of Nazianzus was the third Cappadocian and he was called to be the bishop of Constantinople. It fell to him to preside at the Council which was summoned to meet in

Constantinople in 381 A.D. to deal with issues which had arisen since Nicea. Various attempts had been made to draw up fresh statements of the faith and Hanson says they had "as much delicacy and intellectual refinement as an auctioneer's catalogue" but they did pave the way for the generally acceptable creed drawn up at Constantinople. Gregory did not think highly of the calibre of the assembled bishops. He likened them to a "rabble of adolescents, people to whom nobody who was mature either in the fear of God or in years would pay any attention". Yet, that Council produced the Creed which is now known as the Nicene Creed and is still the common Creed of Churches in the East and the West. Hanson holds that for all the faults of the Council it brought together a sound scriptural understanding of redemption, of the suffering of God in Christ and of the inherited tradition and church practice. It worked out a form of one of the most crucial doctrines of the Bible, the doctrine of God.

Hanson concludes that the story of this period was not a story of embattled and confident orthodoxy maintaining a long and finally successful struggle against heresy. Orthodoxy was reached, not maintained. In the process, it had even learned from the Arians that "in some sense God himself had suffered in the course of saving mankind." The process was a process of trial and error but it was not the outcome of free speculation. It was a grasping of the intention and drift of the whole Scripture story and out of it came "the full genius and drive of the Christian faith." Athanasius had discerned at an early stage that the Incarnation was "an indispensable necessity if the goodness and healing activity of God, and not just his justice and truth, were to be manifested and communicated to men and women and thus remedy the absurd situation whereby human beings created for a good purpose by God wholly miss that purpose and fall into nothingness and decay." The story, says Hanson, led to a satisfactory answer to the great question which had fired the search for the Christian doctrine of God. The development had led to discovery of the truth which was already there in the person and work of Christ. Little wonder, then, that from then till now the definitions of Constantinople in 381 A.D. and of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. have proved to be the lasting

basis of the thought and worship of the vast proportion of Christendom. They have been embodied in the confessional statements of many branches of the Church. They are central to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was formed in 1840 it attached itself firmly to the Westminster Confession and thereby to the doctrines set forth in the Nicene Creed. It had no doubts or queries about the scriptural basis for this orthodox position.

For the first half of the Assembly's life that position was firmly maintained. However, the impact of fresh biblical and theological studies arising from textual researches and from scientific discoveries and theories could not be permanently resisted. The loudest voices were, of course, those defending the unwavering adherence to the old paths and pouring scorn on the "higher critics". Nevertheless, at the time of the celebration of the Assembly's jubilee, there were signs of unease. In a sermon preached in Gortnessy in 1889 on the eve of the jubilee, Professor T. H. Witherow of Magee College, Londonderry, said there was a spirit of restlessness abroad in the community, a spirit which challenged the creeds and confessions and the authority of the Bible. He acknowledged that it was a time of transition from the formality and orthodoxy of the past fifty years into a time of doubt and unbelief and there would be great changes - political, social and religious - but these could not be averted; "happen what may, Presbyterians must make the best of their circumstances and study to use them for their own and the general good." Witherow called the Church to be of good courage and "the Lord do that which seemeth to him good." Here was the recognition that, firm as are the foundations and however great the dislike of changes to what is built thereon, changes are part of life and have to be encountered and taken into account. At the jubilee celebrations addresses were given on various aspects of the life of the church during the fifty years since the formation of the General Assembly. Among the speakers was the eloquent Robert Lynd, minister of May Street Church; he defended the doctrinal position of the Church and maintained that the Calvinist teaching in the Westminster

Confession was not, as some held, unprogressive and prohibitory of freedom of thought or fervent spiritual feeling. On the other hand, he criticised those who insisted on using what he called "the stereotyped phraseology of a bygone century as if it were the only expression of a true faith"; he also criticised those who sneered at biblical or scientific criticism as if it were laying hands upon the Ark of God.

This aroused some criticism, mainly on the ground that other expressions of the faith, however right and valuable, did not devalue the truth as set forth in the traditional form, and also on the ground that those who took part in criticism had not produced appropriate substitutes.

In the same year, at the opening Session of the English Presbyterian College in London, John Skinner gave his inaugural lecture on The Critical reconstruction of Old Testament History and he spoke of the sources used in the compilation of the first five books of the Old Testament which bore the name of Moses. Skinner was to become one of the most influential biblical teachers noted for the depth of his scholarship and of his faith. Compare his lecture with that delivered the same year in the College in Belfast by Professor Matthew Leitch. He declared the views of scholars such as Skinner to be "as unscientific, as untrue to the facts of history and the facts of human nature as any of the hundred other theories now exploded and forgotten, which originated in the ponderous learning, the ill-balanced judgment and the aggressive infidelity of continental scholars."

Even admitting that there have been scores of discarded theories and that scholars have been ponderous, ill-balanced and aggressive, we cannot live as if the theories had not been propounded and as if the scholars had never written. At the opening of the 1893 Session of the College in Belfast Professor Todd Martin, with characteristic clarity, said "I see no objection to the proposal to restate the dogmas of the Creed, but the difficulty is a practical one - the difficulty of finding a body of men who will give a better statement of the truth

than the one we have." He claimed that the truth set forth in the Creed and further expounded in the Westminster Confession was an abiding truth and still provided the teaching which his generation needed to hear; it was truth which answered the quest of the intelligent person of his day. On the other hand, he held that that intelligent person needed to recognise that the revelation of God in his Word also judged the thought of human thinkers. He said that Positivism, Hegelianism and Evolutionism each in their own way professed to exhibit the universal law of change throughout the totality of known or knowable being, but amid the flux, the way of faith still led on to "the idea of a God-thought, God-created, God-governed world." On another occasion, Todd Martin admitted that the Church had always gained some new light even from the heresies which it had rightly rejected, but the Creed which had come out of the early controversies had proved to be a sound guide on the way to faith. Here, he anticipated the findings of Hanson.

Across the centuries since the time of Christ people have wrestled with the meaning and challenge of his teaching and have sought to know who he is and what he demands. They have found that his influence shapes their language, their ways of thought and life and their ways of worship. This has gone on in the Middle East, in Europe and in North Africa since the time of St Paul and then in Celtic and other lands. It goes on in many other parts of the world, such as India and southern Africa where the Gospel has been planted in more recent centuries.

The most abiding form of Christian teaching which has survived transplanting into all parts of the world has proved to be that provided by the thinkers who built upon the Greek of the New Testament and used the Greek language to express what they believed. This reached its climax in the Creeds with which Hanson has dealt in his mammoth volume. Some have claimed that all the arguments around the formation of the Creeds have distorted the plain message of the Christ and have proved the bankruptcy of attempts to express the Gospel in terms of Greek philosophy. Barth is reputed to have said that for him the core of the Gospel was in the words

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"Jesus loves me! this I know

For the Bible tells me so,"

but this did not deter him from producing his vast array of volumes to explain what he meant by Jesus and the Bible.

Though there has been what Ernest Davey called "the changing vesture of the Faith", it can be held that the vesture provided by the Creeds still provides the raiment in which Christians recognize God in Christ and worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Indeed, this raiment has been the inspiration of some of the most sublime musical compositions and of the most enduring hymns.

All who read Hanson's work will be much better informed about the life of the early Church; they will learn many fascinating details such as the fact that Eunomius was a teacher of the system of Greek shorthand which had been devised by Prunicus, a fourth-century Pitman; they will also learn how the Creeds embody the teaching of the Bible and lead to the knowledge of God, the God who is, the God who speaks, the God who acts, God the holy and undivided Trinity.

R. Buick Knox.

* The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 313-381, by R. P. C. Hanson. T & T Clark, 1988. Pp. xxi + 931.