

A Scot Seeks God

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THOMAS HALYBURTON was born in 1674, and died in 1712. He was thus fourteen years of age—at the beginning of his adult life—when the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 put an end to the persecutions under which Scottish Presbyterianism had suffered. He came, as it were, at the tail-end of the Covenanters (he spent part of his boyhood as a refugee in Holland), and was one of the first figures of the new period—the century of theological “rationalism” and also of pietist and Methodist “enthusiasm.” His writings, though they breathe the spirit of the earlier period, also bear the impress of both aspects of the new time. On the one hand, in his controversial writings, his main enemies are not Roman Catholics, as was the case with the Reformers, or Armenians and Episcopalians, as with the Covenanters, but Deists and Atheists. He is one of Scotland’s first “apologists.” On the other hand, he appears in his *Memoirs* as one of Scotland’s first religious autobiographers.

Earlier Scottish Calvinists were not complete strangers to “religious psychology,” to the introspective study of “religious experience.” The letters of John Knox, and later of Samuel Rutherford, beside countless passages in their more purely dogmatic works, indicate their familiarity with the intimate work of God, and of the devil, in the human soul, and their skill in handling such “psychological” material. But they did not concentrate on this aspect of Christianity so much as to write religious autobiographies. They quoted Augustine even more frequently than they did Calvin, but his dogmatic and controversial works rather than his “Confessions.” Halyburton’s *Memoirs* definitely mark the beginning of something new in Scottish Christianity.

Halyburton was sufficiently steeped in the thought of the Reformers and Covenanters to be wary of making the progress of his own religious experience a standard for that of

others. He believed that he could trace in his own life a divine guidance and a divine education, but he also believed that it was specially adapted to his own personal needs which were not necessarily those of others. He regarded his childhood as having been passed in alienation from God, but he admitted that among Christians there were "instances of the early efficacy of sanctifying grace," though he believed them to be "few and rare"¹ I do not know how strongly he would have protested if we had disputed with him the "few and rare" part of this statement, and had suggested that the frequency of cases such as his was largely due to wrong ways of presenting God's claims to children; but the important fact is that he did not make his own experience a universal rule. At a later period he had such a vivid conviction of God's love towards him that he was for days like one in a dream; but this too, he did not take for granted as something universal and "normal," but looked for what special "gracious designs," suited to his own needs at the time, God had in giving him such a conviction in such a form.

At the same time, he did not simply attempt to produce a literary or psychological document that would be of interest to persons of a particular "type" but not to anyone else. In his Preface to these *Memoirs*, Dr. Isaac Watts the hymn-writer says: "Every transcript of the Gospel in the heart of a Christian is a new argument to confirm it." Precisely because Halyburton saw so clearly what was individual in his religious experience, he saw what was universal, and knew how to extract the universal from the individual, and to find in *his* pathway things that would be illuminating even for those who might travel by quite a different road. And he was able to do this because he looked at his whole life in the light of the Bible, because he read the Bible as a book about himself, "God's truth" about himself.

In the nineteenth century, F. D. Maurice protested against the way in which orthodox Protestants of his day tended to put the men of the Bible "at an immeasurable distance from us," and pointed out that "Augustine, and Luther, and Knox, delighted to read their own temptations into the temptations of Noah and Abraham."² Knox, indeed, quite

¹ *Memoirs of the Rev. Thomas Halyburton*, 1824 Edition. p. 65.

² F. D. Maurice, *The Patriarchs and Lawgivers of the Old Testament*, p. x.

bluntly described it as the devil's work to put the men of the Bible "at an immeasurable distance from us." "Yf we desire," he wrote, "to be delyverit frome trubill and anguysche of conscience, with David and Job, suddenlie can the Devill object, What apperteneth thair exempil unto thee? They had many notabill and singular vertewis whilk thow lackest. . . . By these meanis can he who is the accuser of us and of our brethrene, ever find out sum craftie accusatioun to trubill the weak conscience of the afflicted."¹ In Halyburton the kind of "dry rot" of which Maurice complained had certainly not yet set in. Hardly a single experience, and hardly a single "lesson" from an experience, is set down in his *Memoirs* without being followed by a Biblical quotation, almost always a singularly apt one.

Maurice was particularly anxious that the story of the *Fall* should not be subjected to this treatment of being "put at a distance from us," and saw an especially strong temptation in orthodox theology to believe that "Adam, in his paraisaical state, must have been under a law so different from ours, that to bring our knowledge of ourselves or of others to bear upon the subject, is scarcely reverent or safe." Halyburton's views on Adam's original state of innocence were certainly orthodox. In some notes included in his *Memoirs*, he compares Adam's original state to a happy life around the fireside of a home, and our present fallen state to a journey outside in the dark and the cold. But when he warms up to his essential subject, he is sufficiently forgetful of any deductions that may be drawn from this, to use the story of Adam's fall to illuminate his own life-story without hesitation. When any divine command was revealed "that I could not evade, nor pretend to, then I was ready to question, whether he that offered it were not mistaken, 'and secretly questioned the truth'; following the measures Satan took with Eve, 'Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden.' And again, 'Ye shall not surely die.'"

The actual story of the *Memoirs* begins with Halyburton's early childhood, of which he speaks in the same harsh manner as Augustine. "The bent of my soul, from a child, was set against the Lord." It is hard not to feel something strange and unnatural about this; but we should remember that

¹ *The Works of John Knox*, Laing's Edition, Vol. III, p. 148.

Halyburton died when he was not yet forty, that he seems to have been very precocious, and above all that he was conscious—and why should we not believe him about this?—of an essential continuity between the earliest time he could remember and his later boyhood and youth. He looked back and saw himself at the beginning of manhood, living with alternating periods of moral indifference and futile attempts to live rightly on a wrong basis, and of this state of mind he saw no definite beginning—certainly his early childhood was not *radically* different.

During this period he was essentially a “man under the Law.” Sometimes he tried to obey the Law, and failed; sometimes he did not even try, or glossed over his failures by means of one sophistry or another. Brought up in a strictly Evangelical household, he could hardly help hearing of “justification by faith,” but faith itself was but a “Law” to him. He was much troubled by doubts of God’s existence, and of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, and spent much time in attempts to prove these things to his own satisfaction. And above all, his “faith” and his obedience, such as they were, sprang out of selfishness. “Self was the animating principle of any form of religion that I had. So much of it, as would save me from hell, or take me to heaven, and no more I desire.” “Self was the spring of all. My only aim was to be saved, without any regard I had to the glory of God, or any inquiry made, how it might be consistent with it to save one who had so deeply offended.”

Then, to “pull himself together,” he made a personal “covenant” with God. “I found this way of covenanting with God recommended by ministers, mentioned in Scripture, and the people of God declared they had found the benefit of it.” But not much good was done to him by it. He fell again and again, from his high resolves, and desperately repeated the making of “covenants,” and wondered why it was so useless. Looking back, he saw his fault in the fact that “‘Being ignorant of the righteousness of God, I still went about to establish a righteousness of my own.’ And though in words I renounced this, yet indeed I sought righteousness and peace, not in the Lord Jesus Christ, who ‘is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes,’ but in my own covenants and engagements; so that I really put them in Christ’s stead.” We cannot overcome

Self by a technique, even by an "evangelical" technique.

How and when did Halyburton rise from this morass? He says, he does not know. "I cannot be very positive about the day or hour of this deliverance, nor can I answer many other questions about the way and manner of it. But this is of no consequence, if the work is in substance sound: For 'the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.'" Are not people eager to know "the day and the hour" of such happenings, only because they wish to use the findings of "religious psychology" to evolve a technique for receiving the Spirit? Halyburton had no interest in helping forward such enterprises. The one thing his experience had taught him was their utter futility.

One thing alone was clear, that Christianity had come quite suddenly to mean something completely different from what it had meant before. The root of everything else was "a discovery of the Lord, as manifested in his Word." He was able to approach God as a merciful Father, because he saw that God did not look upon him as he was in himself, but as he was "in Christ." "He who had before rejected all that I could offer, was well pleased in the beloved." The mercy of God became real to him because he saw in the work of Christ the answer to a question which before he had hardly been humble enough even to ask—how God *could* be merciful to him in consistency with His own glory and honour. In the work of Christ "full provision was made for all the concerns of God's glory, and my salvation in subordination thereto."

"All these discoveries," he continues, "were conveyed to me by the Word." Not by some single striking text, as in the case of Augustine, but "by the concurring light of a great many of the promises and testimonies of the Word seasonably sent home." It was the main "drift" of the whole Bible rather than merely an arbitrarily-selected part of it that thus impressed him as such a message of mercy. Nor was the actual letter of what he read strange to him—on the contrary, it was only too familiar—but now it was lit up by the light of God Himself speaking through it. He describes this "light" in some detail; not the least interesting element in his description is his statement, "It was

composing : it did not, like a flash of lightning, suddenly appear, and fill the soul only with amazement and fear ; but composed and quieted my soul, and put all my faculties in a due posture, as it were, and gave me the exercise of them." This particular aspect of " God's way with man " seems to have always impressed Halyburton very deeply ; for example, even in the long period of stumbling in the darkness which another man might have thought completely wasted, he saw a sign of the " astonishing patience of God," Who " did not seek, as it were, to entangle the affections, and by them carry my mind away in a hurry, as sin and Satan are wont to do, who guides sinners as the Philistines did Samson they first put out his eyes, and then made him grind their mill."

Detailing the aspects or fruits of this changed attitude, he mentions what an entirely different meaning " repentance " came to have for him. Previously it had been fundamentally a result of fear, but it was now the kind of shame that goes with a gratitude which fails to express itself worthily. " In its rise, sorrow formerly flowed from discoveries of sin, as it brings on wrath ; now it flowed from a sense of sin, as containing wretched unkindness in one, who was astonishingly kind to an unworthy wretch." And such " sorrow " he found considerably more fruitful in real amendment of life. God " made me see with wonder, how one view of forgiveness and pardoning mercy alienates the soul from sin, more than twenty sights, nay, tastes of hell, which Pelagians cannot understand." Calvinism has often been charged with making the fear of hell the basis of morality. But to Halyburton's remarks on the right and the wrong kind of repentance, parallels may be found in countless writings of the period that preceded him. John Knox, for example, says that the difference between the spurious faith which the " reprobate " sometimes have and the genuine faith of the " elect " consists precisely in the fact that the former merely " in a feare and terror, do seke some meanes to please God, for the avoiding of his vengeance."¹

Further, there arose in him " an humble, but sweet and comfortable hope, and persuasion of my own salvation." This " gospel-assurance " did not arise or remain when he contemplated himself or anything within himself—how

¹ *John Knox, Works*, Vol. V. p. 255.

could it?—but it was an assurance of the complete dependability and trustworthiness of Christ, whenever His work was contemplated. “Whenever the glory of the Lord was revealed, and he spake peace, I was hereon filled with shame, and the deeper this humiliation was, still the humble confidence of my safety increased.”

Where would a religious autobiography—especially one of the “twice-born” type of person which the Calvinist is commonly assumed to be—come to an end, if not here? But Halyburton does not end here. For a period, indeed, his whole soul seemed filled with nothing but this new “discovery of the Lord.” But this period, as he realized when he looked back upon it, was something abnormal, which God had given to him for His own reasons. “I was sore wounded and broken before, and the Lord did this in tenderness.” “I had been plunged into grievous and hard thoughts of him, as one who had ‘in anger shut up his tender mercies, and forgotten to be gracious’; and I was not easily induced to believe good tidings, for I had forgotten prosperity; and though it was told me, I could not believe, partly for joy, and partly for fear, till I got a clear sight of the waggons and provisions (as with Jacob), and then my spirit revived; and the Lord satisfied me in deep condescension, that he was real, and in earnest.” “He knew what a wilderness I had to go through, and therefore led me not into that long and weary journey till he had made me eat once and again, as did Elijah.”

“But, alas! I understood not this, and by my ignorance I was cast into sad mistakes. I fancied this world would last always; I ravingly talked of tabernacles, with the disciples on the mount.” “I dreamed no more of fighting corruptions; but thought that the enemies that appeared not were dead.” “I resolved to impose such restraints upon myself, and confine myself to such a course of walking, as neither our circumstances, temptations, nor our duty in this world allow. I remember, I could not endure to read these books which were really proper and necessary to be read, and all the time employed in them I reckoned as lost. . . . Yea, I began to grudge and feel compunction about the time spent in necessary refreshment of the body by meat and sleep. . . . The devil secretly drove me from one extreme to another; and he knew full well that I would not hold here,

and that he would easily get me cast into another extreme, to assume a latitude beyond what was due. Thus I was well nigh entangled in that yoke of bondage which the Lord had so lately broken." Worst of all, the moral change for the better which accompanied his new religious attitude, he began to regard as "more mine own than really it was."

Rapidly, and naturally enough, his exaltation gave place to a certain "flatness," and he wondered why. He accused God of unfaithfulness, and then cursed himself for doing so. But he had, fortunately, learned enough to pass beyond such feelings, and to trust in the God who was "educating" him, even when He "hid his face." From his very despondency and "flatness" he learned many things. "By this the Lord taught me the nature of that state in which we are here, that it is a wilderness, a warfare, and that we must all be soldiers, if we mean to be Christians." Later on he confesses to having been able to learn something from St. Francis de Sales, so he would probably not be greatly shocked if his observations on this part of his life were compared to a passage in one of the "Spiritual Letters" of the late Abbot Chapman of Downside, who says: "There are two states in which the soul can be; consolation and aridity. . . . Let us be satisfied with either; whatever God gives is best. But if we are to choose, I should say perhaps that the last is better . . . ; it keeps us humble."

What Halyburton also learned in and from his "aridity" was that "the grace that is sufficient for us, is not in our hands, but in the Lord's; and that therefore our security with respect to future temptations, is not grace already received, but in this, that there is enough in the promise, and the way patent to the throne of grace for it." If Calvinism has any special contribution to make to religious psychology, I should say that it lies exactly here—unless, indeed, this "contribution" is the negation and end of all religious psychology. One finds the same idea expressed in the sermons of the nineteenth century eccentric Hermann Friedrich Köhlbrugge, who has influenced Karl Barth, and has also helped to make "Barthians" of many modern Dutchmen. Preaching on a text in the first Epistle of Peter, Köhlbrugge says, "You may perhaps ask why the apostle here says, 'Grace and peace be multiplied unto you'; as if grace and peace were not enough in themselves . . . or as

if we could be partakers of grace and peace, without partaking of them abundantly. We must not forget, my beloved friends, that . . . such an apostolic epistle comes to us at a time when the heart is exposed to all the darts of the wicked one, to unbelieving, yea, even to rebellious thoughts ; and alas ! how are we then a prey to uncertainty ! . . . We have grace and peace, but when we are under trouble and trial, how is the grace already received obscured by the clouds of sin, and the soul's peace, the peace of God, disturbed through suffering ! How could we be delivered from this state, if God did not cause *abundant* grace to flow to us ? . . . If we were always faithful in using the grace already received, if we walked in continual peace with God, through the strength of the peace already enjoyed, we should have no need of such an epistle as this to be written to us. But such an epistle is greatly needed by us."¹

I suspect that it is in fact very common for Calvinists to learn this truth in exactly the same way as Halyburton learned it—by undergoing a fairly definite religious " crisis " or " conversion " and then falling " flat " and even feeling revulsion towards what has happened. " Rabbi " Duncan, for example, Scottish missionary to the Hungarian Jews, wrote : " That moment, when I was conscious of a revulsion against my renovation, has entered as a *fact* into all my subsequent theologizing."²

He knew too, however, that men might learn what he had learned in other ways. " When men come to adopt a stereotyped manner of recognizing God, or of conversion to Him, you may be sure there is some human conceit in it." In the words of one of the main text-books now used in Scottish divinity schools, we cannot " confine the Spirit of God to one stereotyped method of bringing men into living fellowship with Himself."³ With this, as has already been pointed out, Halyburton would certainly have agreed ; but the experience of such men as he and Duncan is perhaps " crucial " for Calvinism, in so far as it is one of which nothing but the Calvinist doctrine of " grace all along the line " seems to make sense.

¹ H. F. Köhlbrugge, *Sermons on the First Epistle of Peter*, 1856, pp. 15.

² *Colloquia Peripatetica: Being Notes of Conversations with the late John Duncan, LL.D.*, p. 77.

³ J. Dickie, *The Organism of Christian Truth*, pp. 386-7.