

Theology in the University of Edinburgh: A Brief Overview of Leading Figures and Trends

At the foundation of the university in 1583, the teaching of theology was entrusted to the Principal. The first holder of the office, Robert Rollock, was an able commentator on Scripture and an early exponent of the federal theology that was to dominate European Reformed thought in the seventeenth century. On reading Rollock and his work in Edinburgh, one is conscious of the extent to which the university was in its early years an ecclesial community.

Throughout the ensuing century, theology in Edinburgh reflected the vicissitudes of the national Reformed church. David Dickson was probably the most distinguished Divinity professor in Edinburgh during the seventeenth century. A leading figure of the covenanting party, he was deprived of his charge in Irvine for testifying against the five articles of Perth and subsequently refusing to appear before the high court of commission in Edinburgh. After ten years in the Divinity Chair at Glasgow, he came to Edinburgh in 1650 and lasted until 1662 when he was removed from his post for refusing to take the oath of supremacy at the Restoration. Dickson's theology represents the flowering of Reformed orthodoxy in Scotland in the middle of the seventeenth century. Anyone wishing to understand the Westminster Confession (1647) can learn much from his writings. Along with his friend James Durham, he was responsible for producing *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, a short exposition of Westminster theology written for public use and often published along with the confession and the catechisms. It is perhaps this concern with right belief that contributed so much to the intellectual rigour of Scottish church life and the nation's educational system in the subsequent century.

Yet even as Dickson wrote issues relating to religious toleration were being raised and debated in England and Europe. In studying the career of William Hamilton (1669-1732) in the early eighteenth century one enters a different age of Scottish theology and society. After ministering in Cramond (1694-1709) he held the Divinity Chair from 1709–1732. Hamilton has been described as representing the transition in Scotland from the religious wars of the seventeenth century to the verbal conflicts of the eighteenth. In considering his career, one is aware of a different social and intellectual milieu. There is greater political stability within the union, growing economic prosperity in Edinburgh, and a confidence in the power of reason to demonstrate in a spirit of civility the 'truth and excellency of the Christian religion'. The appeal to reason and external evidences indicates a more confident rationalist spirit; this contributed much to the climate of Moderate church life during the Scottish Enlightenment.

Already established as the leading churchman in the land and a preacher of international renown, Thomas Chalmers succeeded to the Divinity Chair in 1828. Chalmers' theology might be viewed as combining the traditions of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Scottish thought. There is an evangelical commitment to the themes of Reformed orthodoxy, although his defence of its doctrine of predestination is combined with a missionary insistence that the gospel must be offered freely to all. At the same time, there is a striking confidence in the power of reason to demonstrate the validity of this theological system through philosophical reasoning and Scriptural interpretation. Natural theology was a favourite subject of his and one to which he was constantly drawn. We see this in his Edinburgh lectures published posthumously as the two-volume *Institutes of Theology*. There he dwells at some length on the evidences for Christian faith, particularly the scientific study and philosophical argument that supported the design argument. The veracity of Scripture is demonstrated by an internal consistency which sets it apart from other ancient documents. It is further confirmed by the miracles it attests, the fulfilment of prophecy, the growth of the early

church and the witness of the saints. This then leads to an exposition of Christian doctrine. Here again Chalmers follows his trusted experimental method. He begins with the evidences of human sinfulness before proceeding to a study of its remedy. In justification of this procedure he tells his students that it is the one they are to follow in their preaching.

Although in late Victorian Scotland the biblical scholars of New College outshone those in the university, the established church nonetheless could claim one of the leading intellectuals of the age in Robert Flint. He moved from parish ministry in Fife to the Chair of Moral Philosophy in St Andrews before settling in Edinburgh. In the theology of Flint, we encounter a set of problems with which modern theologians are familiar. He grappled with secularisation, the evolutionary science of Darwin, the relationship of politics to religion, and issues raised by a growing awareness of other world religions. Much involved in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he displays a serious theological interest in the world religions, an interest already evident in the work of Principal Robertson a century earlier. Flint also appears to have been one of the first Scottish theologians to interact with socialism, his teaching providing much impetus to a more critical political theology in the Scottish churches. Both socialism and Christianity, he claimed, express a fundamental human solidarity, a sense of the evil that can arise from unbridled competition, and a stress on the necessity of the spirit of co-operation.

Flint was succeeded in 1903 by W.P. Paterson who had earlier ministered in Crieff before taking up the Chair of Systematic Theology in Aberdeen. Paterson had established a reputation as a preacher and lecturer of some eloquence. In his work we begin to see the strong influence of German theology in Edinburgh, an influence that can also be detected in his colleague Hugh Ross Mackintosh who from 1904 held the chair at New College, by that time a college of the United Free Church. Paterson had studied in Leipzig, Erlangen and Berlin; Mackintosh in Freiburg, Halle and Marburg. A revered teacher, Mackintosh exercised huge influence on his students. In grappling with the problems of modern theology, he continued to convey that strong sense of piety that characterised earlier Scottish writers with an almost erotic intensity. He was also one of the first in the English-speaking world to offer a critical reception of the emerging theology of Karl Barth, a tradition in Edinburgh that was to be continued by G.T. Thomson and Tom Torrance.

Paterson retired in 1934 to be succeeded by John Baillie who returned to Scotland from Union Theological Seminary in New York. Baillie had been born into the Free Church manse of Gairloch in the west highlands, and he combined in his life and work the piety of his highland roots together with the erudition of continental thought and the sophistication of New York. His return to Scotland coincided with the merger of the University Faculty and the United Free Church College. Baillie himself had been educated both in the university and the college, and his tenure of the chair coincided with one of the most illustrious periods for theology in Edinburgh.

John Baillie sustained a flow of publications from the 1920s to the 1960s which displayed his dominant theological interests. If his most enduring work was the *Diary of Private Prayer*, his most creative is *Our Knowledge of God* published in 1939. Here we see a departure from his earlier position with a much greater recognition of the contextuality of theological knowledge. This is developed through the idea of 'mediated immediacy', a concept which enables Baillie to speak of an apprehension of the divine presence but one which is always mediated by created realities such as the natural world, other people and the Christian story. The need to explore common ground with the sceptic, with practitioners of other disciplines, with other religions, and with contemporary society

and its various forms of discourse is present in almost all Baillie's writings. One senses that his mid-century audience is becoming increasingly pluralist and secular. It has become dissociated from the Christian faith of its upbringing though it still recognises its symbols and practises its mores. Perhaps much of what he wrote was driven by a sense of guilt that he had survived the Great War, a war in which many of his contemporaries and friends had perished. He wrote in some autobiographical reflections, 'When I turned again to my old pursuits after the war was over, the khaki figures still seemed to keep their place in the background of my mind, and in much of what I have written since these days a clairvoyant reader may find them haunting the margins of the page.'

T. F. Torrance was appointed to the Chair of Christian Dogmatics in 1952. Had he never published a single book, Tom Torrance's achievements would still be formidable: the supervision of the English translation of Calvin's commentaries, and Barth's *Church Dogmatics* with Geoffrey Bromiley; the founding of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* with J.K.S. Reid; a pivotal role in Reformed-Orthodox ecumenical dialogue; the convenership of the church's baptismal commission in the 1950s; and the supervision of a generation of students from across the world. Yet, through the publication of numerous monographs and essays, Torrance is arguably the most influential British theologian of the twentieth-century. His early reputation was established as a promoter of Barth in the English-speaking world but one is also struck by how much of it reflects more native influences and concerns such as his upbringing by missionary parents, the teaching of H.R. Mackintosh, and the writings of John Macmurray. His work today attracts the attention of a steady stream of research students, and also that of the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship in the USA.

The holders of the Divinity Chair in the twentieth century have each had lengthy tenures and exercised a major influence on the institution. This is true especially of John McIntyre who, succeeding Baillie in 1956, held the position for thirty years. McIntyre's early theological work on history and on Anselm display many of the characteristics and themes which are evident throughout his life's work. These include an ability to analyse a problem from different angles, an awareness of the complex relationship of theology with other disciplines, and a sense of the variety of theological tasks including both the study of Christian doctrine and the task of apologetics to which he remained wholly committed. Largely under the leadership of McIntyre, as Dean and Principal (and also prior to his departure for St Andrews during that of his successor Bill Shaw in the 1970s), New College became a more ecumenical and theologically diverse institution. A significant marker was set down in 1979 with the appointment of James Mackey, a Roman Catholic theologian and laicised priest, to the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Systematic Theology. The nomination of Mackey aroused considerable controversy in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the national press. Almost thirty years later, it is hard to appreciate the storm of controversy that was aroused.

The emergence of practical theology, particularly under the leadership of Duncan Forrester, has also impacted in important ways upon theology in Edinburgh since the 1970s. With the gradual integration of three former departments – Divinity, Christian Dogmatics, and Christian Ethics & Practical Theology – into a single Theology and Ethics subject area, strict disciplinary divisions have been eroded. This has been to the benefit of both research and teaching, not least in the extent to which ethics is now at the heart of the syllabus. At the same time, the greater diversity of New College has registered not only changes in society and the university, but also a sense of the importance of ecumenical engagement. Although Scotland may now be more secular and less Presbyterian, this has brought some gains to the School of Divinity. Roland Walls, James Torrance, Bill Shaw, Elizabeth Templeton, Noel O'Donoghue, Alasdair Heron, Jim Mackey, Ruth Page, Alan

Lewis, Bruce McCormack, Kevin Vanhoozer and Gary Badcock each made a distinctive impact upon the student body through their lectures and writings. Their interests, approaches and convictions have generated an awareness of the richness of Christian tradition, together with the tasks confronting faith and practice in modernity. For the future, the challenge will be to combine a sense of the global character of theology while continuing to reflect upon our Scottish context and its heritage.

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