

H. Wheeler Robinson

BY THE DEAN OF ST. PAUL'S.

IT is a privilege to be allowed to contribute an appreciation of my friend Wheeler Robinson to the pages of the *Baptist Quarterly*. There are many better qualified than I to write about his career and his contribution to the life of the Church, many who have worked with him in the denomination to which he gave so much service, or who have shared with him the day by day life of a college. My estimate must be one-sided, since it lacks the authority of intimate association in worship and uninterrupted intercourse. Yet perhaps it may have an interest of its own as the testimony of one who was outside much of his life and many of his interests, but nevertheless bound to him by ties of admiration and affection. There may be an "objectivity" in the judgment of one who stands in such a relation to him which could not be achieved by those who were closer to him.

I will venture to write some words about Wheeler Robinson as a person before I pass on to make some remarks on his thought. My own contact with him began in the days when Regent's Park College was in the University of London and we served together on various University boards. It was a grief to me, on personal as well as on other grounds, when the College moved to Oxford, because I felt that London lost something of value when the Principal went with the College and we saw him no more in our Faculty of Theology. But my chief and longest association with him arose from our joint editorship of the Library of Constructive Theology. I was the junior partner in that firm, because I was brought in after Wheeler Robinson had already been appointed and had thought out the principles on which the Library was to be constructed. I found myself in cordial agreement with them, and from the first day of our collaboration to the end this agreement remained. We wrote the general introduction together, and so close was our unity of thought that I could not be sure to-day which sentences are from his pen and which from mine. There was only one subject on which we could never quite agree—who should write the volume on the Church, because I never could persuade him that Presbyterianism was not a kind of *via media* between Anglicanism and Independency!

The abiding impression which my association with him in this enterprise made on my mind was that of one who was both a real Christian and a real scholar. When he spoke of Christian experience he was not using a catch-word or stating a theoretical principle for theological construction; he was speaking of what

he knew as the central fact of his life. I think one of the facts about him which struck me as most revealing was his catholicity of taste and knowledge in devotional literature. The classics of Christian piety of all the traditions of Christendom were his companions and his delight; he could pray with St. Teresa or Newman as well as with Bunyan or John Wesley. No one could doubt that his devotion permeated and controlled his life. Others will know this better than I, and it would be impertinent to dwell upon it. I will mention only one aspect of this Christian temper, because I had occasion to observe it. I never heard him make an unkind or unnecessary criticism. He had a shrewd judgment of men, of their capacities and of their motives, but he had, I am sure, no thoughts about them that were not kind and charitable. He wrote much controversial theology—at least he wrote much that was controverted—but I believe one would search his writings in vain for any harsh or provocative sentence. He strove to “speak the truth in love” and was always more ready to recognise points of agreement and spiritual kinship than to emphasise dissension. Some acquaintance with the works of theologians leads me to exclaim, “O si sic omnes!”

This sympathetic understanding of other persons was reflected in his intellectual life. Rarely have I known a man whose reading was so wide and diverse. He was, of course, primarily an Old Testament scholar, but he had a more than competent knowledge of philosophy and psychology as well as a remarkable acquaintance with English literature. In his grave theological writings he drew from all the resources of his reading, and every reader must have been glad of the refreshment, which comes so frequently, of always relevant poetical illustrations. It must be observed, however, for it is a mark of the honesty of Wheeler Robinson's mind, that the poetry is never used to cover up weak places in the argument, but always to make more real to the imagination the conclusion or the suggestion which is supported by reasoning. I have noticed one exception to the employment of all the resources of his learning; so far as I know, he never refers to detective stories, in which he was deeply versed!

This is not the place to attempt an account of Wheeler Robinson's theology or an estimate of its value. Perhaps the time has not yet come to judge how much of his thought will remain as a permanent possession of the Church, and when this is done, it should be on a large scale. His writings cover so many of the great topics and problems of theology and there is so much systematic relation between the various parts of his major works that an extended survey would be needed to bring out the strength of his position. I hope that someone, perhaps one of his former students, will write such a study—it would be more useful than

many theses which are thought worthy of academic honours. In the preface to the last of his considerable books he tells us some interesting things about his theology and how it grew in his own mind. The three books which represent his thought on the problems of religion most adequately are, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, and *Redemption and Revelation*. They also represent the development of his thought. Beginning with the psychology of religion as it is related with the Christian faith, he passed on to the philosophical and theological background and then to the question of revelation and redemption as related to a philosophy of history. It is worthy of note that he found there was a unity and coherence in his work when he looked back upon it which he had not suspected while it was in progress. As he himself remarks, the unity grew out of the contact with religious experience and not from a conscious purpose.

To-day there are many theologians who regard the foundation beliefs on which Wheeler Robinson and I tried to build up the Library of Constructive Theology as false and misleading. They abhor the appeal to "religious experience," without, I fear, always being careful to discover what we meant by that term. We are attacked from two sides, by the Barthians and by the neo-scholastics who fling at us the name which has, strangely enough, become a term of reproach and contempt. We are "old-fashioned liberals." I do not think these polemics troubled Wheeler Robinson and I remember that we once consoled each other by thinking of the distinguished company, including Charles Gore, which shared our condemnation. I believe that this fashion will pass and that it will be found to have been only an interruption of the advance of theology on the general lines which we adopted. Wheeler Robinson was led by his directness of apprehension and sense of actuality to grapple with the problems which are at the root of the contemporary religious perplexity. There is no "shadow-boxing" in his theology.

The psychological analysis of religion has presented a challenge to Christian thought which must be met, and met if possible in terms which are intelligible to the "plain man," because the influence of the views which stem from Freud's *Future of an Illusion* has passed far beyond academic circles. And evidently one who based so much as Wheeler Robinson did on "experience" was bound to take very seriously such a threat to his presupposition. The "validity" of the religious experience might almost be said to have been the question which he was always discussing—he returns to it again and again in his books—and the burden of his contention is invariably that there is an objective element in the spiritual experience. It is a sign of his penetration that he

appreciated the importance of James Ward's *Psychological Principles*, one of the very few books on this subject which is likely to be a classic. The impressiveness of Wheeler Robinson's discussion of this vital subject is largely due to his intellectual honesty. He does not deny that "illusion" has played a considerable part in the development of religion, and he faces this fact in his remarkable chapter on "the Ministry of Error."

The progress of philosophy in recent years has concentrated attention on the problem of history. The philosophy of history, which used to be regarded as a doubtful claimant for inclusion in the circle of philosophical studies, has moved into the centre of the stage, and the Christian thinker must take account of this movement of thought. It was fortunate, therefore, that the unfolding of Wheeler Robinson's own intellectual life led him naturally to concentrate upon history in his final work. He certainly would not have entertained the idea that he had said the last word on this matter, or that there were no serious difficulties to be cleared up before we can give a confident Christian answer to the question, What is the significance of history, but it would not be an exaggeration to assert that he has laid down the broad lines on which theology must proceed and has linked the problem of history securely with the doctrines of revelation and redemption.

The theology of Wheeler Robinson is, first of all, a theology of the Holy Spirit, and here too he was in harmony with the deeper tendencies of religious thought. The new conceptions of the universe which have been forced upon us by science, and by the philosophy which has been profoundly influenced by science, compel us to think out the doctrine of creation and of the place of man in the world. The old theology of the spirit is evidently wholly inadequate, and there can be little doubt that the re-making of Christian doctrine for the new age must begin with a re-statement of our belief concerning the Spirit. Here again Wheeler Robinson showed the way, while leaving much to be done to elaborate and apply the principle which he discerned.

This brief and totally inadequate account of his contribution to Christian theology and philosophy will, I hope, at least have indicated that it consisted, not of a closed system, but of a body of seminal ideas. The curse of theology is that its development so often takes the form of violent reactions and of closely-knit "schools of thought," which in turn reach positions of dominance. Wheeler Robinson had no ambition to found a school or lead a movement, but it is to be hoped that his spirit and his method will be transmitted to many sincere and humble scholars who will pursue the same enquiries with that devotion to truth and deep personal piety of which he has left us an abiding example.

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