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PURITANISM IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND

THE EVANGELICAL party in the Scottish Church of the eighteenth century displays very clearly the main characteristics of Puritanism. The strength and influence of the party relative to that of the Moderates varied from period to period during the course of the century, amounting to dominance at the beginning and again at the close, and being never at any time negligible. To the outsider there might seem to be between these ecclesiastical parties a difference of degree rather than of kind, for there was much that was typically Puritan about Moderate views in government, worship, discipline and even theology. The Moderate was broader minded and broader hearted, but his tendency was towards rationalism, formalism and mere morality, so that if we class the Scottish Evangelical as a right-wing Puritan, which seems proper, the Moderate appears to recede almost out of touch in that direction.

The Presbyterian system of Church government had been an important feature of the Protestantism of Scotland as introduced through Knox on the lines laid down by Calvin at Geneva, and had been brought to full development by Andrew Melville on the basis of Huguenot experience. To this system the Church of Scotland returned with some enthusiasm at the Revolution Settlement of 1690 after an unsatisfactory Episcopalian experiment. The arrangement was accepted with much the same feelings by both ecclesiastical parties, though the Evangelicals tended to be more democratic, giving the Eldership a larger place in the spiritual life of the congregation, and the people more control of its affairs, while their emphasis upon personal rather than social salvation led to insistence upon freedom of individual conscience as against the authority of any church court. English Puritanism, which had begun on Presbyterian lines under the influence of Thomas Cartwright, later divided in this same way, but there was a very much stronger drift to the left, to independency and radicalism, than ever occurred in Scotland.

In the externals of public worship the Scottish Church in all sections was now more Puritan than it had ever been. There

was a natural desire to depart clearly and decisively from the mild Anglicanism which the Stuarts had forced upon the country, and claim was laid to "that comely gospel simplicity which Christ and his apostles used". There was a pronounced distaste for forms and ceremonies. As Bishop Dowden has said: "With a deep sense of the inwardness of religion, Puritanism regarded the external apparatus, which to the Catholic seemed avenues and inlets for the divine influence, not as avenues, but as barriers." For the Calvinist, ceremonies originated in the weakness of the times when Christ had not yet come. Now that we have Christ Himself all such aids may be abandoned. We can realise the presence of God without an ark of the Covenant in our midst. We can worship in spirit and in truth. The Papist is like a person using a candle in the bright sunshine. John Foster of Bristol has suggested that people who know how to walk in the ordinary way are difficult to interest in the benefits of crutches.

There was no thought of a printed liturgy and the service was barer than in the days of Knox or than in Reformed churches abroad. We notice even an antipathy to the Lord's Prayer in public worship, though Calvin and Knox had, of course, used it, and the Westminster Directory recommended it. In the Baptismal service there was a reference to the Westminster Confession instead of that repetition of the Apostles' Creed which had once been a reminder that by baptism one becomes a member, not of a particular sect, but of the Catholic Church. The "lecture" in place of simple reading of Scripture had come in from practice in England. So had the "reading of the line" in the metrical psalms, which one may still hear in certain Gaelic-speaking districts of Scotland, but which had only been allowed by the Directory of 1645 "for the present, where many of the congregation cannot read". Such ancient Church festivals as Easter and Christmas were unanimously ignored. The parties had no quarrel in principle as to worship. There would, indeed, be a marked difference in atmosphere according as the minister was a Moderate or an Evangelical. The former type stood for order and decency, taste and reticence, the latter for fervour, unction, pathos, personal directness. But outwardly the service was the same. The sermon had the central place; the people sat while singing a metrical psalm before and after sermon, the precentor leading the familiar tune; they stood

during the long extemporaneous scriptural prayers. There might be a discipline case for rebuke after the preaching; possibly a baptism. At the afternoon service there was catechising, so that the young were not neglected. The solemn elders watched the people put their trifling offering for the poor into the plate as they entered the church; and one or two of them toured the parish to see if anyone was spending service hours in drinking or poaching or even working. The annual celebration of the Lord's Supper was a great "occasion".

In belief there was likewise a fairly general agreement with the wording of the Westminster Confession. The latitudinarian tendencies of John Simson and others attracted some attention; but Moderates as a rule were more interested in culture than in theological controversy, and in the pulpit dealt largely with manners and morals, assuming a contented scholastic attitude towards Calvinism. One section of the Evangelicals insisted that it was "not sound or orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ"; but on the whole there was remarkably little theological activity, and zeal devoted itself rather to ecclesiastical problems. The evangelical preacher had an "ordinary", a book of the Bible or a section of a book which he expounded Sunday after Sunday. The treatment was scriptural and assumed in the hearers a good knowledge of the contents of the Bible. It was also theologically systematic, and could be patiently followed by parishioners who had all been faithfully instructed in the letter of the Shorter Catechism. There would probably be many heads and sub-heads, doctrines, reasons and uses, as the scheme of salvation was set forth. Congregations would have to be prepared for technicalities, such as that "the Son of God was decretively, intentionally and typically, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world". There would of course be a final challenge to "close with Christ".

One of the most characteristic ministers of the Puritan Evangelical type in eighteenth-century Scotland was Thomas Boston, minister of Ettrick, the author of *The Fourfold State*, a theological treatise which had enormous popularity in Scotland for many generations, and might long have been noticed in the average Scottish home alongside the Bible and Rutherford's *Letters* and the *Pilgrim's Progress*. His *Memoirs* give an intimate picture of him in his manse and parish and pulpit, in meditation and prayer, reading the Bible with the help of very few

commentaries and finding special satisfaction in his Hebrew Old Testament, busy preparing sermons for delivery without paper, holding family worship, organising prayer meetings, visiting the homes of the people to comfort or catechise, celebrating the sacraments with all due care and dignity, taking his full share in the courts of the Church. Boston was very strict with himself, endeavouring to sit loose to "all created enjoyments", examining himself constantly with exaggerated scrupulosity, finding worldly thoughts as birdlime to his feet, seeing himself "a vile minister good for nothing", declaring, "I was most ugly and hell-hued in my own eyes and verily believed there was none so unworthy as I"; feeling that anything which he has a special aversion from, God must have appointed him to do, and anything which he wished to do, must be a temptation from the devil; attempting "to put the knife to the throat of his inclinations and sacrifice them to the good pleasure of God"; often believing himself deserted of God, for example in preaching, attributing this to God's wrath against him for some misdeed or neglect; sometimes rising to mystical fervour, as when he tells us that his "soul went out in love and flames to his Advocate with the Father"; conscious of the real presence of God so that he can write: "I got up to Mr. Stark's garret between sermons, and at the south-east corner of it I conversed with Christ, and it was a Bethel to me. . . . If ever poor I had communion with God it was in that place"; attributing every occurrence to the immediate activity of Providence; declaring: "Nothing do they meet with but what comes through the Lord's fingers"; "they have a covenant right to chastisements"; "the Lord justly put me to needless pains because I would not be at needful pains"; "I had no good will to the business, but God had said it, and it behoved to be done"; noting "a surprising cluster of mercies"; conscious, however, at the same time, of the constant attendance of the Devil in the parish and in his own life: "Satan soon after got in upon my weak side"; "Satan watches to prevent the good of afflictions"; Satan shames us by his diligence. Turning to prayer was the only safety: "I sobbed out my case before God." The unforgettable Thomas Boston.

A famous picture of a Puritan is that which occurs at the beginning of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the pilgrim with his fingers in his ears, running from his own door, crying out, "Life, life, eternal life". Puritanism concentrates upon the things which are

eternal. Matthew Arnold complained that in its Hebraic way it demanded that we should "sacrifice all other sides of our being to the religious side"; but John Foster, the Baptist essayist, shows more understanding of Puritan asceticism when he writes: "The correct consequence of conversing with our Lord and his apostles would be, that the thought of immortality should become almost as habitually present and familiarised to the mind as the countenance of a domestic friend; that it should be the grand test of the value of all pursuits, friendships and speculations; and that it should mingle a certain nobleness with everything which is permitted to occupy our time." Abraham Kuyper explains the position when he says that Calvinism "has not only honoured man for the sake of his likeness to the divine image, but also the world as a divine creation, and has placed to the front the great principle that there is a particular grace which works salvation, and also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests the process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our lives in which to glorify him as creator". The true other-worldliness does not then consist in flight from the world. While remembering Calvin's words that "everyone of us would be thought to aspire and aim at heavenly immortality during the whole course of his life", and while recalling that to him the real meaning of our earthly existence is trial, contest and preparation, we must also with him insist that this life is a God-given blessing full of proofs of God's love, "a slippery place" indeed, but one where God provides not only for our needs, but for our enjoyment, so that there should be no unnecessary austerity, and indeed the scent of flowers and the beauty of marble are amongst many things that have value quite apart from use. Calvin calls that an inhuman philosophy which would deprive man of his senses and reduce him to a block. There is here no handing over of this world to the Devil, none of the medieval asceticism that regarded the song of the nightingale as devilish because beautiful.

Scottish Puritans seem to have appreciated this, and we find John McLaurin, a friend of Jonathan Edwards, writing: "Not that the cross made him hate the men of the world or refuse the lawful enjoyments of it. It allowed him the use of the latter and obliged him to love the former; but it crucified those corruptions which are contrary both to the love of our neighbour

and the true enjoyment of the creatures." There were, of course, some who regarded the world as of the Devil, as they regarded the body as of the Devil; some who indulged in what Calvin would have called "unnecessary austerities"; but on the other hand we have the interesting example of Ralph Erskine, a Secession leader, who was fond of his violin and wrote a poem in praise of tobacco.

It is through not noting the actual teaching of Calvin that some have difficulty in understanding the undoubted emphasis which Puritanism laid upon ethics and discipline. If elect, why should they trouble about character and conduct? The main argument for morality, as we find it, for instance, in McLaurin, is that to be saved is to have the image of God restored in us, and God is essentially holy, so that to be holy is clearly in view in the process of salvation. Ebenezer Erskine, the evangelical originator of the Secession of 1733 said: "They are renewed after the image of God in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, separate from the rest of the profane world." Believers will naturally turn to good works though these have no justifying value, and will put themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for sanctification and growth in grace. Erskine stresses good works as fruits and evidences of true faith, as testimonies of gratitude to God, as profitable for strengthening our assurance, and as edifying to other people. We remember how Milton in *Paradise Lost* writes:

Only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith,
Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love,
By name to come called charity, the soul
Of all the rest.

James Webster, a Scottish preacher of the early eighteenth century, said: "The promise of remission to believers and the commands for their holy walk are in the new covenant joined and married together"; and he pointed out that in Titus "in that very place where all good works are excluded from having any influence on our effectual calling and salvation, holiness is enjoined".

We are taught, however, to distinguish sharply between what is termed "gospel holiness" and what is called "mere morality". Ebenezer Erskine says: "To make a work a good work it must be done by a good and holy person, renewed by the spirit of Christ and justified by his merit." John Willison of Dundee

wrote similarly: "The fruit is always sour that grows not upon the root Christ."

The case for discipline, regulating the lives of others, is rather different. The righteous God has revealed his law through Moses and later in the example and teaching of Jesus; this accordingly is the law for all his creatures and they ought to be obeying it. To quote McLaurin again: "Every sin in its very nature is poison to the soul tending to eternal death, separating it from God who is its own life"; or in Ebenezer Erskine's words: "Error, ignorance, unbelief, atheism, pride, profanity, security and like evils, they are the strongholds of the devil's kingdom." Plainly the Devil must be opposed by any one who acknowledges allegiance to God. From this point of view it was evidently the duty of authorities to do everything possible to cleanse the community of evil. Hence Church Discipline.

There have been terrible descriptions by Stefan Zweig and others of the supposed gloomy tyranny of Calvin at Geneva; and Taine has written: "In Scotland intolerance reached the utmost limits of ferocity and pettiness. It seemed as though a black cloud had weighed down the life of man, drowning all light, wiping out all beauty, extinguishing all joy, pierced here and there by the glitter of the sword and by the flickering of torches, beneath which one might perceive the indistinct forms of gloomy despots, of bilious sectarians, of silent victims." Buckle in his famous *History of Civilisation* caricatures Scottish Puritan Kirk Session Discipline. So does Edwin Muir in his book on John Knox; so also Storm Jameson in her *Decline of Merry England*, and Agnes Mure Mackenzie in her misleading books on Scottish history; but a writer at the beginning of the eighteenth century is as savage and bitter as any, referring to the minister as a tyrant, the kirk his court, the pulpit his throne, a dozen sour ignorant elders his council, any disobedience producing at once the thunders of excommunication, confiscation of goods and condemnation to eternal perdition. There is here much misunderstanding and exaggeration; but the standard was indeed severe: "We fear the preciseness of the way," it was said; "ye oblige us to an intolerable strictness and rigorousness in our walk." It is of course to be remembered that neither Calvin nor Knox originated church discipline; we have only to open our New Testament to see that. We must also recall the standards of the time as revealed in the civil punishments in common use.

What the critics of Puritan severity denounce is nothing peculiar to ecclesiastical Scotland or Geneva, but the prevailing ignorance, brutishness and roughness above which the church was slow to rise. We now feel that eighteenth-century methods were crude and that the ends desired can better be achieved by gentler means. Zeal or fear of divine wrath might warp the judgment of a Scottish elder; but it must be admitted that these men knew the people with whom they had to deal, and recorded decisions often show common sense and a shrewd understanding of human nature. By the close of the eighteenth century, session discipline was fast disappearing in Scotland, partly through the rise of humanitarian sympathies but chiefly because secession destroyed session control of the parish, since the sinner might now allege that he belonged to some other denomination and so flout the summons to compare.

Throughout the century the sessions, with public opinion strongly on their side, watched strictly over Sabbath observance; and indeed Scotland has been very slow to decide that compulsion is as futile in this sphere as in others. Very naturally discipline was confined to matters of external and public behaviour, and so missed sins of the inward life that were quite as serious, leaving respectability as the test, and making self-righteousness too often a substitute for real integrity. But what system does not fail in precisely this respect?

A distinctive feature of Puritanism was its individualism. Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress* set out upon his journey alone. His concern was, What must I do to be saved? The message of the Scottish Evangelical was definitely an individual one, a very personal gospel. We might take as characteristic of the group and of the period a sermon by one of the early Seceders, William Mair of Muckart, who deals with the words from Micah, "He delighteth in mercy", and after an introduction with several firstlies and secondlies, states briefly the doctrine involved, proceeds to discuss its "import" under six heads, and then to make some "improvement" or application also under six heads, and concludes with this gospel appeal both to sinners and to the elect:

"Let us all presently essay under the influence of the promised Spirit, to betake ourselves with hope to the Lord's mercy. Oh, sinner! you that never did it before, you need awakening, pardoning, regenerating mercy; and it is in your offer, the throne of grace is accessible by you, where you may obtain mercy and

find grace to help in time of need. It presently is, but none can tell how long. Now is the accepted time and day of salvation; while it is called today, harden not your hearts as in the provocation. And even you that are the Lord's people need mercy, you need sanctifying, directing, protecting, glorifying mercy, your Lord giveth, and grace for grace. Mint then at receiving, and let the word of his grace be the ground of your faith and expectation, for he will perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham, and thus will manifest that he delighteth in mercy."

A sermon by John Muckarsie of Kinkell on Joel ii. 17, intricately divided and subdivided, deals with an Old Testament text as "evidently expressive of our case at this day in these lands of Britain and Ireland", dilates upon "the Lord's threatening" and the cause thereof in sin that is God-dishonouring, soul-ruining, and hell-deserving, declaring that "the gospel was perhaps never more clearly preached and never more indifferently received" than in those mid-eighteenth-century days of deadness, indifferency and division; proclaiming the love and grace and condescendence of God, referring to the "comfortable experience" of the religious, and concluding with texts that make an offer of deliverance, "a full and free offer of a full and complete saviour".

While emphatic about the corruption of human nature and the wrath of God and the need for repentance, while emphasising the inherent justice of God which He must vindicate, these Evangelicals stress God's mercy as even in stricter accord with His ultimate nature, suggesting that while God will condemn a sinner out of justice, "it's a work He sets about with reluctance", while when He pardons "He is in His element", "He delighteth in mercy". Love is here regarded as in some sense more of the very nature of God than justice itself. "Mercy", says Mair, is "the darling attribute of God." This view of the nature of God is not often credited to the Puritan.

Individualism tends to sectarianism; and in eighteenth-century Scotland this comes out in connection with the Secessions, which were essentially rebellions of the private conscience against authority in church or in state, and assertions of private rights, the immediate issue in many parishes being the question of the election of a minister. The Evangelicals were all democrats in this matter. A Testimony of 1736 lays some stress upon the Bible warrant for the Tabernacle being removed without the camp, and the duty of believers to separate themselves from a faithless Church. We have here the shadow of what happened in England in the previous century, and the emergence at times

of the idea of the gathered church to which Scottish tradition generally was so antipathetic. Secession, then, was a prominent feature of church life in eighteenth-century Scotland, and all the Seceders were of the Puritan type. That of 1733 was led by Ebenezer Erskine, a respected preacher of Free Grace, a man of strong convictions and determined character, righteous and devout, intense and conscientious, dignified and cold, a redoubtable champion of independence. "You never heard Ebenezer Erskine?" exclaimed one, "then you never heard the gospel in its majesty." The Associate Presbytery, as it was called at first, began with four ministers, but gradually attracted many zealous and sober Christians who were discontented with other ministrations. The Church thus built up was orthodox, strict, democratic, select. Soon individualism caused one split after another in its ranks, Burghers, Anti-Burghers, Old and New Light Burghers, Old and New Light Anti-Burghers, the results of minor but bitter controversies. Typical of the sternest elements was Adam Gib (d. 1788), a fierce theological warrior, reputed to have written a private Covenant with God in his own blood.

Still another Secession arose from the deposition in 1752 of the pious and faithful Thomas Gillespie of Carnock, who held strong opinions against patronage and for liberty of conscience, a friend and correspondent of Jonathan Edwards. This was a milder group, with some affinity to English Congregationalism. These various Secessions after a chequered history were more or less gathered up in the United Presbyterian Church of 1847, now part of the reunited Church of Scotland of 1929. Of the Seceders Thomas Carlyle, who knew them well, has said: "A man who awoke to the belief that he actually had a soul to be saved or lost was apt to be found among the dissenting people." There were, of course many Evangelicals who did not feel the call to leave the Church of Scotland of their fathers for any of the sects which had thus disestablished themselves. There were, for example, the ancestors of those who would one day "go out" at the Disruption of 1843. There was such a typical Puritan and Evangelical as John Willison of Dundee, an earnest, modest and diligent pastor, and one whose writings long remained popular in Scotland. He was broader-minded than some, though no less orthodox in his Calvinism, saying for example: "Commend me to a Jesus-Christ-exalting and soul-winning minister, whatever

his denomination." Willison and other Church of Scotland Puritans interested themselves in the extraordinary religious revivals which marked 1742 and the succeeding years, very much on the lines of the Great Awakening in America at the same period.

Finally it may be observed that of course these Scottish Puritans were characterised by devotion to Scripture, insisting upon Bible warrant for everything, for doctrine and for practice. Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress* starts out with a book in his hand, the Bible, the one guide for his pilgrimage. Richard Hooker devoted the second book of his great work to an attack upon the exclusive scripturalism of the Puritans of his Elizabethan experience. Scotland in the eighteenth century scarcely showed itself conscious of Scripture problems. The attitude of Knox and Calvin was a general assumption with all parties. The Testimony of the Seceders, a document of 1736, is typical in asserting "that the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is not only a sufficient rule, or a principal rule, but it is the only rule to direct us how we ought to glorify God and enjoy him". John Willison states the universal conviction when he writes of the Bible:

"We should look upon it as a golden epistle, indited by the Spirit of God; we should receive it as a love-letter from heaven, opening up God's designs of love to our souls; we should go to it as for our daily food and subsistence, and daily enquire in it for the will of God, and hereby consult with God about our duty in all cases. . . . We should read with faith, reverence, and application to ourselves, as if we were particularly named in the precepts, reproofs, threatenings, and consolations of it . . . and in reading every part, we should still keep Christ in our eye, as the end, scope, and substance of the whole scriptures."

The Calvinistic doctrine of the Church and Ministry as the ordinary channel by which the Holy Spirit sets forth the Word contained in Scripture, enabled Scotland very largely to avoid the chaos of individualistic interpretation that we find in Separatist England. John Erskine, the most distinguished of the later Evangelicals, reminded ministers that they were expected to be "mighty in the scriptures", and thus the pulpit was the essential preparation for the Bible in the home; but this last, as immortalised by Robert Burns, was perhaps the most interesting, outstanding and influential feature of Puritanism in eighteenth-century Scotland.

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