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A Canadian Theological Classic: Harold Hamilton's *The People of God*

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I

ONE EVENING in August, 1963, in the Convocation Hall of the University of Toronto, Trinity and Wycliffe colleges joined forces to honour twelve leading participants in the Anglican Congress, then being held in Toronto. In his convocation address the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Michael Ramsey, singled out for favourable mention a piece of Canadian divinity, published half a century before. In his student days, he said, he had been greatly impressed by Harold Hamilton's *The People of God*.¹ He still believed that it should be ranked as an important theological work. He hoped that it was not being neglected in the land of its origin.

It is clear that the Archbishop was not just trying desperately to find something kind to say about Canadian theology. His own important contribution to ecclesiology, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*,² approaches the study of Christian institutions in the same spirit as *The People of God*, and it is obvious, in the light of the Archbishop's remarks, that this similarity is more than sheer coincidence. We may well wonder, however, just how many of his hearers were in a position to appreciate Dr. Ramsey's tribute. Both Hamilton and his *magnum opus* seem to have been almost completely forgotten in this country. Significantly enough, apart from a few sentences in Professor Donald Masters' history of Bishop's University³—where, incidentally, the title of *The People of God* is incorrectly cited—I have been able to find no reference to Hamilton in standard accounts of Canadian scholarship and academic history.

In view of the reception given to *The People of God* at the time of its publication, this silence is surprising, to say the least. It is true that an eminent American historian could conclude a selective (and, at one point at least, seriously unfair) summary of the book with the judgment: "So purely doctrinaire a reading of history defies critical comment."⁴ Many qualified reviewers, however, assessed Hamilton's work very differently. "This book," a distinguished English churchman wrote, "... is a remarkable illustration of the great value that critical studies have for the advancement

1. H. F. Hamilton, *The People of God: An Inquiry into Christian Origins*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).

2. A. M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, 1936).

3. Cf. D. C. Masters, *Bishop's University: The First Hundred Years* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1950), pp. 105f.

4. S. J. Case, "Recent Studies in Christian Origins," *American Journal of Theology*, 17 (1913), 282.

of a credible and believing theology."⁵ "In these two fascinating volumes," said another reviewer, "we have a critical and historical study of the very first importance."⁶ "It is," a third critic remarked concerning the first volume, "one of the most powerful arguments that has ever been marshalled in proof of a special revelation to Israel."⁷ A French biblical scholar summed up a lengthy examination of the same volume in these terms: "Personne ne contestera la grandeur de ces vues; tous ceux qui prendront contact avec le volume qui les renferme reconnaîtront la vigueur des argumentations qui en font valoir les points forts."⁸ Such comments as these suggest that it may well be worth our while to take Hamilton's book down from its shelf and dust it off.

Since the details of his life are not readily accessible, it seems appropriate, before surveying the argument of *The People of God*, to give a brief account of its author.⁹ Harold Francis Hamilton, one of nine children of Charles Hamilton and Frances Louisa Hume, was born in 1876 in the city of Québec, where his father, later to become successively Bishop of Niagara and Archbishop of Ottawa, was rector of St. Matthew's Church.¹⁰ He was educated at Trinity College School, Port Hope, Ontario, and Christ Church, Oxford.¹¹ Ordained deacon in 1900 and priest in 1901, Hamilton served as assistant curate at St. Matthew's, Quebec, from 1900 to 1902, and then taught for four years at the University of Bishop's College, Lennoxville, Québec. After spending a year as an instructor at the General Theological Seminary, New York, he returned to Bishop's College in 1907 as J.J.S. Mountain Professor of Pastoral Theology. Unhappily, increasing deafness forced him to resign his chair in 1910.¹² Between 1913 and 1919 Hamilton lived for much of the time with his parents.¹³ During his years in retirement he published, in addition to his major work, a more popular book, *Discovery and Revelation*,¹⁴ in which he recapitulated much of the argument presented in the first volume of *The People of God*. In the autumn of 1919 he became engaged to Miss Mary West, of Bromley, Kent, and the marriage was to have been solemnized on December 15 in Christ Church Cathedral, Ottawa. On December 14, however, Hamilton suffered a paralytic stroke, from which he failed to recover. He died in Ottawa on December 20, 1919.¹⁵

5. A. S. Duncan-Jones, in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 15 (1913-14), 278.

6. H. R. Gummey, in *The Sewanee Review*, 21 (1913), 251.

7. A. Nairne, "The People of God," *Church Quarterly Review*, 76 (April-July, 1913), 179.

8. J. Touzard, in *Revue Biblique*, N.S. 10 (1913), 129.

9. There are biographical entries in *Crockford's Clerical Directory* and in H. J. Morgan (ed.), *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1912), p. 494. For further information and clarification, I am indebted to Hamilton's nephew, H. Larratt Smith, Esq., Q.C., of Montreal.

10. Cf. *Encyclopedia Canadiana*, V, 69.

11. Hamilton held four degrees from Oxford: B.A. (1899), M.A. (1901), B.D. (1906), D.D. (1910).

12. Cf. Masters, *Bishop's University*, pp. 105f.

13. Archbishop Hamilton resigned his see in 1914 and died in La Jolla, California, on March 14, 1919.

14. H. F. Hamilton, *Discovery and Revelation: A Study in Comparative Religion* (London: Longmans, 1915).

15. Cf. *Canadian Churchman*, December 25, 1919, p. 830.

II

Hamilton's main line of thought in *The People of God* is easy to characterize. His straightforward argument is primarily historical—an analysis of the emergence of certain religious ideas and of the resultant shaping or reshaping of religious institutions. While important theological considerations are either elicited from or applied to the historical picture thus formed, the narrative is carefully safeguarded from distortion by *a priori* notions of what should have happened. Hamilton's first and basic concern is to determine, as accurately as possible, what did in fact happen and to explain, in terms of the actual character of Judaism and Christianity as historical phenomena, why things happened as they did. At no point does he embark on a theological argument before he has presented what he takes to be the relevant historical materials.¹⁶

The People of God is divided into two volumes, devoted respectively to "Israel" and to "The Church." Under the former heading Hamilton first surveys the rise of the monotheistic—or, as he prefers to say, the "mono-Yahwistic"—faith of Israel and the ensuing reformation of Hebrew religion and then, after briefly sketching the development of Jewish Messianism, presents Jesus of Nazareth as deliberately undertaking the definitive, "Messianic" reconstruction of Judaism. Under the latter heading he proceeds to portray emergent Christianity as, on its own showing, "the religion of the Jews reorganized."¹⁷ From start to finish his aim is to account, first historically and then—and only then—theologically, for the rise of Christianity and the formation of its distinctive institutions. His argument moves directly and forcefully from the rise of "mono-Yahwism" to the definitive organization of the ordained ministry of the Christian church. "I attempt," he writes at the beginning of his first volume, "to sketch an account of Christian origins which appears to form a consistent whole and which must stand or fall as a whole."¹⁸

It would be extravagant to claim either that Hamilton had supplied an explanation of every significant feature of apostolic and early patristic Christianity or that his explanations always took sufficient account of all the relevant data.¹⁹ At the same time, given his clear statement of purpose—to say nothing of his coherence and lucidity in implementing it—it is hard to see how an intelligent reader could assert that his one concern was to present the origin of episcopacy in such a way as to vindicate Anglican insistence on "apostolic succession." Yet that is precisely what a temperately written critique in a reputable journal tries to tell us:

... Although the first volume deals with the authority of the Old Testament and its Religion, and the second with the origin of the Church and the Ministry, the two volumes make one book.

16. Cf. Hamilton, *The People of God*, vol. I, p. xxxi.

17. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

18. *Ibid.*, p. vii.

19. Cf. *The Athenaeum*, October 12, 1912, p. 411.

Dr. HAMILTON has written one book because he has one interest. That interest is the reunion of the Churches. If the Churches are to reunite it can be accomplished, he sees, only by each individual Church conceding to the rest all that it can conscientiously concede. He himself is an Anglican. The most serious obstacle to reunion on the side of the Anglican Church is Apostolic Succession. Can the Anglican Church give up Apostolic Succession? He writes his book to show that it cannot.²⁰

I do not, of course, want to suggest that the defence of "apostolic succession" is anything but a respectable enterprise, but it is very limited in comparison with Hamilton's actual aim in writing his book. Indeed, to describe his work as a defence of episcopal order is to stand it on its head. It may be that, by devoting the entire preface of his second volume to the question of episcopacy and reunion, Hamilton invited just such a misinterpretation. But he had already written quite unambiguously:

The chapters on the ministry are not so vitally united to the rest; but, since the idea of the Church is scarcely complete without a reference to the Ministry, they are included in the same work. Moreover, the view taken of the origin of the ministry is influenced in several particulars by the discussion which precedes it.²¹

In its author's own intention, then, *The People of God* has to do primarily with "the idea of the Church" and only derivatively with the much narrower question of "the origin of the ministry."

"The idea of the Church," however, is itself set in a wider context in Hamilton's thinking. What, the Anglican theologian Nairne asks, is his "ruling idea"? Nairne's answer to his own question, while it reflects a pre-occupation with the philosophical contrast between intuition and intellect which Hamilton does not share, nonetheless points us to the heart of the latter's thesis.

If [he writes] we interpret the whole treatise by the second volume the answer will be: that God has provided for the development of true religion in the unity of a visible organization. If however we attend to the former volume from which the whole argument takes its rise, this will appear as a corollary rather than the main idea. The main idea is that the abiding spirit of true religion is Semitic, and that this spirit is intuitional rather than logical, an inspiration rather than an education, an impulse rather than a development. Not the Jewish Church, but the miracle of prophecy from which it sprang, is the height of Dr. Hamilton's great argument.²²

In other words, Hamilton's essential concern is to depict the essential character of Judaism and Christianity as religions—or better, as a religion—of historical revelation, differing both in origin and in spirit from philosophical monotheism.

The contrast between monotheism and "mono-Yahwism" which is central to Hamilton's argument can be briefly summarized. Both Greek philosophical theology, the archetype of philosophical monotheism, and its suc-

20. *The Expository Times*, 24 (1912-13), 50.

21. Hamilton, *The People of God*, vol. I, p. vii.

22. Nairne, "The People of God," 180.

cessors were rooted in cosmological speculation; "mono-Yahwism," on the contrary, sprang from the "miracle of prophecy." Rational monotheism is indifferent or hostile to religious institutions and practices; "mono-Yahwism," on the contrary, unhesitatingly incarnates itself in a community and a cult. In the one case, we have to do with "a knowledge about God which men have wrung for themselves out of the study of the facts of existence";²³ in the other case, we are faced with what at least purports to be "a knowledge of God given directly to man by God Himself and not mediated through reflection on the nature of existence."²⁴ Among the Greeks, philosophical reasoning led to the death of the gods and the emptying of their sanctuaries; among the Hebrews, prophetic experience issued in a truer confession and a purer worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

There is no room here for a detailed account of Hamilton's development of his thesis, but the crucial steps of his argument must at least be noted. For brevity's sake, I shall make extensive use of his own preliminary statement in the early pages of *The People of God*.

Hamilton begins by investigating the rise of Greek monotheism.

The cause of this process [he tells us] is . . . a growing knowledge of nature and the birth of a new conception of causation. . . . The Greeks found out that things happen by "nature," not by the immediate intervention of so many different unseen beings. The universe . . . must be explained as a single whole, from a single source. . . . All the old gods, in a real sense, perished, and then a new God was discovered, a result due, not to any one religious system, but to philosophical inquiry.²⁵

With this process Hamilton sharply contrasts the origin of Hebrew monotheism.

To all intents and purposes [he argues], the great mass of the nation were, up to the days of the exile, polytheists. . . . Against this polytheistic background one must study the doctrine of the prophets. The point at issue between the prophets and the people is not whether there is one God only or more than one; that point is involved, but it is not uppermost in the minds of either side; the debate is not concerned with the meaning of existence or the ultimate nature of Reality, but with the limits of the power and the moral character of a certain divine Person whose existence both sides alike assume without question, and who is known to both by the name of Yahweh, the national God of the Hebrews. . . . The dispute concerns the powers and the character of that Person; to the average Hebrew, He is a characteristic Semitic deity; to the prophet, He is Almighty, absolutely righteous, and besides Him there is none else. The problem of the Hebrew monotheism or mono-Yahwism, then, resolves itself into this: How did a handful of the Hebrews come to believe that their national God was the only God and righteous?²⁶

In attempting to answer this question, Hamilton first excludes certain hypothetical possibilities. The belief in the unique deity of Yahweh was no product of sophisticated reflection on nature.

23. Hamilton, *Discovery and Revelation*, p. 12.

24. Hamilton, *The People of God*, vol. I, p. 165.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. xxviii-xxix.

All those primitive ways of looking at things . . . which made polytheism a living reality to their contemporaries, were accepted by the Hebrew monotheists without question. Causation was to them precisely what it was to the polytheists—the immediate intervention of a personal will.²⁷

Nor did mono-Yahwism result from reasoned reflection on the facts of history. “The logic of history was set against the idea that the God of Israel had no equal; and of this the prophets themselves seem to have been conscious.”²⁸

Again, the prophets did not derive their belief in the righteous character of Yahweh from any speculative moral theory.

Since they did not perceive the organic unity of the universe, they could hardly have seen in it a power which on the whole makes for righteousness. Nor again was the logic of history entirely on their side. They seldom attempt to prove their point by an appeal to history.²⁹

How, then, does Hamilton explain the rise of Hebrew monotheism?

If a religious belief is to dominate conduct and organize one’s views of life, it must have behind it one of three things—an unquestioned prejudice or inherited assumption, a train of reasoned thought, or some vivid inner mental feeling or experience.³⁰

In the present instance, neither the first nor the second alternative can apply; thus the answer must be found in the third.

The prophets experienced Yahweh, His power and His righteousness, within their own souls; in moments of intensest feeling, the belief in His Almighty power and moral uprightness was impressed upon their minds in a way which proved indelible. . . . They knew that they had stood in the presence of an Almighty and All-holy Person; hence they were as certain of His existence as of their own.³¹

But was this “vivid inner mental feeling” a genuine apprehension of God, on which the faith of Israel and the church could securely stand? At this point, Hamilton moves beyond historical analysis to draw what is indisputably the crucial theological conclusion of his entire argument. That conclusion is twofold.

In the first place, he argues that, wholly alien as “mono-Yahwism” was to the culture which shaped the minds and personalities of the prophets, a purely natural, psychological explanation of their religious conviction is patently inadequate. We must choose, then, between leaving that conviction unexplained and accepting it at its face value.

These men were, as a result of their peculiar religious states of mind, led to a belief which was wholly at variance with all the logic, the prejudices, and the mental habits of their day, but one which later critical observation and reflection has shown to possess a sound claim to be the truth. These experiences, then, in which a sense of the presence of one Almighty All-holy God was indelibly impressed upon the souls of men who breathed the atmosphere of the polytheistic stage of culture, bear every mark of real communion with God. If these are not cases of true religious intercourse, then either such intercourse is impossible,

27. *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

30. *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

31. *Ibid.*

or it has never been enjoyed by man. And if these are instances of true Religion, they also constitute a self-Revelation of God.³²

But if "mono-Yahwism" is in reality the result of God's own self-revealing activity, a further conclusion is in order. In disclosing himself to the prophets of Israel as the God of Israel, God chose the religious tradition of Israel as the instrument of his loving purpose for mankind.

That such states of mind should have occurred at all is remarkable enough; but that they should have been confined to one race and always associated with the one divine Name of Yahweh is even more worthy of consideration. It seems to imply a definite choice of this Name and of the race and religious system attached to it, to be the medium of the revelation of God and the means of carrying out His purposes for the world.³³

Hamilton's next task is to explore the historical connection between Judaism and Christianity. He begins by discussing the "Messianic Hope," which he sums up as the "idea that God would one day make a fuller revelation of Himself and His will to all mankind through the religious system which He chose in the past."³⁴ He then sketches the relation in which Jesus stood to Israel and its expectation.

Jesus of Nazareth [he tells us] appeared upon the stage of history as a member of the Jewish race; He worshipped in the temple; used the Hebrew Scriptures as divine; called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, His Father; and claimed to be the fulfilment of the Messianic Hope, and to introduce the realization of that which had been promised to the Patriarchs.³⁵

Finally, he tries to show just how Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the divine promise.

As Messiah He was conscious that He had authority from God to bring the Mosaic Covenant to its intended close, and, like a new Moses, to inaugurate and give validity to a new Covenant between God and His people Israel. The new Covenant came into effect and was ratified through His Blood. Under the new Covenant it was His death, not the observance of the Mosaic Law, but the sacrifice He offered on Calvary, which was efficacious unto the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. The basis of salvation was shifted . . . from the Law to a personal appropriation of the merits of His Cross and Passion.³⁶

In the second volume of *The People of God*, Hamilton goes on to account for the distinctive institutions of "the new Messianic Israel"³⁷—among which he lays particular stress on the Eucharist and the ministry of the Eucharist—in the light of his interpretation of Christian origins. That phase of his argument lies outside the scope of this introductory paper. We must, however, at least record the final theological conclusion which he draws from the story as a whole and which determines his evaluation of Christian institutions.

When we recall [he writes] how, as a result of the continuation of these [prophetic] experiences for generation after generation, the whole nation was at last brought round to the beliefs of the mono-Yahwists, and its whole outward system reconstructed with a view to expressing and maintaining the

32. *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

37. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 39.

truth that there is but one Holy God and that Israel is His people; and how at length, this monotheistic religion, under the influence of the greatest Figure in man's religious history, gave birth to a new society which claimed to be heir to all the privileges of the old, and yet was freed from all its national limitations and imperfections; and how that new society is still with us as a vital force; we must feel that there is good reason to think that the ancient religion of the Hebrews was chosen to be the matrix of a divinely authorized system of religion which should include all the world of mankind within its fold in one universal self-conscious brotherhood.³⁸

III

This paper is meant to be descriptive rather than critical. In any case, Hamilton's book is much too far-reaching and complex to be usefully evaluated in a single article. In particular, its detailed treatment of biblical and early church history invites a no less detailed examination, which cannot be undertaken here.

What can perhaps be attempted is a brief comment on Hamilton's approach to his central theme of historical revelation in Judaism and Christianity. At least two remarks on this point seem to be in order.

On the one hand, Hamilton's vision of the distinctiveness and particularity of historical revelation is clear and penetrating. It may be that, in his concern to validate the "vivid inner mental feeling" of the prophets as a true apprehension of God, he pays insufficient attention to God's mighty acts in history, to which the prophets themselves bear witness, though it can certainly be argued that his sense of the hiddenness of God's action and of the consequent necessity of prophetic inspiration for the disclosure of that action supplies a valuable corrective to fashionable exaggerations of the role of act and event in revelation. But his insistence that the prophetic faith, as response to God's gracious self-disclosure, must be clearly differentiated from philosophical conviction or the fruits of "religious genius,"³⁹ and his awareness of the necessary concreteness of a genuinely historical faith—for example, its embodiment in a particular community and particular institutions—are both crucially important insights.

On the other hand, Hamilton refuses to carry the legitimate contrast between "mono-Yahwism" and philosophical monotheism to the point of denying their common factors. As we read his brief observations on the meeting of biblical faith and Greek philosophy in early Christianity,⁴⁰ we may well wish that he had applied his lively mind to the complex problems raised by their prolonged interaction. But his recognition that the affirmations of "mono-Yahwism" and of Greek philosophy, while differing not only in origin but also, very largely, in substance, are of the same logical order, is of great importance. Unlike certain biblical—or better, biblicistic—theologians of our day, he is able to assert the uniqueness of the prophetic and apostolic faith without thereby excluding all significant dialogue between believers and secular interpreters of man and his world.

38. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. xxxii–xxxiii.

39. Cf. *ibid.*, p. xxx.

40. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 38f.