



Edmund Hill OP: In Memoriam

Fergus Kerr OP

Fr Edmund Hill, who contributed to this journal over many years, died in Cambridge after a short illness on 11 November 2010. Born in Spain on 23 July 1923, Russell Hill was the second of four brothers: Sandy, the eldest, died quite recently; Michael, born a year or two after Russell, died in childhood; while Mark, the youngest, was chief family mourner at the funeral in Cambridge on 19 November.¹

Their father was a mining engineer with the Rio Tinto Company in southern Spain. His family, and their mother's family also, had a long association with the mines. Their maternal grandfather Dr R. Russell Ross, chief medical officer to the Company, was responsible, with a colleague, so family tradition has it, for introducing football to Spain: Huelva is the senior club in the league. The life enjoyed by this quasi-colony of British expatriates in Andalusia is well described by David Avery, in *Not On Queen Victoria's Birthday: The Story of the Rio Tinto Mines* (Collins: 1974). (The mines closed on Victoria Day.)

Dr Ross and his wife did not find settling down in the United Kingdom easy when he retired. About 1930 they rented a house in Edinburgh, let to them by Scott Moncrieff and Trail, the family lawyers: 24 George Square, which is the late 18th century house bought by the Dominicans in 1931 to be the Catholic Chaplaincy to the University of Edinburgh.² Edmund remembered staying in the house with his grandparents, with a nursemaid to look after him.

The boys were of course sent home to school: Bigshot near Wokingham. Unlike his brothers, who went on to Loretto (Midlothian), Edmund, at the suggestion of the Latin master, was entered for a scholarship at Winchester College: there were 16 places and, as he reports, he 'scraped in as 16th out of 16'.

In 1941, as was not unusual for public school leavers, he went up to Oxford for a year and was then commissioned, in his case in the Royal Armoured Corps, in the Westminster Dragoons, a territorial regiment. As it turned out, he was never in battle. When the regiment went to France in June 1944 he was left behind 'for various excellent

¹ I am grateful to Mark Hill for sending me a copy of Fr Edmund's family memoir.

² About half the money was donated by Mrs Tytus: see F. Kerr, 'Mrs Tytus: Founder of Blackfriars, Oxford', *New Blackfriars* January 2006: 77–82.

reasons': 'basically that I would have made a total mess of things had I gone with them — shall we say "irresponsible incompetence"?' — so he jokes in his wryly self-deprecating manner.

As far as religion goes the family background was Church of England on his father's side and Scottish Presbyterian on his mother's, though not of the gloomy kind. At Winchester, 'trailing in their wake', he adopted the religion of Cosmic Unity invented by his contemporaries James Lighthill (the eminent mathematician, drowned in 1998) and Freeman Dyson (the equally eminent physicist). He soon realised this was 'codswallop'. In Andalusia, the locals of course were Roman Catholic: few of the expatriates were anything but Anglican or Presbyterian. Staying with an aunt at Virginia Water, in 1937 or 8, young Russell met Noel Ross, an older cousin from a branch of the family in South Africa. As he remembered being told, this cousin had become a Catholic and 'even tried to become a monk', but, dissuaded by an uncle, joined the Malay States Civil Service instead.

In the year at Oxford Edmund used to 'snook (sic) around listening to various sermons', including William Temple in St Mary's — yet 'none of them seemed right'. He was clearly searching for 'the right sort of thing'. On Easter Sunday 1944 he went to Mass for the first time in the church at Aldeburgh, near where the Dragoons were stationed, taken by his friend the second in command of the regiment, Patrick Jameson (of the Irish whiskey family) — 'a ceremony like nothing I had seen before'. A few weeks later, now at the army depot in Catterick, he sought out the RC chaplain, 'a kind but totally vague Jesuit priest', who gave him about three 'highly uninformative talks'. On being posted to another holding unit he asked the Jesuit for a letter to the chaplain there: 'he wanted to receive me there and then, but I declined, and thank God I did, because the chaplain at this other place gave me regular instructions, crammed into at most three weeks, but just the right thing'. He was received into the Church in September 1944.

A few weeks later again, now at Maryhill Barracks in Glasgow, as he was going out to Mass in the nearest parish church, 'the appalling thought suddenly struck me' — 'My God! Suppose I ought to become a priest!!'. (He'd vaguely thought of law.)

Back in Oxford in 1946, completing his degree (history at Magdalene College), since 'from my studies in English history I knew quite a bit about priests of one kind and another', the friars were the only ones that appealed to him. He visited the Franciscan church in Iffley Road: 'One look inside the church and I knew — "the vibes are all wrong"'. Next he tried Blackfriars in St Giles': as he rang the bell the door was immediately opened, not by the lay brother one would have expected, but by Fr Conrad Pepler, who just happened to be ushering out Edmund's Catholic cousin Noel Ross: it had been the Dominicans he'd wanted to join in his youth, now in 1946 he had

survived years in the notorious Changi prison camp. ‘This was a sign indeed that couldn’t be gainsaid’, Edmund notes, with a touch of that clipped self-mockery that colleagues and friends would remember.

Given the religious name Edmund, he entered the Order in 1948; was ordained priest in 1954 at Blackfriars Oxford; and assigned to teach at Hawkesyard Priory in Staffordshire, then the house at which young Dominicans studied philosophy for three years. In 1958–9 under the heading of Sacred Eloquence he took us once a week through St Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* — Augustine, as it turned out, was destined to become the great labour and delight of Edmund’s life.

But first — in 1966 — in a major reorganization of our overseas commitments, in the first wave of post Vatican II enthusiasm and expansion, Edmund was sent to South Africa (priests of the English Dominicans had ministered there since the Great War).³ He taught first in the Dominican study house at Stellenbosch in the Western Cape and then at Hammanskraal in the Transvaal, the diocesan seminary then in the Order’s care.

Edmund had served as Prior at Hawkesyard; he was elected again at Stellenbosch. At once, as Osmund Lewry records in his beautiful memoir of life among the English Dominicans in those days, Edmund

began to introduce there a less paternal style of priorship. At a time when we were all reading Richard Hauser’s *Fraternal Society* we were discovering that a prior need not act as a father in council: that study might be a brotherly enterprise, and that the spearhead of anti-apartheid activity might be directed through multiracial and interfaith Bible study. Edmund and other Dominican brethren in the Cape brought to their role as friars a humanity that overcame the narrower conception of the priestly caste and the sacramental machine.⁴

On sabbatical in England in 1973 Edmund found himself prohibited from returning to the Republic — no reasons ever given but because of too many articles in the main Catholic weekly critical of the apartheid regime, as he supposed. He returned to South Africa to be convoyed from the airport with a police escort straight to Lesotho, the landlocked mountainous kingdom entirely surrounded by the Republic (as Basutoland it had been a Crown Colony until independence in 1966) — where he was to remain on the staff of St Augustine Seminary until July 1994 when he retired to Blackfriars, Cambridge. With a population of 2 million, 45% of whom were Catholic, and most of the others Anglican or Evangelical, and with a king educated

³ The first to go was Fr Laurence Shapcote, who single-handedly translated the version of the *Summa Theologiae* attributed to the English Dominican Fathers while he ministered on his own in South Africa.

⁴ Osmund Lewry, “‘Surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses . . .’”, *New Blackfriars* June 1987: 297–308.

at Ampleforth and Oxford, Lesotho was not a typical African country. For nearly thirty years, then, apart from sabbaticals, including one year teaching in the seminary in Papua New Guinea, Edmund taught Catholic doctrine and biblical studies to ordinands, in southern Africa, sometimes in challenging circumstances.

Out of his teaching he wrote a great deal, on a range of subjects, always in a very clear crisp punchy style. Before he left for Stellenbosch Edmund translated and edited the image of God questions in the Blackfriars *Summa* (volume 13, 1963). This includes an important appendix dealing with St Augustine on the *imago Dei*. It also includes some characteristically sharp comments, this time on premodern biblical exegesis. For example, he judges that Origen of Alexandria (now widely admired for his ‘nuptial theology’) is ‘an example of a theologian of genius and admirable Christian devotion, whose work was essentially invalidated by wrong principles of interpretation introduced from outside into the Catholic possession of Scripture’. Edmund refers in a footnote to the book in which the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac ‘vigorously defends Origen against this charge of defective historical principle in his exegesis’, while reaffirming his judgment that Origen’s error in principle was to ‘ignore the literary intentions of the sacred writers’. This would be regarded as a highly contentious thesis nowadays; it was what most Dominicans would have assumed back then, had we ever had occasion to think about it.

The books that emerged from Edmund’s teaching are *Being Human: A Biblical Perspective* (1984): well aware of setting aside what he regarded as abstruse philosophical considerations; *Ministry and Authority in the Catholic Church* (1988): showing signs of frustration at the failure of Vatican II reforms; and *The Mystery of the Trinity* (1985): the best of his books, still as congenial an account as there is from a Catholic point of view for seminarians and lay people.

Edmund could be fierce in polemics. His review in *The Thomist* of *Multiple Echo*, the collection of papers by Cornelius Ernst that Timothy Radcliffe and I edited (1979), was caustic (perhaps stirred more by the author than the editors). The most savage article that has ever appeared in the pages of *New Blackfriars* is Edmund’s demolition — in the January 1978 issue — of the paperback edition of Peter de Rosa’s book *Jesus Who Became Christ*. Edmund had not been invited to review it, he admits —

But I offer this article on it, because it is a very bad book, and ought never to have been published in the first place, let alone reprinted in paperback, and because it strikes me as symptomatic of much that is deplorable in current theological writing. . . . As previous reviews, quoted on the back cover, declare, “[De Rosa] is indeed master of the technique of communication” (*Times Educational Supplement*); “He

is a brilliant communicator” (*Church Times*). And this, no doubt, is why Collins have thought fit to publish this new edition. I fear it will probably sell quite well, and Collins will profit by their irresponsibility... The all-important question is — What does the brilliant communicator communicate? And the unfortunate answer in this case is: junk.

This was the kind of book that gave ‘progressive’ theology a bad name (Edmund regarded himself, rightly, as ‘progressive’ in the post Vatican II manner). The editor (Fr Herbert McCabe) invited Peter de Rosa to reply, which he did — laughing it off; but need such a vitriolic article ever have been published?

However, it’s for the translations of Augustine that the name of Edmund Hill will be remembered with gratitude for many years to come. Dame Maria Boulding translated several volumes, including the *Confessions*; but Edmund did even more for the Augustinian Heritage Institute project to translate all the works of St Augustine ‘for the 21st century’. Edmund was very attached to Augustine’s sermons — his first book was *Nine Sermons of Saint Augustine on the Psalms* (1958), and by the end he completed ten volumes of Augustine’s *sermones ad populum*. He developed a way of rendering Augustine’s often folksy, graphic and colloquial preaching style. Yet I guess he thought his most important contribution is the translation of Augustine’s *De Trinitate*. One of the major classics of the Western Church, the *De Trinitate* was commonly subjected forty years ago to quite bizarre misreadings (even by Catholics). Edmund translated Book 1 before he left England in 1966 but the remaining fourteen he did in South Africa, by 1971. It took nearly twenty years to find a publisher, no doubt because the translation by Stephen McKenna CSSR came out in 1963 in the Fathers of the Church series. But eventually, in 1991, when the Augustinian friars at Villanova University in Pennsylvania discovered him, Edmund’s translation, with extensive introduction and notes, erudite and often entertaining, at last appeared. In his years at Cambridge Edmund would translate many other volumes for the series, including *De Doctrina Christiana*. Retirement from teaching in southern Africa opened the way to making the greatest north African theologian accessible in English.

Edmund held clear and strong views about dating, he could make confident decisions between textual variants and suchlike; but he was not really the kind of scholar who has left indispensable articles in the academic literature about Augustine. He was very concerned, as he writes in his introduction to the *De Trinitate*, that the doctrine of the Trinity had been effectively detached from the wider movements of Christian spirituality and devotion in Western Christianity, so that the mystery of the Trinity had come to be regarded as ‘a curious kind of intellectual luxury for theological highbrows, a subject on which not

many priests are eager to preach sermons, nor congregations to listen to them'. Edmund's translation has made a significant contribution to the famous return in academic theology to Trinitarian doctrine that began in the middle of the twentieth century. Augustine (I guess Edmund would have said) offers a far more grounded and better balanced account of the doctrine than dubiously orthodox, and barely intelligible (as he'd certainly have thought) modern masters like Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

The problem lay in learning how to read the book. The *De Trinitate* had been largely misunderstood — 'much copied and diligently mined' yes; but seldom if ever read as it ought to be. Its more metaphysical section supplied the medieval scholastics and all subsequent theologians in the Latin Church with the language to expound the doctrine. The internal structure of the human soul had become a familiar model for the Trinity. But the central point was missed entirely, Edmund contends: the *De Trinitate* is not a book merely about God, it's a quest for, an exploration of, the mystery of the Trinity, 'a complete programme for the Christian spiritual life, a programme of conversion and renewal and discovery of self in God and God in self'. The book is not a neutral academic exposition — rather, it's 'a kind of plan for the spiritual life of any Christian'. Augustine writes of 'training the reader': it's a book meant to change and reshape the reader's sense of the divine — not just to tell us about God, but to initiate us into actually finding, — or rather being found by — the mystery of the Trinity.

Surely that's right. And surely Edmund was right to translate as readably and engagingly as possible. He 'took liberties' one reviewer said; he made Augustine sound 'chatty', another said. Yet one of the delights of Edmund's translating — 'dynamic', so to speak, not literal replication — is the way he brings out how direct and informal — conversational — Augustine's style actually is. Since Edmund's death a young lecturer in patristic theology has mentioned to me her regret at never having written to him to thank him — to tell him how easy he has made it for students with little or no Latin to get into Augustine and to learn how to engage with the central doctrine of the Christian faith.

It's of the essence of Christian truth to be dramatic, Edmund says in the introduction, 'to be an encounter cast in dramatic form between God revealing and man believing'. In the *Confessions* we have Augustine's own personal drama, a drama primarily of faith; in *The City of God* we have the dramatic history of the Church, a 'tale of two cities', a 'kind of love story'; and in the *De Trinitate* we have something like the dramatic history of God — not a claim Augustine himself would have accepted, Edmund allows — but 'by concentrating on the historical and dramatic revelation of the mystery of the Trinity and by seeking to illuminate it through an examination of

the divine image in the human soul Augustine contrived to give the divine mystery itself a veritable dramatic quality’.

In making so much of Augustine approachable, even enjoyable, Edmund played a significant part in ensuring that the ancient Catholic faith can be handed on to generations to come. May he rest in peace.

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