

SCOTTISH PROTESTANTISM TODAY

RONALD WALLS

I

WHATEVER be the exact relation between English and Scottish Protestantism it is certainly true that an understanding of the Scottish religious mind cannot be gained from knowledge, however thorough, of conditions in England. Moreover, the understanding of Scottish Protestantism is more important than is suggested by the size of the population of Scotland, because of the key position which the Scottish theological schools have in the English-speaking, non-Anglican, Protestant world. The faculty of Divinity at Edinburgh University is a most important place of post-graduate study in Europe for students from the U.S.A., and that faculty—and the others at Glasgow, Aberdeen and St Andrews—are very much in touch with Basel and other centres of Protestant scholarship on the Continent. Edinburgh in particular is quite a bottleneck in the traffic of Protestant ideas.

For those whose work is in Scotland this key position of the Scottish faculties of Divinity will be secondary. Their main interest will be in the conversion of the people of Scotland. If we think only of this we are still considering a very important matter. The evolution of Protestantism in Scotland has come to a stage where great opportunity may be given to the Church to make itself known. There are signs that in Scotland earnest Protestants are fast approaching a point from which the next step will have to be either Humanism or the Truth. They are about to bring forth either religious disillusionment or Catholicism. It is imperative that the midwife be on the spot and well equipped.

II

Until recently there was strong anti-Catholic feeling in Scotland. In the face of this opposition it was difficult for the Church to proclaim the Faith with vigour. Today there is almost no active hostility to the Church. The Free Church, which is almost negligible numerically and whose congregations are virtually

confined to the remote North West Highlands, maintain a noisy theological objection to the Church because it still believes that it is the Synagogue of Satan. In the Lowland industrial belt there is a pocket of imported Orangism which does not impress the normal Scottish Presbyterian. Apart from these two sources of opposition the Church can count on considerable friendliness from the average Scot. At the same time, however, the inherited prejudice of centuries has left its mark and even the friendly Protestant has a lurking fear and slight suspicion of his Catholic neighbour.

This removal of animosity between Catholic and Protestant is not due to a greater understanding by the Protestant of the Catholic Faith but only to the spread of the idea that toleration is one of the greatest virtues. And it is in the popularity of this notion that the Catholic finds his greatest problem—and his greatest snare.

The disadvantage of being surrounded with hostility was obvious: that of being surrounded with an atmosphere of toleration is veiled. Amongst friendly non-Catholics we tend to accept their values and to become ready to buy a continuing peaceableness at the price of indifference. We come easily to think that it is at least unsporting to disturb the calm by suggesting that non-Catholics are in error; and in the vague presumption that they are in good faith we take a theological retreat. The toleration which is now common in Scotland may be a greater hindrance to the spread of the Faith than open hostility was in the past.

Consider this notion of people being in good faith. If it means anything it must be something like this. People are in good faith when they live faithfully according to the beliefs which they profess. They may be victims of illusion, but if they have integrity they can be said to be in good faith.

On this definition, an out-and-out Presbyterian of a century ago who believed it to be his duty to extirpate Catholicism might have been presumed to be in good faith. A Presbyterian living today with very vague beliefs but who feels that it is a bit narrow-minded to despise Catholics is not, because of his failure to hate the Church, therefore more likely to be in good faith. On the contrary, his indecision in moral and spiritual matters may be an indication that he may *not* be in good faith.

The mere fact that a person does not know the Catholic Faith

is no guarantee that he is in good faith. There must be a positive quality about his state of mind and heart, and this positive quality is precisely what is lacking in so many Protestants in Scotland today. We are dealing not with those who are sincere in their support of error but rather with those who have shelved the questions which have no doubt begun to worry them; and to those in such a state of mind, what is more likely to bring life than the clear exposition of the whole truth? It is the Word of God which brings light to those who are suspended in the twilight between belief and unbelief: perhaps for those, it is only the Faith which can bring the state of being in good faith.

It seems to be most necessary that Catholics in Scotland be on their guard against accepting the state of mind of their separated brethren as something healthy and to be left undisturbed. There is great need that we should discover why they find it difficult to see the point of the Catholic Faith and to do all in our power to give them the knowledge of the Faith.

III

First of all there is the psychological problem. Under the surface of the Scottish mind is fear of the Church. There are converts to the Faith who at the moment of their reception, in spite of complete conviction that the Catholic Faith is the one, true Faith, have known a surge of horror at the thought that now they are one of these dreadful people called 'Catholics'. This experience can come to men and women of the most liberal education. When Catholics meet this innate fear and hatred of Catholicism it is essential therefore that they should understand that they are dealing with an irrational factor. If they feel offended or counter suspicion with resentment they play directly into the hands of the enemy and confirm the irrational fear of the Protestant. There seems to be only one course for Catholics to follow and that is to pay the non-Catholic the compliment of assuming that he has absolutely no fear of us or hatred towards us at all. In so doing we are not only acting charitably but are also taking the only possible way out of the psychological impasse.

The reason for this irrational fear is easily found. The Reformation in Scotland was no gentlemanly disagreement but a violent revolution whose leaders spared no vitriolic eloquence to gain support. The Church was not regarded as merely in error or as

socially inconvenient but as something totally evil. She was 'the horrible harlot, the kirk malignant', and her members, the 'sonnes of perdition', were filled with 'cankred malice'. The Scots Confession of 1560 and the Negative Confession of 1581 are models of unrelenting abuse. Catholicism in 'general and particular heidis' is utterly abhorred and detested, and the Pope is said to be the Antichrist.

When the Reformers established themselves as rulers of the country this initial campaign of vituperation was succeeded by a very well-organized social order the purpose of which was to continue to discredit Catholicism and to maintain the new teaching. Presbyterian discipline was maintained by a hierarchy of Church Courts which had the civil arm behind them. Indeed, the civil courts and the Church Courts were often the same people meeting under different names. Even within the parishes the vigilance of the Kirk Session made it almost impossible for any nonconformity.

It is interesting to note, in view of the spirit of toleration which Protestants in general prize so much today, and in terms of which they tend to look askance at the Catholic Church where that Church has influence over modern states, what the Westminster Confession of 1647 has to say about the duties of the civil magistrate. ' . . . he hath authority, and it is his duty to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.'

For several centuries the only knowledge which the Scots people had of Catholicism was the selection of abuses which were promulgated as the truth about the Church. The minds of the people were effectively sealed off from all direct knowledge of the Church by the first-class propaganda machine embodied in the Presbyterian social system.

In some ways it is surprising that the residue of fear and hatred of the Church which is found in the Presbyterian blood today is not even greater than it is.

IV

This psychological barrier between Protestants and their coming to understand the Faith is not so serious as the barrier which is caused at a more intellectual level by the notion of authority which exists in germ at the very beginning of the Reformation and which has come to full expression in recent times. It is all the more troublesome because it is not a particular doctrine but a way of thinking.

Having denied the authority of the Church to teach infallible truth, the Reformers had to supply a new type of authority. Ostensibly they claimed to bring the pure Word of God to the people. By what authority did they guarantee the truth of their doctrines?

The usual answer is to say that they offered the Bible in place of Pope and Church. This is not a perfect answer because, to understand how the Bible took the place of the authority of the Church, we must look for statements about how the reader is assured of the truth of what he reads in the Scripture. The Scripture requires no outside guarantor of its Divine Authorship. This is the popular view, but is it strictly in accordance with the Reformers' teaching?

As Emil Brunner explains in one of his smaller works, the Reformers did not set up a 'Paper Pope' in place of the Roman Pontiff. A quotation from the Westminster Confession shows what he means.

'We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverend esteem of the holy scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, etc. . . . the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth thereof, is from the *inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.*'

This doctrine of the authority of Scripture lies at the foundation of the Protestant mind—at least as it is found in Presbyterianism and related forms of Evangelical Christianity. The doctrine implies that the key to the Scripture is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts. When we read the Scripture the words come alive to us as we read. We are given both understanding of and belief in

what we read at the same moment. It is as though the Scripture were being written afresh each time it is read.

Now it is very easy to see how it is only a little step—and a very logical one—to the doctrine that the Holy Spirit need not work only when we are reading these particular writings. Moreover, as it is the inner working of the Spirit upon which the life of the written word depends, the interpretation of that written word and the determination of what that written word shall consist of depend also upon the primary operation of the Holy Spirit. And because there is no doctrine concerning the operation of that Spirit in the Church as an organic unity, the result is that individual private interpretation is bound to follow. Every man possesses within himself the touchstone of eternal truth.

There is nothing original in stating that this is the essence of Protestantism, but it is worth noting that this was always the essence as is testified by such documents as the Westminster Confession.

V

The history of Presbyterianism shows a constant struggle to maintain this idea of individual illumination while at the same time proposing for belief an objective, binding body of dogma—the Word of God.

Different parts of Scotland today and different groups within the country are at different stages in the working out of this process of having the cake of authority and eating it. The most interesting development is this. The Church of Scotland is now committed to the view that in deciding what is and what is not in accord with the Scripture it is the Church which has the right to judge. It looks as though now the idea is growing that there must be some corporate way in which the Holy Spirit works in the Church. In other words, the need to have a doctrine of the Church as a teacher or custodian of the Truth is realized.

Along with this slow veering towards a Catholic notion of the relation between the Church and the teaching of the Faith goes a tendency to copy several Catholic ideas and practices. This tendency provokes occasional reaction amongst those who demand that the Church of Scotland remain true to her heritage. The reactionaries are then castigated by progressive people who maintain that they are being true to the spirit of the Reformation

which insists on constant readiness to be critical—even of one's Reformation heritage. As we should see from the analysis of the Westminster Confession on the authority of Scripture, both sides are in the right, and both are caught in very awkward contradiction.

At every turn when we observe the life of serious Presbyterians today we see people who are trying to hold mutually contradictory notions. They desire to accept only the Word of God, but are afraid to rely on the historical Incarnation of that Word. They desire to know the Church which is the Body of Christ, but because that Body must contain men of flesh and blood they cannot bring themselves to trust in any visible Church. Perhaps the saddest thing of all is when men borrow all that they can from the Catholic Church but because they are sustained only by the doctrine of inner illumination they can never have full assurance of faith and so are in the tragic position of holding the Faith tentatively.

The only semblance of the Faith which can be built upon the Presbyterian premises is one of the same sort as that concocted by the Gnostics of the second century.

The difficulty is this. Having become so accustomed to a faulty way of regarding Revelation, Presbyterians and allied groups cannot be properly self-critical. They are dissatisfied—those who are earnest—but they cannot cure themselves. A physician is required. In some way the Church who understands the root of the trouble must make some contact—especially as the patient is now willing to allow the physician into the sick-room. In some way we must enter into the atmosphere of the sick-room and think through the problem with those whom it is vexing. Like St Dominic with the Albigensian inn-keeper, we must be able to spend a whole night discussing heresy, having both understanding of the error and a burning apostolic zeal.