

## ARTICLE III.

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN SCOTLAND IN THE  
VICTORIAN ERA.<sup>1</sup>

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THE present writer once received the more quaint than salutary advice for pulpit oratory—to have a good beginning and a good ending, what comes between mattering but little. Religious thought in the Victorian era conforms to these requisites; with bright beginning and lustrous ending, it has mid-spaces that yield but little. But, so apt is religious progress to proceed in seemingly spiral manner rather than in rectilinear fashion, that these apparently barren spaces were really fruitful of silent growths. When young Victoria stepped upon the throne at the close of the fourth decade (1837) of our century, the time was big with influences that made for enlarged charity and wholesome intellectual breadth. These influences proceeded largely from a pair of writers whom foreign theologians account two of the greatest dogmatic theologians of our country in this century. Of these the first was the quiet, contemplative, brooding layman of deeply religious turn, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen. Little known as his books now are, the independence of his work is memorable. Just before him had gone the influence of Schleiermacher in Germany, and of Coleridge in England. The inward or experiential aspects on which they laid stress were quite independently reached by Erskine. To him, as to Jacobi,

<sup>1</sup> The substance of an address on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, in June, 1897.

religion was a thing of the heart. For him the truth of the gospel was proved by its suitability to man's nature and needs. He loved to dwell on God as the loving Father of all men. He voiced the spirit of those who, as an English paper once put it, had become "insurgent against the dismal Calvinistic decrees." Strong in spiritual insight and rich in religious feeling, Erskine was weak in dialectic skill or argumentative force.

The second influence was Dr. Macleod Campbell, whose deposition from the ministry of the Scottish Church every one now laments. It was Campbell's aim to make the atonement more spiritual and more real to men. Christ had for him made a confession of our sins, which was a "perfect Amen in humanity" to the Divine judgment on our sins. He would have men brought into assurance of God's love. Both he and Erskine put ethical inwardness before the forensic externality then so common. These influences—however we may judge of them—gave religious thought an impulse within Scotland such as it never lost, and there were fruitful results beyond. In England, they stamped the theology of Maurice with the best features it bore. This expansive feeling, this progressive spirit, is what first marks our era. We do not, of course, forget the evangelic zeal of Dr. Andrew Thomson, of *Christian Instructor* fame, nor the theological pungency of Dr. Thomas Chalmers. Their influence made for churchly movement, however, more than for progress in religious thought, and need not now detain us. Dr. Thomson died, ripe in service and rich in honor, in 1831—the year in which Campbell was deposed.

When we enter the next decade (1840-50), we find it a momentous one for all three Presbyterian churches in Scotland, although we are not now to go into that. Enough that it was momentous for the Establishment, since, by the secession of 1843, it should lose so much of its best blood, and have years of trial before it; momentous for the seced-

ing church, because of the years of anxiety before it; momentous for the United Presbyterian Church, because in 1847 it was destined to take hopeful and vigorous rise out of the union of the United Secession and the Relief churches.

It should be remembered that Carlyle was, during this and the next decade, in the zenith of his influence as a religious teacher. His "Sartor Resartus" was issued in 1838, the year after the Queen's accession. It was Carlyle's merit to be the first to make German thought, in all its depth and richness, a living thing to this country, with broadening and inspiring effect for its religious thought. Carlyle brought to his countrymen a new enforcement of the prime duty of self-renunciation (the *Entsagen* of Goethe), gave them a new sense of the great word duty, but there are more important things to be said. For these things were insisted on by him because of—and were for him sealed by—the fact that God is actually in the world, is present, is working, in it and in us, here and now. For so to feel God in one's own soul was the main thing with Carlyle. It was much that he so appreciated the spiritual in Christianity and fought materialism so doughtily. He greatly aided the advance of religious thought by his own peculiar mode of insistence on the duty to seek first the kingdom and righteousness of God. The pity was that he so inadequately realized the historic grandeur and vitality of the Christian faith, and remained so much in the sphere of isolated personalities and detached events. Pity also that he never rose to the conception of real Divine Personality, but there are still those who have not risen to that.

In this same decade did the influences flowing from John Stuart Mill begin to be felt. Mill's "Logic" was published in 1843, his "Examination" of the Hamiltonian philosophy not till 1865. Such matters as human freedom and the presence of design in nature have with advantage been

recast in the light of Mill's criticisms, though the untenableness of a theism so tenuous as Mill's has been laid bare. It was but natural that, in the circumstances of the time, both the Established and the Free Church should, for the period lying between the two dates just mentioned, have been largely shorn of power to give systematized form to their religious thought. Sir William Hamilton published his "Discussions" in 1852, whereby we are brought up to the time in which he, and his English disciple, Mansel, paved the way for religious agnosticism.

The Burnett Lectures of Thompson and Tulloch on Theism appeared in 1855. Interesting it is to note how, in Thompson's, the compatibility of a progressive theory of creation, from the scientific standpoint, with theism, is put forth, in connection with the influence of the then famous work on "The Vestiges of Creation" (1844), by Robert Chambers. Thompson thought much remained to be done before it could be said that a theory of development could be "applied to living beings." But the sons of men are poor prophets, and he little thought that Darwin's "Origin of Species" would appear in 1859. So comes it that, since about the year 1860, the single word "evolution" has proved, even in Scotland, the most revolutionary and fruitful in the whole range of thought. Exceedingly far from new to German philosophy or German science was the idea of development, but Darwin and Spencer have given it new applications in Britain.

It ought now to be well understood how unfortunate was Darwin's setting forth of the theory introduced under the phrase "natural selection." The idea of development, though so far from new, has become invested for the past generation with new power. Our religious beliefs, no less than our scientific theories, have been tested in the light of this all-embracing law. If the Victorian era has been one of expansion, in nothing has that expansion been seen

more than in its religious thought. That expansiveness has brought, not a mechanical evolution—not an evolution in which God has no place—but one in which he has larger and worthier place, is, in fact, “first and last and midst and without end.” It is bare fact to say that the real exhibition of the progressiveness of modern Christian theology, and the extended application of the progressive principle to the truths and doctrines of the whole Christian system, belongs to the last decade of our century.

We come back to say we are now in the midst of the time when Dr. Robert Lee exercised a widening influence on men’s minds in things liturgical and hymnological, as Dr. Norman Macleod, great-souled man, did in the matter of more rational Sunday observance. Principal Cunningham’s “*Historical Theology*” (1862) pertains to the period of which we are speaking. In 1864, Dr. R. S. Candlish delivered the first series of Cunningham Lectures on “*The Fatherhood of God*,” in which he maintained a particular and adoptive theory. This was opposed by Dr. Crawford, to whom the Fatherhood was universal. Candlish’s theory did not lack in logical self-consistency, but the trend of modern thought has been favoring to Dr. Crawford’s contentions. Professor Smeaton’s “*Atonement*” appeared in 1868, Crawford’s in 1871. Such works as those of which we have just been speaking may not have had the spiritual warmth or religious glow sometimes to be found in works of more recent date, but they were highly meritorious productions of their time, by whose light they should be judged.

Professor Robertson Smith published his article “*Bible*” in the “*Encyclopædia Britannica*” in 1876, the year in which Professor Bruce issued his “*Humiliation of Christ*.” Robertson Smith adopted the main positions of the Wellhausen or advanced school of Germany, with the result that he was sacrificed (1881) as a professor, though not as

a preacher, his adherence to essentials being beyond question. But progress comes only by sacrifice. The deposition of the Rev. David Macrae from the ministry of the United Presbyterian Church took place in 1879, in consequence of divergence from the confessional teaching on matters of retribution.

We are now brought, in this very rapid survey, within reach of influences that more nearly touch our own time. After more than a quarter of a century from the severe weakening induced by the Disruption, the Established Church had become sufficiently assured to be free to catch the influences of the time-spirit. These influences made for intellectual freedom, breadth, and religious charity. Tulloch and Cunningham were conspicuous in church leadership; the brothers Caird, Drs. Matheson and Flint, in the leadership of thought. Dr. John Service belonged to what may be regarded as a left wing which existed at this time, and sang, so far as the leaders were concerned, its "undisturbèd song of pure concert." But the appearance of the volume of "Scotch Sermons," in 1880, led to Mr. McFarlan's (of Lenzie) being brought before the General Assembly. The result was only an admonition, sure proof of the growth of a more tolerant spirit within the church by this time. Of the theological execution of this volume we prefer now to say nothing, as its influence on religious thought was really not great; its hope for the future, however, as expressed in the Preface, was certainly a good enough one, lying in "a profounder apprehension of the essential ideas of Christianity." But "a profounder apprehension of the essential ideas of Christianity" need not mean a reduction of Christianity to philosophical ideas or to a product of the religious consciousness: Christianity may remain a historic fact the while it is essentially a spiritual revelation. In recent years Principal Story, Dr. Archibald Scott, and the late Dr. John Macleod, of Govan,

have been among the most noted leaders of the church.

The importance for Scottish religious thought of the influence exerted by the great Hegelian school at Glasgow certainly calls for special mention, although there is no occasion to overestimate, as some writers have done. For, though young and susceptible minds were easily enough swept away by the Hegelian current, powerful and corrective influences were never wanting. The University of Edinburgh, for example, remained all through singularly untouched by this influence, and it would be hardly ingenuous, in any national view, to ignore such a fact. Nor is there occasion to forget the cases of conspicuous independence of thought even among those who at Glasgow felt the spell, but without surrendering their individuality. Mere "fashion" is an affair of quite subordinate importance in things affecting the question with whom the truth lies, and the progress of theological thought cometh not with the outward observation that some are so prone to desiderate. Taking, however, this type of Hegelian thought to have been so dominant as some have supposed, are we then to find in this fact an explanation of that decay of theological interest in the Established Church of Scotland which has, in recent years, been often broadly affirmed? If so, this type of thought would have a very doubtful claim to gratitude. But this unfavorable influence for theology is precisely what has been laid to the charge of this type of idealism, and one which facts would seem to go to some extent here, as elsewhere, to justify.

This decay of theological interest in the Established Church is patent to every fair-minded and careful observer: the strange thing is that church's own lack of enlightened concern. To take a single illustrative fact. While almost half a dozen magazines for theological ends have existed practically under Free Church influence, the church that calls itself the Church of Scotland, and should be *decus et*

*tutamen patriæ*, has not had theological interest or enterprise enough to start *one*. The Church Defense Movement, also, has made, perhaps necessarily, for the conservation of teinds rather than the cultivation of theology. The sad fact remains that the Established is admittedly the least inspiring of the three Presbyterian communions in things pertaining to theological interest. In a paper lately contributed to that church's official needs, Dr. David Hunter properly laments this "grave defect in our present church life in Scotland, that so little encouragement is given to the pursuit of theological learning. Quiet scholarship is little regarded: the pressure on every side is towards practical work, parochial organization, and the various methods of raising money. And yet the need is greater than ever it was that the ministry of the church should be able to guide the intelligence of the community on theological subjects." The few theological workers in the Establishment have thus worked under conditions that greatly augment their credit.

The Scottish Church Society influences, too, have been unfavorable for theological development, save of the narrowest, most provincial, and confessional type. It has even been possible for some of its most noted members to write on theological subjects with an innocence of German theological thought which a churchly-minded layman might envy. As if the most robust intellectual strength could not be wedded to the intensest loyalty to evangelic essence! As if the triumph of Christian truth were to be achieved through a timidity that simply intrenches itself in churchly dogmas before scientific and critical assaults on the faith, instead of allying itself with that true *Christian* rationalism which, conjoined with the profound spirituality of the gospel, is able to match every adversary, and vindicate revelation in its appeal to the whole nature of rational and spiritual man! As if the simplicity that is of

Christ were more surely to be recovered by an elaboration of church services and unmeaning sacramentarianisms than by a return to apostolic substance of the faith once delivered to the saints, and again and again obscured by the traditions and commandments of men! No wonder that good men among us have been perplexed to know whether their Bible is a revelation or a discovery, and have been unable clearly to discern the senses in which it is *both*.

The old descriptive terms, "Evangelical," "Broad," and "High Church," no longer suffice, save for such one-sided types as remain. No rich, full theological type is found merely after any one of these patterns. Mere Broad-churchism too easily passes into mere narrowness, while remaining sublimely unconscious of the fact. Mere Evangelicalism easily passes into a narrowness of its own also, with a disastrous dearth of intellectual interest and outlook. Of High-churchism enough has already been said. But each type has its merits. Broad-churchism began well, and was useful as a reaction against evangelical narrowness and even intolerance, but it rapidly lost all constructive tendency. Evangelicalism will still and always furnish the elements of deepest spiritual fervor, of profound and living warmth, and it is fatuous for Broad-churchism to dream that it can be otherwise. High-churchism, too, has a truth to declare—that the beautification of life and service may go hand in hand with the breadth of charity and the fervor of piety. What doth hinder any one from uniting in himself elements drawn from *all* these types? There is no conceivable reason why the robust intellectualism, or even high speculative tendency and interest, compatible with Broad-churchism, should not dwell in the same mental home with intense evangelic fervor and with the profound insight into Christian mysteries that comes of religious experience. If, on such a union, there be superinduced such

a reasonable High-churchism as is consonant with it, the upbuilding will be an innocent operation.

It will be seen that the time is long past when it was possible to talk of arrogance in the claim of the Free Church to be the church of greatest or most widespread theological interest in the country. She has been, on the whole, most wisely guided in the theological activity she has sought to develop. The theological productiveness of Dr. Bruce has been great, although his work leaves something to be desired on both the speculative and the mystical sides. The services of Dr. Marcus Dods as a theological critic have been of quite unique worth in our country. They, with others too numerous for mention, have exerted so clear and decisive an influence in the direction of theological interest that nothing in any way comparable to it is to be found in the Established Church. The main pity is that such theological movement should sometimes have assumed a rather self-centered cast. The Established Church has lacked theological cohesiveness or unity of movement, and whether she will do any better in the future remains to be seen.

It cannot in truthfulness be said that the Scottish universities have done for the fostering of theology what they well might have done—a fact deeply to be deplored. Their encouragement has been too conventional, hesitating, uncertain. They have all sinned in this respect, and come short of the glory of true University ideal. Our only hope for the prospects of the Reformed theology is in the fact that truth exists for man, and that his spirit will not always be satisfied without seeking the truth. We come back to say that the primacy of Principal Rainy in church leadership has in the Free Church been unquestioned.

The United Presbyterian Church has made the creditable experiment of putting the Kerr Lectureship into the

hands of the younger clergy. An excellent start was given this lectureship by Dr. James Orr, who is the best example of speculative knowledge and interest outside the Establishment, his work, however, suffering at times from a certain lack of speculative boldness. Drs. Whitelaw, Hutchison, R. A. Watson, A. R. MacEwen, and Mair, have in recent years—since Principal Cairns and Dr. John Ker passed away—been among the more influential guides of this church. Besides the influences already noted, Dr. Hutchison Stirling and Professor Andrew Seth have, in the religious as in the philosophical sphere, made quiet but not ineffective impress.

Noteworthy influences have existed outside the three great Presbyterian bodies. From the year 1843 the Evangelical Union took rise on an Arminian basis from Dr. James Morison, whose teaching had a liberalizing effect on Scottish theology. He had before been deposed from the United Secession Church for holding to the universality of the Atonement. Scottish congregationalism has been ably represented by such names as Dr. W. Lindsay Alexander, and, yet earlier, Dr. Ralph Wardlaw.

Now, the interest of these movements of religious thought is not bounded by the clergy. For the intelligent worshiper they have this interest, that they have brought nigh him—so that there should be in his mouth and in his heart—the aspirations, sentiments, truths, and principles, of a wiser, fuller, and stronger spiritual life than would otherwise have been possible—a result of unspeakable importance. They have this further interest that they have resulted in a heightened religious activity over our whole country, and made the prospects of Christianity in the latest stages of the Victorian era far more hopeful and inspiring than they were at its beginning.

We have seen the saying lately once more approvingly quoted that our history as a people “contains nothing of

world-interest at all" but the "Reformation by Knox." But now, should this be accepted as true or sufficient? If true, would it be altogether creditable? Are we to suppose that there is "nothing of world-interest" in the way our Calvinistic religion has survived, having undergone profound modification at the hands of the newer philosophy and science, and the dictates of the logic of life? We do not hesitate to profess that, for our part, the preserving, adjusting, purifying, deepening, broadening, and developing, of our religious thought through the crises, doubts, perplexities, and perils, of the century now drawing to a close, present issues in some senses hardly less momentous, and in other respects more informing and inspiring, than any offered by the work of ancestors so memorable as Knox and his confederates. If only our past—and that past a remote one—is of interest, the sooner we make something of the present the better. But we shall not begin by belittling the present—its needs, its possibilities, its achievements, or its hopes.