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# THOMAS CHALMERS (1780-1847) AND THE 1843 DISRUPTION: FROM THEOLOGICAL TO POLITICAL CLASH

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## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Chalmers is one of the leading figures of the 1843 Disruption which occurred in the Church of Scotland. He was strongly involved in the Ten Years' Conflict, and as the first Moderator of the Church of Scotland – Free, he presided over the first General Assembly in May 1843. He is mainly known as a symbol of the struggle for ecclesiastical freedom against State intrusion. However, in this article I will argue that, on the contrary, Chalmers was actively involved in advocating cooperation between State and Church, and that portraying him as a single-dimension 18th-century Evangelical is far too restrictive. After presenting a short biography, I will consider the complex processes behind the theological, political and social clash – dating from the Union of Parliament – which lay at the root of the 1843 Disruption. Following an examination of Chalmers' policy in the framework of the Disruption, I intend to show how he combined both his ideas of traditional Calvinism as an Evangelical and his ideas of rationalism as a pragmatic parson in urban Scotland, fighting for spiritual independence and against poverty.

Thomas Chalmers is quite difficult to define as he was a polymath and in that respect he remained faithful to the tradition of the Enlightenment. He is described in the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* as a 'preacher, theologian, Church leader and social reformer'.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, as an academic professor, he taught a wide range of subjects: Moral Philosophy, Theology, Mathematics, Natural Science, Chemistry and Political Economy. The eclectic churchman provoked strong reactions as he was both admired and dismissed. In his concept of a harmonious and religious community, the economist Thomas Malthus

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<sup>1</sup> A. C. Cheyne, 'Thomas Chalmers' in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 158-61.

regarded him as an ally: 'I consider you as my ablest and best ally'.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Thomas Chalmers, Thomas Carlyle paid tribute to the politician and churchman: 'with a Chalmers in every British parish much might be possible!';<sup>3</sup> whereas Karl Marx referred to him as the arch-parson: 'Parson Malthus and his pupil, the arch-parson Thomas Chalmers'.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Chalmers was born in 1780 in Anstruther in the Lowland county of Fife. Chalmers' father, John Chalmers, was a merchant in thread and dye works. He was also involved in local politics as he became a magistrate in Anstruther. His mother, Elizabeth Hall Chalmers, was mainly involved in helping the paupers of the parish, in addition to leading a busy family life. His parents' commitment in both political and social life undoubtedly spurred his future involvement in politics and social concern.

Thomas was the Chalmers' sixth child, and had a strict Calvinist education. He attended the parish school of Anstruther, and matriculated at the University of St Andrews at the age of eleven in 1791. During his stay at the University he studied a wide range of subjects such as the Humanities, Mathematics, Chemistry, Philosophy and Divinity. Chalmers graduated in late 1798, and became 'a lad o'pregnant pairs'.<sup>5</sup> He became the minister of Kilmarnock in 1802, and at the same time he was an assistant in the Mathematics Department at St Andrews University. He became conscious of the incredible power of the Kirk at the University and its close connection with politics. As a matter of fact, Thomas Chalmers had to struggle to attain his academic ambitions. In his youthful enthusiasm, he first regarded the Moderate ascendancy in the Kirk as a possible instrument of his career ambitions.

George Hill, Chairman of the Academic Board at St Andrews, was a Moderate in the Kirk, but his ideas jeopardized the independence of the Kirk from State control. One of the major positions of the Scottish Reformation was the spiritual independence of the Church of Scotland from the State. The ecclesiastical Moderate party within the Kirk was increasingly linked with the political Tory party (the Establishment), in

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<sup>2</sup> 'T. R. Malthus to T. Chalmers', 22 July 1822, Thomas Chalmers Papers, New College Library, Edinburgh in S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> W. Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers*, 4 volumes (Edinburgh: Constable, 1849-1852), vol. 4, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> K. Marx, *The Capital*, 3 volumes (New York: F. Engels, 1967), vol. 1, p. 617. Cited in Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> 'A lad o'pregnant pairs' was a term to define a candidate for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, who was under 21 years. Chalmers was only 19.

particular with the Tory Henry Dundas. Hill wished to avoid agitation, and in order to maintain a kind of consensus, he shared the Tory view of patronage, essentially benefiting the landed interests. Patronage was the system which allowed the local landowner to appoint the local parish minister whether or not the person appointed was acceptable to the local congregation. The patron of the parish imposed his candidate for the ministry, and parishioners were eventually compelled by decisions of the Court of Session to accept the applicants. However, the Moderate leadership was gradually challenged by another faction within the Kirk: the 'Popular Party' or the 'Evangelical Party'. This party was opposed to absolute patronage, which it regarded as undermining the spiritual independence of the Kirk. Patrons had political connections in Parliament, and Evangelicals saw that phenomenon as the ascendancy of political over ecclesiastical power.

As leader of the Evangelical Party in the 19th century, Chalmers initially placed emphasis on the possibility of a Church-and-State alliance. He believed in the 'establishment principle', i.e. that the State had an obligation to maintain and support the Church but had no right to legislate in any spiritual matters – these were the exclusive province of the Church. Chalmers was soon disappointed.

Since the time of the Reformation, parishioners had elected their ministers. Nonetheless, as the Moderates gained the ascendancy in the Church and collaborated with the government through the law courts in upholding the rights exercised by landowners to impose their chosen ministers on their local congregations, Chalmers and the Evangelical Party found the situation intolerable. Accordingly, led by Chalmers, one third of the Kirk seceded and founded the Church of 'Scotland – Free in 1843, i.e. free from patronage and State intervention. This became commonly known as the Free Church of Scotland, and the secession as the Disruption of the Church of Scotland.

#### THE ECCLESIASTICAL ALLIANCE CHALLENGED: A THEOLOGICAL CLASH

Whilst historians generally agree that the issue of patronage was a major factor in the 1843 secession, there were also theological reasons to explain the emerging differences, which endangered the alliance between Church and State and led to the final conflict.

The notion of a covenanted land, a people who recognise that their first loyalty is to God, is part of the cultural heritage of the Reformation. The

origins of the Church of Scotland's disruption date back to the early 18th century and correspond to the time of the 1707 Treaty of Union.

At the 1707 Treaty of Union, as Scotland lost political independence to the benefit of England, the Kirk became a kind of 'ghost Scottish parliament', where ministers, deacons, elders and academic representatives could debate contemporary issues. Within the new political context, two ecclesiastical/political/theological parties emerged in the Kirk: the Moderate and the Evangelical Parties. From then on, political and temporal issues increasingly permeated the ecclesiastical ones. It was, to be sure, an enriching amalgam. Nevertheless, it was also a source of conflict. There was an ecclesiastical clash due to theological conflicts, which would eventually lead to a Church-and-State divorce.

#### THOMAS CHALMERS AND THE MODERATE PARTY

The early 18th century was also the source of an intellectual revival – a great age where culture flowered: 'The eighteenth century is rightly hailed as the age when Scotland became one of the most important centres of intellectual culture in the western world.'<sup>6</sup> Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson<sup>7</sup> were symbols of the substantial cultural development which took place in Scotland in the 18th century. The Kirk actively participated in nation building within the new cultural context. As an illustration, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was first published in Edinburgh between 1768 and 1771, and most of the articles were written by Church of Scotland ministers – from the Moderate Party. Thomas Reid and William Robertson were significant figures in the Moderate Party which nourished the Enlightenment:

The advantages of common-sense Realism were judged to be considerable. It cohered with theism, since God is both the source of the common-sense principles, for he has implanted them in our nature.<sup>8</sup>

Scottish common-sense Realism was a golden mean between strict Calvinism and liberalism. Thomas Chalmers found himself in line with Moderate common-sense views, which he mostly shared until 1812.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 353.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), David Hume's *The Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767).

<sup>8</sup> P. Helm, 'Scottish Realism' in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p. 759-60.

During his studies, he joined the Theological Society where he was required to prepare discourses and to participate in debates. He always tried to link theology to Europe's political events and to Britain's economic and social context, at that time when war was raging between Britain and France.<sup>9</sup> Chalmers was strongly opposed to war, and defended freedom. He argued via the prism of Christian faith in a sermon he preached on 12 November 1796:

[The Christian] submits to the wanton exercise of extensive authority with a becoming patience and composure, and his love of order, harmony, and peace often prompts him to forgo the advantages which would result from resisting the encroachments of power.<sup>10</sup>

Delivering this type of sermon was, to Chalmers, an opportunity to challenge the university authorities. Actually, he realized that university and politics were closely linked. St Andrews University was dominated by the Tory party which was in favour of war. However, Chalmers was not a Democrat either, although he gave the impression that he belonged to the Whig Party. He offered a liberal Christian view in line with a faith nurtured by what he named later the 'spirit of the times':

Although the subject matter of theology is unalterably fixed ... is there not a constant necessity for accommodating both the vindication of this authority and the illustration of this subject matter to the ever-varying spirit of the times? ... In theology, as well as in all the other sciences there is indefinite room for novelties both of thought and of illustration.<sup>11</sup>

Until 1812, Thomas Chalmers found equilibrium as an enlightened minister between his strict Calvinist education and the changing world around him:

[The Scottish common-sense] also enabled busy preachers to maintain a largely non-theoretical stance in the pulpit, while at the same time

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<sup>9</sup> The Napoleonic wars.

<sup>10</sup> T. Chalmers, 'Blessed are the Poor in Spirit', unpublished student sermon, 12 November 1796, Thomas Chalmers Papers in Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> T. Chalmers, *Posthumous Works*, volume 9, xv, (Edinburgh: W. Hanna, 1847-1849) in J. Roxborough, *Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for Mission* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1999), p. 231.

vindicating certain metaphysical positions widely believed to be endorsed by Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, it was perfectly consistent with his double profession as a Kilmany minister and as an assistant of mathematics at St Andrews University. He was licensed minister of the Church of Scotland in July 1799. To Chalmers, this was not vocational: 'The choice of their profession [ministers] often depends on the most accidental circumstances, a whim of infancy, or the capricious destination of parents.'<sup>13</sup> Indeed, his father, John Chalmers, put pressure on him, and did his utmost to support his son's ecclesiastical career. The newly-licensed minister had another ambition as he wished to secure a university position. He viewed the ministry as 'the malignant touch of ordination'.<sup>14</sup>

As an assistant of mathematics at St Andrews University, he realized that not only were university and politics closely connected but also church and politics: university was a place of power – ecclesiastical and political power. A post of Moral Philosophy was vacant, but for political reasons, Chalmers did not obtain it. The Head of the Faculty, namely George Hill, was a Tory, and he would not let any Whig in. Indeed, Professor Hill – a Professor of Divinity and a St Andrews parish minister – was a key figure in Scottish church life, and succeeded William Robertson as a leader of the Kirk in 1785. Thomas Chalmers was very disappointed not to obtain the position. Moreover, as he was not working full-time in his parish owing to his assistantship in the university, he was verbally attacked for being a pluralist – he was combining a parish living and a university position – by both his congregation and the Kirk. In 1804, he was summoned before the Presbytery of Cupar for having neglected his parish. Chalmers strongly defended his position.

However, the Moderate principles which he had shared were no longer in line with his ambitions. Family bereavements, the failure of the publication of his first book – *Enquiry into the Extent and Stability of National Resources* (1808) – and mainly illness, all contributed to transforming Chalmers into an Evangelical. His spiritual conversion represented a turning point in his life, and brought about a significant change in his thinking.

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<sup>12</sup> P. Helm, 'Scottish Realism', p. 760.

<sup>13</sup> T. Chalmers, *Observations on a Passage in Mr Playfair's Letter to the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, relative to the Mathematical Pretensions of the Scottish Clergy* (Cupar, 1805), p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

While convalescing, he read the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician and philosopher in the Jansenist tradition, who favoured a spiritual life to the detriment of an exclusively intellectual one. Despite his new spiritual vision, he never gave up his Moderate political tenets. He simply emphasized the significance of doctrine, and he reasserted his faith in the Westminster Confession.

#### THOMAS CHALMERS AND THE EVANGELICAL/ORTHODOX/POPULAR PARTY

The Moderate and the Evangelical Parties were founded at the same time. To be more precise, there were tendencies which gradually took the form of parties. The Evangelical Party was more orthodox, more doctrine-centred and abided by the standards of the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, it reaffirmed the overarching authority of the Bible over the doctrine and the Confession.

In 1717, the Kirk was divided over the question of redemption. Indeed, Professor John Simson of Glasgow University questioned the extent of redemption,<sup>15</sup> introducing the excess use of natural reason. He was condemned for heresy. Given Moderate tenets, Thomas Boston found an answer to the controversy by means of an English Puritan work: *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The General Assembly condemned this as antinomian.

In 1726, Moderate theology was back to the scene of controversy with the question over the divinity of Christ in the form of Arianism, which was viewed as heresy. After these dates, a series of heresies arose in the Kirk, and permanently widened the gap between the Moderates and the Evangelicals. The former faction became increasingly rationalist and the latter group stood firm as a Bible-centred party. Everything undermining Christianity via the prism of reason rather than faith was regarded by the Evangelicals as unscriptural. One of the leaders of the Evangelical Party was John Witherspoon of Paisley. He strongly opposed the Moderates in his *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Did redemption concern all the people or just the elect? See J. R. McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 1998), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> The whole title is *Ecclesiastical Characteristics: or the Arcana of Church Policy being an humble attempt to open up the mystery of Moderation, wherein is shown a plain and easy way of attaining to the Character of a Moderate Man, as at present in Repute in the Church of Scotland* (1753).



There was a real theological division, and there was a wide range of tendencies within the Evangelical Party: from evangelical Calvinists such as Thomas Boston and Ebenezer Erskine to some more liberal ones such as James Oswald and William Hamilton. However, whatever their theological differences were, there was a sound piety amongst them. The Evangelical Party grew at the same time as an evangelical movement<sup>17</sup> emerged during the 18th century, and the two nurtured one another. The revivals and awakenings which happened in Scotland,<sup>18</sup> England<sup>19</sup> and America<sup>20</sup> gave an impetus to the Scottish Evangelical Party. The Cambuslang Revival (1740) was the beginning of a series of awakenings in Scotland. Revivals were scenes of spectacular conversions. Chalmers' conversion, however, had nothing to do with the spectacular type of conversion which took place in Cambuslang. He was not an 'enthusiast'.

During the profound solitude of his illness, he read William Wilberforce's *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*. This form of Evangelicalism was consistent with an active man open to politics and to intellectual life. To Chalmers, Wilberforce was a living example of the fulfilled Evangelical who was involved in the anti-slavery movement and who participated in politics as a Member of Parliament.

In the wake of his conversion, Chalmers started to communicate his conversion experience by means of preaching in various evangelical congregations throughout Scotland.<sup>21</sup> As a result, he was gradually recognised as a symbol of the evangelical movement in Scotland.

Young Evangelicals in charge of writing the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* invited Chalmers to write articles on Christianity and trigonometry. He was very successful and gave a new tone to 'Scottish Evangelicalism'. In that newly-arising evangelical opportunity, Chalmers could finally meet his ambitions. As his faith grew, he strove to apply it to the reality of the changing world.

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<sup>17</sup> Defining the characteristics of the Evangelical movement is rather difficult as there is an incredible variety of criteria. However, the following terms would generally be agreed: Christ-centrism, Biblicism, conversion, and activism in the sphere of social concern. See McIntosh, *Church and Theology*.

<sup>18</sup> William McCulloch (1691-1771).

<sup>19</sup> George Whitefield (1714-1770) and John Wesley (1703-1791).

<sup>20</sup> The New England Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758).

<sup>21</sup> He was invited by Robert McCulloch, Minister of the parish of Dairsie. Robert was the son of William who participated in the Cambuslang Revival.

In 1814, owing to his growing fame, he was called by the congregation of the Tron Parish Church in Glasgow to its ministry. This was in fact one of the poorest districts of the city. He reorganized the parish, divided it into 40 portions, and appointed elders and deacons to run each portion. He created a Sabbath school, and encouraged teachers to debate different methods of teaching, constantly improving the quality of studies. Despite the increasing number of poor children in the parish and the dramatic illiteracy, he undertook to educate the whole population of the parish efficiently through communal responsibilities and Christian virtues. As a result, following lengthy negotiations with the local authorities, he was granted the right to create a new parish: St John's. From then on, Chalmers was a social reformer – drawing up new economic and social theories to fight against pauperism and the Poor Laws – and an evangelical reformer – reforming society by increasing piety within Scotland.

To conclude, Chalmers' theological clash with Moderate tenets was not so obvious even though he strongly relinquished the Moderate Party as a whole. In fact, he did not completely adhere to traditional 18th century Evangelicalism either. He gave a more 'moderate' image of the Evangelical Party. Nevertheless, the theological conflicts had already divided the Kirk, and had also shaken the ecclesiastical alliance between the Church and the State.

#### THE CHURCH-AND-STATE ALLIANCE CHALLENGED: A POLITICAL CLASH

From the time of John Knox, there had been an alliance between the Church and the State. At the Treaty of Union, Scotland remained independent in matters of religion, education and justice. The Church of Scotland was an Established Church. Participation of the Kirk in social life was expounded in the First Book of Discipline (1560) and in the Second Book of Discipline (1578). It was complemented by the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).<sup>22</sup> However, the role of the State in Church affairs remained ambiguous, notably as far as the issue of patronage was concerned. Because patronage linked the Church and the landowning class, it was regarded as a political and temporal intrusion in the 'body of Christ'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, Introduction, xv.

<sup>23</sup> For more reading on patronage see K. R. Ross, 'Patronage' in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, pp. 649-50; McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, pp. 92-124, and M. Fry, *Patronage and Principle, A Political History of Modern Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987).

The question of patronage had been a glitch in the well-organized Church of Scotland since the Reformation. It was a remnant of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, and was part of the social landscape of Scotland, deeply anchored in Scottish tradition. Lairds used to build churches and to endow priests. Patronage was condemned as a papal corruption by the *First Book of Discipline*, and the Law of Patronage was repealed. It stated that pastors were to be elected by the congregation. Nonetheless, patrons were entitled to present a candidate given their financial support of the Church parish. In theory, equity was the ruling principle. Yet there were still traces of corruption. In 1649, patronage was abolished by Parliament but remained in practice in some parishes. In 1690, the Presbyterians made an attempt to secure the abolition of it: patrons and ruling elders could nominate a minister. If the congregation disapproved, the Presbytery would give the final say. Needless to say that, within the new law, the issue of patronage was to become prominent. After the Union of Parliaments in 1707, the Act of 1712 was passed and patronage was restored.

#### PATRONAGE IMPOSITION VERSUS CONGREGATIONAL CALL: AN ECCLESIASTICAL AND SOCIAL CLASH

Whereas up until the Act of Union, opposition to patronage had mainly involved attempts to end hierarchical government within the Church of Scotland, whether of Papacy or Episcopacy or domination by the Sovereign, the new political landscape after the Treaty of Union redefined the real meaning of the controversy, focusing on social class and privilege. It had coincided with the revolutionary ideas which developed in Europe and America. The restoration of patronage gave rise to a series of schisms within the Kirk. Each Lesser Church claimed to represent the traditions of the past, defying the Parent Church (the Established Church).

As a whole, their disputes concerned essentially social questions: in 1733 the Associate Presbytery seceded over the Burgess Oath – only burgesses were allowed to work in trade, and to be a member of a guild. Similarly, Thomas Gillespie and Thomas Boston dissented and established the Relief Church in response to the Moderate Party's support of patronage. The Moderates under the leadership of Robertson had dominated the ecclesiastical landscape until the early 19th century. They were mostly ministers of high social standing, closely intertwined with patrons because they belonged to the upper strata of society, a minority of Scots.

In contrast, the Evangelical Party gradually became the Popular Party as it mainly represented the crofters, the Scottish working classes, who had

traditional Presbyterian values, and also the new rising middle-class merchants who did not enjoy the same power within the Church as the old Scottish landed aristocracy.

As an evangelical activist, Thomas Chalmers fought against pauperism in the slums of industrial Glasgow. The Evangelical became a philanthropist, the champion of religious charity and a sworn enemy of the Poor Laws.

#### THE DANGER OF COMBINED ISSUES: FROM ECCLESIASTICAL TO POLITICAL DISPUTE

The Ten Years' Conflict was characterised by several issues, which contributed to undermining the Church-and-State alliance. In 1833, the Church was already divided: the Popular Party was gaining ground, and the Moderates were in disarray. As I have mentioned earlier, a series of theological and ecclesiastical conflicts had weakened the Kirk, which was no longer the sole Presbyterian body in Scotland. The Dissenters were to become the main rivals in politics.

Chalmers was at the height of his career as an evangelical social reformer and a Divinity Professor. His sermons were very popular in Britain and started to gain fame in America.

At that time, he was busy working on the Church Extension Scheme, which was part of his missionary ideal. While ministering in Glasgow, he had been confronted with crowded churches. Thus, he started a large campaign to double the number of Glasgow churches by means of State endowment and private subscriptions collected in the framework of Church Extension Societies. Chalmers and his supporters proved to be real 'managers'. However, the joint efforts of both Church and State would hasten the undertaking. To increase the number of churches, Chalmers drew up bill after bill to convince Parliament of the necessity of endowing the Kirk to enable the new churches to reduce seat-rents.

He was closely linked with the MP William Gladstone, the future Prime Minister, who could connect Chalmers to Parliament in order to contact Sir Robert Peel, the British Tory leader. It seems that the churchman had no other choice than to go through the evil necessity of patronage to meet his ambitions. In pamphlets, Chalmers showed a total commitment to that scheme to such an extent that the government and the Dissenters felt persecuted. The Whigs who treated him as utopian, an injurious and a disgraceful parson, soon opposed Chalmers. The State had withdrawn from its traditional role of sustaining the Kirk.

When the Popular Party started to gain power in the General Assembly, Thomas Chalmers immediately drew up a measure to revive congregational power over the patron's decision-making: the 1834 Veto Act. The objective was to give the congregation power to veto a patron's preferred candidate to a parish appointment. However, the Act was weakened as some parishes did not abide by it.

The 1834 Auchterarder case was the beginning of a series of cases which undermined the functioning of the Veto Act. Robert Young was presented by the patron, the Earl of Kinnoul, but was vetoed by the congregation. The case went to the Presbytery, Synod and to the General Assembly. Young's appeal was rejected since the veto was consistent with the Veto Act. Finally Young took legal action against the Kirk by raising the matter in the civil courts, namely in the Court of Session. In 1838, the civil justices regarded the veto as an infringement upon the civil rights of patrons. The justices' vision of equity was diametrically opposed to that of the Church. The Kirk decided to appeal against the decision to the House of Lords. Unfortunately, the Kirk was defeated again. Although he had done his utmost to preserve the Church-and-State alliance, Chalmers could not submit to the humiliation of State intrusion in Church affairs. It became evident that the government's refusal to endow his Church Extension programme and the invalidity of the Veto Act meant that the Kirk could be considered an Erastian church, questioning the foundation of Presbyterianism.

The Kirk undertook to revise its ecclesiastical laws in order to reaffirm its spiritual independence. In a speech to the General Assembly, Thomas Chalmers stated that Church and State were 'Two Kingdoms': the State had a power over Church building and endowment, yet the Church maintained spiritual independence over ordination and induction. To Chalmers, the conflict became a 'holy warfare'.<sup>24</sup> The defence was set up via a Non-Intrusion Committee presided over by Chalmers. He was still trying to negotiate but the tone of his discourses became increasingly forceful. As a result, he gradually lost political support. On the one hand, the Earl of Dalhousie, a Tory who supported Chalmers's campaign, refused to participate in the Kirk's rebellion. On the other hand, Lord Cockburn, who did not give up Chalmers, was conscious of the total stand-off with the government:

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<sup>24</sup> H. Watt, *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1843), pp. 181-2.

if it be a Whig Government, the answer must be – ‘You boast of your hatred to us, and wish us to renew the persecution of Dissenters; we won’t run our heads against an English and Irish post to please you.’ If it be a Tory one, the answer will be ‘[...] you are against patronage and the law, get gone.’ If it be a Radical – ‘We hate the Church; your ruin rejoices us.’<sup>25</sup>

Chalmers’s mediation hopes became increasingly weak as another patronage dispute came to birth: the 1839 Dunkeld case. Just as in Auchterarder, Thomas Clark was rejected by the congregation; he appealed to the General Assembly, and he was also defeated. Another probationer, Andrew Kessen, obtained the ministry. Clark went to civil court which put an interdict on Kessen’s induction. As the Kirk refused to abide by the civil law, the court issued a second interdict, and threatened the Kirk leaders with imprisonment for breach of interdict. In December 1839, Chalmers wrote a pamphlet<sup>26</sup> in which he vividly defended the Veto Act, arguing that the Act had dramatically improved the parish cohesion, and restrained the conflicts over patronage. Indeed, Chalmers advocated traditional values and respect for the past.

The patronage dispute reached its climax in the 1837 Strathbogie case. The case was quite similar to the Dunkeld one. Yet the ending was different. Instead of ignoring the civil court’s decision, the Strathbogie Presbytery proceeded with it. This generated an internal church conflict that the General Assembly settled by suspending the seven Strathbogie ministers. The civil court placed an interdict upon the replacement of ministers in their churches, but the Kirk held open-air religious services. The endless controversy had to be settled. In 1840, Chalmers asserted the independence of the Kirk over the degrading encroachments of the State:

Be it known, then unto all men that we shall not retreat one single footstep, – we shall make no submission to the Court of Session. They may force the ejection of us from our places: they shall never, never force us to the surrender of our principles.<sup>27</sup>

After having written several letters and articles in the *Witness* – a newspaper started by the Evangelical Party – Chalmers addressed

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<sup>25</sup> H. Cockburn, *Journal* (Edinburgh: 1874), volume 1, pp. 230-1, in Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, p. 304.

<sup>26</sup> T. Chalmers, *Remarks on the Present Position of the Church of Scotland, Occasioned by the Publication of a Letter from the Dean of Faculty to the Lord Chancellor* (Glasgow, 1839).

<sup>27</sup> W. Hanna, *Memoirs*, volume 4, pp. 145-6.

politicians directly without any intermediaries over the Veto Act. As the convener of the Non-Intrusion Committee, Chalmers and a deputation went to London to make a final attempt to reach a compromise with Melbourne's Whig government. Melbourne disdained Chalmers, refusing to speak to him. Nevertheless, the deputation returned home full of hope about a possible reconciliation via Whig support. In order to secure an agreement, Chalmers corresponded with the Earl of Aberdeen, a leading Tory. In his youth, Chalmers was rather a Whig. After his conversion, he was a Tory. In 1840, he was neither. It was essentially a strategy to find a harmonious solution. Consequently, Chalmers had been quite astute in wavering between both camps. Indeed, the Whigs had changed their minds, and were no longer taking the Kirk into account to draw up the legislation, whereas Aberdeen offered to introduce a bill which would modify the Veto Act and would prove satisfying to both the Church and the State.

#### THE VETO ACT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Lord Aberdeen recognized the independence of the Kirk in spiritual matters. He favoured the parishioners' vote for or against a minister. Yet, in the event of the rejection of the minister by the congregation, he advocated for justification before the Presbytery in order to avoid any kind of congregational corruption. As a former rural minister, Chalmers knew that uneducated peasants would have difficulty in expressing their reasons:

We hold ourselves free, though not obliged, to exclude a presentee because of the strength of the popular dislike, though not substantiated by express reasons, a case which may occur, though not once in a hundred, – I believe not once in a thousand times.<sup>28</sup>

Thus Chalmers defended the principle of *liberum arbitrium* in a letter to Aberdeen:

First, the obligation laid on the Presbytery to give its judgment exclusively on the reasons of [dissent], instead of leaving a *liberum arbitrium* in all circumstances of the case ... Second, because the Bill, in its whole tone and structure, subordinates the Church to the Civil power in things spiritual ...<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, p. 314.

<sup>29</sup> Fourth Earl of Aberdeen, *The Earl of Aberdeen's Correspondence with the Rev. Dr. Chalmers and the Secretaries of the Non-Intrusion Committee: From*

The churchman and the politician were unable to reach a compromise about the social aspect of the issue. The reason was that the social question was both a spiritual and political issue. The controversy happened when the 1832 Reform Bill<sup>30</sup> was passed, which contributed to amalgamating the congregational vote and the national 'class war'.<sup>31</sup> The Reform Act's rejection of the peasant vote reinforced the defense of the Veto Act by the Evangelicals and mostly the rural parishes.

As a result, the combination of the Veto Act, the Reform Act and the evangelical revivals<sup>32</sup> strongly influenced the creation of the Free Church of Scotland. The Kirk was politically excluded by the government, which put an end to the principle of the 'Two Kingdoms'.

Chalmers and the Evangelicals made a last attempt to negotiate with the Government: the General Assembly of the Kirk passed the Claim of Right which was a final appeal:

We are making an appeal to English justice; and that we hope will not be in vain. We are letting the capital of the empire know as a gross case, and grievous, and multiplied oppression, which is now going on in one of the provinces – an oppression which, if not remedied, will have the effect of trampling down the Church of Scotland into utter insignificance; will despoil all her moral weight ... will dis sever her from the State altogether.<sup>33</sup>

The situation was no longer ambiguous, and all possible efforts had been made to restore confidence between the Kirk and the State. On 18 May 1843, during the Church of Scotland's General Assembly, Thomas Chalmers and the other Evangelicals 'signed the tabled protest, proceeded out of the church, followed by an even greater number not commissioned

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14<sup>th</sup> January to 27<sup>th</sup> May 1840 (Edinburgh and London: 1840), 'Thomas Chalmers to Aberdeen', 12 May 1840, in Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, p. 316.

<sup>30</sup> The 1832 Reform Act gave a right of vote to middle-class males who owned their dwelling.

<sup>31</sup> T. C. Smout, *The History of the Scottish People 1560-1830* (Bungay, Suffolk: Collins/Fontana, 1969), p. 419.

<sup>32</sup> Several evangelical revivals started in Kilsyth in 1839 and extended to the counties of Angus, Aberdeenshire and Ross-shire.

<sup>33</sup> W. Hanna, *Memoirs*, volume 4, pp. 297-8, in Brown, *Godly Commonwealth*, p. 329.



who had signed as adhering with them to it. That was the dramatic and crucial moment of the Disruption.<sup>34</sup>

The Church of Scotland – Free was freed from the Government's encroachments in spiritual matters. But the negative aspect was that it was also freed from financial support. Hence, Thomas Chalmers organized the Kirk with evangelical collective efforts:

It was an inward and a right spirit, we hope, which animated the devotions and the doings of the first General Assembly ... but the inward principle should not prevent, nay, the very strength of it will prompt us onward to the outward business of the House of God.<sup>35</sup>

The Tory Lord Cockburn witnessed the precariousness of the Seceders: 'They have descended from certainty to precariousness, and most of them from comfort to destitution, solely for their principles'.<sup>36</sup>

The Free Kirk was an impressive foundation: churches, manses, missionaries, theological colleges, schools and Sunday schools. The new Kirk was a symbol of the evangelical unity which Chalmers wished to extend all over the world. 'The Christian good of Scotland' prevailed over everything as the churchman became aware that schisms were the enemy of Christian unity:

Who cares about the Free Church compared with the Christian good of the people of Scotland? Who cares for any Church, but as an instrument of Christian good? For, be assured that the moral and religious well-being of the population is infinitely of higher importance than the advancement of any sect.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article was an attempt to conflate the complex factors which led to the 1843 Disruption, showing that it was the result of underlying processes which had developed from a theological starting point to become a political clash. The key role played by Chalmers in the Disruption remains indisputable. Nonetheless, it deserves to be reconsidered in the context of

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<sup>34</sup> H. Watt, *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption*, p. 298.

<sup>35</sup> T. Chalmers, *A sermon preached at the Opening of the General Assembly*, pp. 5-6, in H. Watt, *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption*, p. 315.

<sup>36</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1863), pp. 248-9.

<sup>37</sup> T. Chalmers, 27 December 1845, in W. Hanna, *Memoirs*, volume 4, p. 394.

## THOMAS CHALMERS AND THE DISRUPTION

the increasingly pluralistic society of 19th-century Britain. Given the mingled complex issues, I chose to illustrate the evolution through different aspects – theological, social and political – in order to find a balance between Thomas Chalmers, the symbol of the Disruption, and the historical constraints within which he founded the Free Church of Scotland.