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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Religion of Samuel Johnson*

NEIL GREGOR SMITH

DURING their tour of Scotland James Boswell and Samuel Johnson amused themselves by assigning places on the faculty of an imaginary university in St. Andrews to members of their club. It was agreed that Boswell should teach civil law and that Goldsmith should give instruction in ancient history. For teaching theology Johnson could think of no one more suitable than himself. "I'll trust theology to nobody but myself,"¹ he said. While conceding that Percy, being a clergyman, might be trusted to teach practical divinity, Johnson insisted on reserving to himself "logick, metaphysicks and scholastick divinity."

If members of the Presbyteries of the Church of Scotland were aware of Doctor Johnson's disrespect for the Presbyterian system of church polity they would be very unlikely to invite him to teach theology at St. Andrews. When he came to Scotland he was prepared to view Presbyterian church institutions with the open-minded tolerance that one might expect of a Spanish Inquisitor. Presbyterians were "sectaries" in England, and as far as Johnson was concerned that meant that they must be "sectaries" everywhere else. A church that had no bishops, and no Book of Common Prayer, was, in his eyes, scarcely to be regarded as a church at all. He made no effort to conceal his opinions. He expected to be entertained by the Scottish ministers, but felt that he should not be expected to worship with them. When asked if he would go to hear Principal Robertson preach he answered that if Robertson would climb a tree to deliver his sermon he might listen to him, but that he would not sanction a Presbyterian assembly by his presence.² He hoped that a decaying steeple would not be taken down, as there was a possibility that it might fall on some of the posterity of John Knox.³ When he was being taken to see the Church of St. Giles in Edinburgh he said, "Come, let me see what was once a church!"⁴ He could not believe that Presbyterians really worshipped when they listened to extemporary prayers, and never knew what the minister would pray for next. When reminded that Episcopalians were dissenters in Scotland he retorted that they were in Scotland as Christians in Turkey. The holding of such views made the possibility of his appointment to a chair of divinity in St. Andrews extremely remote.

Some of his disparaging remarks about Presbyterians were, doubtless, like some of his numerous invectives against Scotland, "more in pleasantry

*Quotations from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, edited by George Birbeck Hill, revised and enlarged by L. F. Powell (Oxford), are indicated by *Life*. Quotations from *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, edited by George Birbeck Hill (Oxford, 1897), are indicated by *Misc*.

1. *Life*, V:109.

3. *Ibid.*, V:63.

2. *Ibid.*, V:121.

4. *Ibid.*, V:41.

and sport than real or malignant."⁵ His caustic comments aroused the wrath of a few ministers like Donald Macnicol, but for the most part his jibes were received with good-humoured patience. "Johnson sometimes cracks his jokes upon us," Principal Robertson is reported to have said, "but he will find we can distinguish between the stabs of malevolence and the rebukes of the righteous, which are like excellent oil, and break not the head." In a non-argumentative mood Johnson expressed the belief that all Christians agreed in the essential articles of faith, and that their differences were trivial.⁶ There might be a great contrast between the outward form of a church in Scotland and the outward form of a church in Italy, but he thought the doctrine taught essentially the same.

On Christian doctrine, on what was essential and what was trivial in it, he had strong convictions. In the midst of the age of enlightenment, when the scepticism of Voltaire and Hume were gaining ascendancy, when bishops and pamphleteers were lamenting the growth of infidelity, Doctor Johnson was prepared to defend the reasonableness of revealed religion, particularly as that religion was enshrined in the faith and practice of the Church of England. The views expressed in his recorded conversations may sometimes be open to suspicion as opinions advanced for the sake of provoking or maintaining an argument. "I dogmatize and am contradicted," he said, "and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight."⁷ The general tenor of his convictions may, however, be traced with considerable confidence. From the *Prayers and Meditations* written for his own use, from conversations with intimate friends where there was no audience to impress, and from the observations of those who knew him best, it is possible to reconstruct the main outlines of his beliefs on the subjects embraced in what he called "scholastick divinity."

His theology was formed on the basis of early religious training, tempered by a period of youthful scepticism. It was built up through wide reading in general literature and in current works of divinity. It was nurtured in practices of piety and habits of devotion; and it was severely tested in the hardships, sorrows and privations of a life in which he professed to find much to be endured and little to be enjoyed.

The most important factor in his theology was undoubtedly the fact that he had been reared and nurtured in the Church of England. He held that we should not, without very good reason, desert the religion in which we have been brought up. "That" he said, "is the religion given you, the religion in which, it may be said, Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion you may be safe."⁸ Providence had placed Samuel Johnson in the Church of England, and he was eminently satisfied with the place that Providence had given him, although he was never very confident that he was safe. For most of his life he was oppressed by melancholy and beset by doubts regarding the possibility of his salvation. He feared death

5. *Misc.*, II:216.

7. *Ibid.*, II:92.

6. *Life*, I:405, II:250.

8. *Ibid.*, III:298.

and what might come after death, but he never doubted that the church in which he had been reared was a trustworthy guide to follow.

He became very angry at a young lady of his acquaintance who had left the Church of England to join the Quakers. When Mrs. Knowles tried to plead the case of the "amiable young creature" Johnson stormed:

"Madam, she is an odious wench! She could not have any proper conviction that it was her duty to change her religion, which is the most important of all subjects, and should be studied with all care, and with all the helps we can get. She knew no more of the Church she left and that which she embraced than she did of the difference between the Copernical and Ptolemaic systems."⁹

Mrs. Knowles pleaded that he might not remain unforgiving, and expressed the pious hope that he might meet her at last "in those bright regions where pride and prejudice never enter." "Meet her!" said Johnson, "I never desire to meet fools anywhere."

Much as he disliked all forms of religious dissent he was less intolerant towards Roman Catholicism than many of his contemporaries. He referred to it as "the old religion," and frequently defended its practices. In true John Bull fashion he had a ready formula for making a decision on points of difference which existed between the Church of England and the Church of Rome. He confidently assumed that where they differed from the Church of England they were wrong. This convenient standard of judgment could be applied impartially to Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers, Turks and infidels. He thought that Wesley and Whitefield might do much good by their preaching, but heartily approved of the expulsion of Methodist students from Oxford.

"Was it not hard, Sir," said Boswell, "to expell them, for I am told they were good beings."

"Sir," said Johnson, "I believe they might be good beings; but they were not fit to be in the University of Oxford. A cow is a very good animal in the field, but we turn her out of a garden."¹⁰

Faith was always rather difficult to maintain for one of his "stubborn rationality," but he always tried to bear himself as a loyal son of the church in which he had been reared. He respected its bishops and clergy, believing that they had produced the most valuable books in support of religion.

From the few notices we have of his early religious training we know that he was set to memorize some of the collects of the Prayer Book (a task which he found ridiculously easy), and was required to read *The Whole Duty of Man*. He became for a time "a lax talker against religion," neglecting church attendance to read in the fields. He credited a reading of William Law's *Serious Call* with stimulating his first serious reflections on religion. He had taken up the book, expecting to find it dull, and had been quite prepared to laugh at it. He found that Law was more than a match for

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, II:187.

him. In later life he expressed the opinion that Law's *Serious Call* was the finest piece of hortatory theology in any language.

From the citations in the *Dictionary* it would be possible to draw up an imposing list of theological writers with whose works he had some acquaintance. He quoted from the sermons of Richard Bentley and Robert South, from Henry More's *Antidote against Atheism*, from Isaac Watts and Richard Hooker. He admired the works of Richard Baxter, who, as he pointed out to Hannah More, "was bred up in the establishment." He frequently read from the Greek New Testament, and reproached himself for not reading more.

He shared the religious temper of his age in believing that the truth of Christianity could be rationally demonstrated. He thought no honest man could be a Deist, because no man could be so after a fair examination of the proofs of Christianity. When Hume was mentioned as an exception, Johnson would not admit the exception, claiming that Hume had never read the New Testament with attention. When a well-known infidel was praised in his presence he protested vigorously: "Let us not praise talents so ill employed. Sir, we foul our mouths by commending such infidels."¹¹ The Christian religion, he was convinced, had very strong evidences, and it had the additional support of the testimony of the wise and virtuous of preceding generations. The faith of the Church, buttressed with convincing evidence, and supported by the testimony of the wise and the learned, was a reasonable body of beliefs, intended by a beneficent Creator to give guidance to man in this world and prepare him for citizenship in the next.

Sentimentality and emotionalism had little place in the religion of Doctor Johnson. He spoke slightly of a popular book of meditations written by James Hervey, and made a parody of its style with a meditation upon a pudding. Impatient with sentimentality, he was impatient also with scrupulosity about minute details of faith and conduct. When the puritan objection to ornate clothing was being discussed Johnson observed that he thought it better for us to take the spirit of contention from our tongues and souls than to tear the lace from our waistcoats. "A man who cannot get to Heaven in a green coat will not find his way thither any sooner in a grey one."¹² Scruples were certain to make men miserable, and seldom made them good. A clerk employed in packing goods in a warehouse accused himself to Doctor Johnson of having taken home paper and packthread for his own use. When Johnson found that it had been done with his employer's knowledge and consent, he said:

"I advise you, Sir, to study algebra, if you are not an adept already in it; your head would get less muddy, and you would leave off tormenting your neighbours about paper and packthread while we all live together in a world that is bursting with sin and sorrow."¹³

There are numerous references in his own meditations to scruples which

11. *Misc.*, I:211.

12. *Ibid.*, I:222.

13. *Ibid.*, I:300.

tormented him, and he prayed earnestly that he might not lavish away his life on useless trifles, nor waste it in vain searches after things that were hidden from him.

On most of the tenets of the Christian faith Johnson maintained a strict orthodoxy. He revered the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as a rule of faith and manners, and read them with the best commentaries available. He used the notes of Erasmus on the New Testament, and Patrick and Lowth on the Old Testament. He believed that man was deeply tainted with original sin, with a propensity to grow more wicked with age, and only restrained from worse wickedness by the fear of retribution and punishment.

He considered belief in purgatory a harmless doctrine,¹⁴ judging it reasonable that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to be admitted to the fellowship of the Blessed. "There is no harm in believing it," he said: "but you must not compel others to make it into an article of faith, for it is not revealed."¹⁵ He thought it remarkable that in all recorded history it was still undecided whether there had ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. "All argument is against it; but all belief is for it."¹⁶ That his own belief was for it is seen in his prayer on April 26, 1752, when he requested that he might enjoy the good effects of the ministrations of his departed wife, "whether exercised by appearances, impulses, dreams, or in any other manner agreeable to Thy government." He was quite aware that he was leaning over the limits of orthodoxy in making such a request, for the strange petition is modified with a plea to forgive his presumption and enlighten his ignorance. There is good reason to believe that his own sentiments on the subject are voiced in the speech of Imlac in *Rasselas*:

"That the dead are seen no more," said Imlac, "I will not undertake to maintain against the concurrent and unvaried testimony of all ages, and of all nations. There is no people, rude or learned, among whom apparitions of the dead are not related and believed. This opinion, which perhaps prevails as far as human nature is diffused, could become universal only by its truth; those that never heard of one another would not have agreed in a tale which nothing but experience can make credible. That it is doubted by single cavillers, can very little weaken the general evidence; and some who deny it with their tongues confess it with their fears."¹⁷

His prayers for departed friends, qualified with the statement "so far as it may be lawful" were ridiculed by Cowper and others on their first publication as evidences of religious dotage. They may more properly be understood as the instinctive utterances of a lonely man, grieving for the loss of friends whose companionship he had valued.

He had no doubts about the reality of a future state, with rewards and

14. *Life*, II:104.

15. *Ibid.*, II:162.

16. *Ibid.*, III:230.

17. Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas* (London, 1817), p. 116.

punishments. The happiness of the blessed would consist in "consciousness of the love of God, in the contemplation of truth, and in the possession of felicitating ideas."¹⁸ As it was necessary for the general good that individuals should be punished in human societies, it might be necessary in the life hereafter, in keeping the blessed in the state of rectitude, to have continually before them the punishment of those who had deviated from it.¹⁹ He admitted more than once that he could not be sure that he had fulfilled the conditions necessary for salvation. He feared, accordingly, that he might be among those who were damned. When Dr. Adams asked him what he meant by damned, he answered passionately and loudly, "Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly!" Mrs. Adams remarked that he seemed to forget the merits of his Redeemer. "Madam," said Johnson, "I do not forget the merits of my Redeemer; but my Redeemer has said that he will set some on his right hand and some on his left." In gloomy agitation he broke off the discussion, saying, "I'll have no more on't."²⁰

The fear of something after death was very real to Johnson. In the fragment of his memoirs that was rescued from destruction he recalled his first instruction in religion by his mother:

I suppose that in this year [1711-12] I was first informed of a future state. I remember that being in bed with my mother one morning I was told by her of the two places to which the inhabitants of this world were received after death; one a fine place, filled with happiness, called Heaven; the other, a sad place, called Hell. That this account much affected my imagination I do not remember.²¹

The very fact that he remembered the incident so long afterwards would suggest that it affected his imagination more than he supposed. A modern psychologist might infer that Johnson's fear of death, so often alluded to, had its origins in such instruction given to a sensitive and imaginative child.

When death came to him at last he met it with courage. When he was told that he could not recover he resolved to take no more opiates, that he might render up his soul to God unclouded. He was strengthened for his last journey by the prayers of the church, and was comforted by the assurances of his friends that they were better and wiser men because of his life and conversation.

Thackeray judged that Johnson had done more to stem the tide of infidelity in England than whole benches of bishops. Certain it is that he influenced many who would never have been touched by the preaching of a Wesley or a Whitefield. His influence has been extended far beyond his own generation through his writings, and through the talk, sparkling with wit and wisdom and common sense, which his friends preserved for us. He has had a larger and more influential audience for his instruction in scholastic divinity than he would have had in his imaginary university at St. Andrews.

18. *Life*, II: 162.

20. *Ibid.*, IV: 300.

19. *Ibid.*, III: 200.

21. *Misc.*, I: 135.