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# Fifty Years of Scottish Theology\*

N. H. G. ROBINSON

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'<sup>1</sup>, and while, further, few were more ready than Mackintosh to allow that 'we are much more sure of our facts than of our theories'<sup>2</sup>, 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-

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

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428n.

## *Liturgical Worship*

The greatest concern for care was felt in dealing with liturgical worship. Here were elements that were a common heritage even from scriptural times, and from the centuries of the early Church when in East and West, about the Holy Land of Palestine, the Christians were in cultural communication with each other, and maintained and developed forms with central elements of a constant nature, whatever the less essential accompaniments might be. Fr. K. Philipose very wisely impressed upon us the need for care to keep them; he suggested that the essentials of the liturgy were: Readings from Scripture, Preaching, Spiritual Songs, Prayers and Sacramental Acts. There was a general consensus of opinion that not only the historicity and uniqueness of the Gospel should be maintained, but the historic continuity of the Church and its universal nature. Mr. M. M. Thomas thus reminded us of ecumenical responsibilities.

At the same time it must be understood that indigenization can actually assist ecumenical understanding. Some of the divisions in the Church have arisen over misunderstandings of forms and customs, which in their traditional context still arouse prejudiced emotion, though the ancient causes of it have no longer the same validity. In a new context, provided by a desire for indigenization, a fresh approach can be made in which these prejudices lose their force. The liturgical experiments of the Church of South India give illustration of this phenomenon. The process is further assisted by the revival of interest in liturgy in many branches of Christendom, which are allowed to work together to a common end in a new context.

Mr. Savarimuthu raised the question as to where we should look in deliberate indigenization of forms of worship. Should it be to ancient Hindu tradition? Should it be to mediaeval? Should it be to Muslim? Should it be to what is current in modern India? We were faced with the danger of the academic, and of creating forms which could be technically correct and yet as much out of touch with modern Christian and non-Christian life in India of today as forms inherited from foreign lands. We were interested to hear from Mr. Macphail, a member of the Liturgical Committee of the Church of South India, that no ideas of deliberate indigenization had been in the minds of members of the committee in preparing forms for the Church. What had been very vividly in mind were the actual congregations in village and town who would use the forms, and the necessity of forms expressing their aspirations and devotion.

This certainly pointed us back to the conception of indigenization as a process that inevitably happens, wherever the Church of Christ comes into visible being, on the principle of the incarnation. Liturgies must spring out of the experience of worshippers, and cannot be written in ivory towers. That does not mean that men with exceptional gifts cannot make decisive contributions. It does mean that such contributions must be made in the context of the actual worshipping life of the Church. A poet and musician, as Archdeacon Mara showed us, who actually writes and composes in one of the traditions of India, may find that, when it comes to music which accompanies liturgy, the tradition must be modified to accord with the congregational character of Christian worship which has no precise counterpart in the Hindu customs.

When we come right down to preparing liturgical forms, or modifying those already in use, recent experience, both in the Church of South India and the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, goes to show that in the great central and sacramental acts of the Church, however much all parts of the Church may be laid under contribution for enrichment, nothing much peculiarly Indian can be done in the way of modification, because of their universal character. The indigenous element appears in the accessories, and these accessories have been there for generations, and are no modern invention of those who now think in terms of indigenization.

### Indigenization in the Villages

The very conditions of life in villages have made such indigenization inevitable. There has been no money for elaborate buildings for worship in Western or *consciously* Indian style. The prayer houses must be just local village style. There has been no money for elaborate Church furnishings. There has been simply the floor to sit on, and the village musical instruments to accompany the only kind of songs which they can accompany, and these have not seldom been themselves composed by the village poets, or poets whose childhood was steeped in the village life. Village customs accompanying such social occasions as weddings or thanksgivings for firstfruits or harvests, and personal occasions have been so strong that they have persisted among village Christians, unless they are clearly incompatible with Christian faith and life, and it has not been easy to resist them even if they are. The villagers have long been doing what townfolk talk about. In his richly suggestive introductory lecture the Rev. R. C. Das gave us many examples of how Indian traditions of worship could be used by Christians, and I wondered how many of them would not already be found among our village Christians, as spontaneous expressions of their devotion.

Of course local conditions affect such generalizations. In some places conversion has been followed by a considerable dislocation of village life, and even removal to Christian colonies surrounding Mission Houses. In others village life has gone on, especially where whole groups have come into the Church, though even there the former place in the village social order has sometimes been lost by the converts and led to a lesser dislocation. In some it has been possible to bring over into the Church a social structure almost intact.

I think, for instance, of an *adivasi* region where the Church has developed in some degree of isolation from other Christian groups, and where the missionaries have been specially alive to local conditions, so that in photographs of forty and fifty years ago you cannot tell which is the missionary as he is attired and looks just like the rest of the company photographed. The spiritual songs sung in the churches, including translations of Scriptural and other Church canticles, have all been composed and written by local *adivasi* poets, and the accompaniments are the local village instruments. The life of the Church is ordered by a series of *panchayats* which lead up to a *Moti Panchayat* which governs the affairs of the whole region, including social customs as well as those more strictly ecclesiastical, though fully aware that the social life is part of the spiritual life. The chairman of the *Moti Panchayat* is himself an

*adivasi* of the region, and the whole is integrated, as a whole, into the larger life of the Church of the Diocese. Local conditions and the sympathetic care of those who brought the Gospel to the people there has made possible the Christianization of a culture with a minimum of alien elements in it.

### Indigenization and the Universal Church

Indigenization affects the whole of the Christian's way of life. It can be seen perhaps most clearly in such special examples as I have mentioned, but it is a matter of the Christian way of life being in harmony with the general cultural trends of the life of the commonality of citizens of this country. Into this have come already trends from the West which are likely to continue. However much national self-consciousness tempts to the underlining of certain national characteristics, India becomes more and more a part of a world civilization, and economic, and even social, influences from elsewhere play their part. Such a process of cross-fertilization of cultures can be for enrichment of all. The East is influencing the West as well as the West the East. These influences from without are most apparent in towns, especially the few great cosmopolitan towns, but slowly, and not so very slowly, they pass on to the countryside.

As a world-wide community, as a community which has existed memorably in East and West the Church has here a special part to play, firstly, in realizing its own world-wide character, as it is in such organs as the World Council of Churches, and secondly, in fostering the very best elements in cross-fertilization which is bringing nearer the day of mutual understanding between peoples of diverse cultures, and helping them to find themselves as one community of men, created by one God.

Worship should be the focus of the whole process. In worship man should express his deepest instincts and his profoundest attitudes, not only in his relations with God, but in his relations with his fellowmen. The common man, if he exists, may not be articulate in these matters, but when he finds himself caught up into worship which truly articulates them for him, he has a rich satisfaction of a kind he cannot otherwise have. Already in many parts of the Christian community in India these have been finding expression spontaneously. One of the first tasks in following up the Conference at Bangalore will be to attempt to gather up some of these expressions so that all parts may be stimulated by them. It is in the natural process of things, and part of that supremely natural, as well as supernatural, event, the Incarnation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, that the supernatural shall become increasingly at home in every natural environment. Another of the tasks in following up the Conference will be to assist the awareness of the process of indigenization, and so to hasten it.

At the Conference at Bangalore a Continuation Committee was set up to continue the work. Of this Principal J. Russell Chandran is the Secretary. It will be as representative as a committee small enough to be effective can be of the Churches of India. It is to be hoped that the Churches will so co-operate with this committee that it can become a useful organ for all Churches in developing forms of worship in line with the conscious process of indigenization, and draw them together in a common task, which will further the cause of union at one of its deepest and most intimate levels.