

TAKING SIDES

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It was the New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann who said that any historical document was primary evidence for the period in which it was written and only secondary evidence for the period about which it writes. I want in this paper to look at some of the occasions when the Baird Lectures have dealt with subjects as protagonists in church controversy and as contributions to the church politics of their day, and not simply as academic treatises. I will deal in the main with the early Baird lectures, though I want to end by referring to two of the more recent lectures by Ronald Falconer and Andrew Herron.

Let me start by straying into Bultmann's (and Alison Jack's) field.

William Milligan was the first occupant of the chair of Biblical Criticism in King's College, Aberdeen. He had been the predecessor of Robert Flint in Kilconquhar, and he was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1882, and Principal Clerk of the General Assembly. He gave two sets of Baird Lectures: in 1885 on the book of Revelation, and in 1891 on "The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord". I am not primarily interested in these lectures, nor indeed qualified to discuss them as pieces of New Testament scholarship. However their significance for the Church of Scotland lies in their impact outside the world of biblical scholarship. Both Milligan's series of Baird lectures are really "pamphlets", arguments, contributions to a controversy which was taking place within the Church in Scotland at the time.

Commenting on the reference in Revelation 1:13, "I saw one like the Son of Man", Milligan wrote

Christ is the great High Priest and King of his people, not so much as the eternal [Word] Logos, though he is that also, as He who became dead and behold He is alive for evermore....It is Christ in His Church, therefore, rather than in Himself; or in other words it is the Church as she is in Christ, and as one with Him, whose fortunes we are here to follow. With this thought, however, another immediately connects itself – that union with Christ not only in inward spirit but in outward fortune is the abiding mark of the Church, one of the deepest and most essential characteristics of her life; that the Church must tread the same path as that which her Redeemer trod; that she must drink the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism. Hence the life of Christ, remembered as St John remembered it, supplies the type to

which the history of his people shall be confirmed.¹

That central theme of Christ as High Priest present in and conveying to the Church that Priesthood was the theme taken up by Milligan in his second series of Baird Lectures in 1891. He said: "It is not sufficiently felt that, in the strictest and fullest meaning of the words, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a priestly Church, or that the priesthood is even the prime element of her being, because it is prime element of her glorified head".²

And lest this be misunderstood as some attempt to exalt the status of the clergy, Milligan explained: "Let the priesthood of the whole Church, not that of any particular class within her, be brought prominently forward; let it appear that the very object of insisting upon the Church's priestliness is to restore to the Christian laity that sense of their responsibility of which Protestantism, hardly less than Romanism, has practically deprived them".³#

The year after Milligan's second Baird Lectures were published, the Scottish Church Society was formed. Its aim was "to defend and advance Catholic doctrine as set forth in the Ancient Creeds and embodied in the standards of the Church of Scotland; and generally to assert scriptural principles in all matters relating to Church order and policy, Christian Work, and Spiritual Life throughout Scotland."⁴ In his doctoral study of the Society, the late Douglas Murray refers to the Society having "twenty two special objects, which included the affirmation of the divine nature of the Church, its historical continuity from the first, the necessity of a valid ordination to the ministry, the efficacy of the sacraments, the examination of social problems, and the furthering of the catholic unity of the Church."⁵

The Scottish Church Society was a high church pressure group, and Milligan's Baird Lectures, particularly second second series, were not simply exercises in biblical scholarship but the manifesto of the Society. Milligan was elected its first President and, as Murray shows, those who led the Society after Milligan's death in December 1893 continued to stress his emphasis on the priesthood of Christ in the Church.

The Scottish Church Society wanted to resist two quite opposite trends in the Church which it viewed with equal suspicion. The first was a trend towards theological liberalism and which was associated with people like Principal John Tulloch of St Andrews and Principal John Caird of Glasgow University within the

¹ MILLIGAN, W., 1886, *The Revelation of St John*, London, pp 61-62, accessed, www.bairdtrust.org.uk, 12.10.07

² MILLIGAN, W., 1901, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord*, London, p 247, accessed, www.bairdtrust.org.uk, 12.10.07

³ Ibid., p 246

⁴ Scottish Church Society, *Annual Report, 1892-3*

⁵ MURRAY, D.M., 1975, *The Scottish Church Society, 1892-1914, A Study of the High Church Movement in the Church of Scotland*. Unpublished doctoral thesis for the University of Cambridge. P. 6

Church of Scotland,. From 1845 to 1862, Caird was parish minister in Ayr, Edinburgh, Errol and and Glasgow before being appointed to the Chair of Divinity at Glasgow and then the Principalship in 1873⁶

The Scottish Church Society believed it needed to defend the ancient creeds against the view of someone like Tulloch, who told Edinburgh University's Theological Society in 1865 that the creeds and confessions

are neither more nor less than the intellectual labours of great and good men assembled for the most part in synods or councils, all of which, as our Confession itself declares 'may err and many have erred'. They are stamped with the infirmities no less than the nobleness of the men who made them. They are *their* best thoughts about Christian truth as they saw it in their time – intrinsically they are nothing more; and any kind of infallibility for them is the worst of all kinds of Popery – that Popery which degrades the Christian reason while it fails to nourish the Christian imagination.⁷

While Caird could tell the students of Glasgow University that “the gentle virtues are not plants that bloom only on the soil of orthodoxy. They flourish, with a wonderful disdain of ecclesiastical restrictions, on the unhallowed domain of heresy; nay, sometimes are found blossoming into a strange luxuriance on the outlying wastes of heathendom”.⁸

The other movement of which the Scottish Church Society was intensely skeptical was the revivalism of Dwight Moody. Moody paid three visits to Scotland, the third in 1891-92. Admittedly the influence of his evangelistic rallies was felt more in the Free and the United Presbyterian Churches but the sort of anti-theological, extra-ecclesiastical emphases of the revivalist represented a version of Christianity very different from that espoused by William Milligan.

So Milligan's Baird Lectures have to be seen in the ecclesiastical context of his day. Part of that context was a debate about the role and place of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In 1879 the United Presbyterian Church had

⁶ According to the *Fasti* Tulloch was “the most distinguished churchman of his time, none more trusted in the Councils of the General Assembly. He was Principal Clerk, Moderator of the General Assembly in 1878, and Dean of the Thistle. He died in 1886 at the age of 63. From 1845 to 1862, when he was appointed the the Chair of Divinity at Glasgow, Caird was a parish minister in Ayr, Edinburgh, Errol and Glasgow. He became Principal of the University in 1873. He was a greatly admired preacher, and died in 1898 at the age of 78.

⁷ TULLOCH, J., 1971 Edition, *Movements of Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, Leicester. Quoted in A C Cheyne's Introduction, p 27

⁸ CAIRD, J., 1898, *University Sermons*, Glasgow, p 4

modified its relationship to the Westminster Confession of faith by allowing liberty of opinion on matters which did not enter into the substance of the faith, and in 1892 the Free Church had followed suit. There were those in the Church of Scotland who would have liked to insert a similar “conscience clause” into the formula which anyone admitted as a minister had to sign after 1889, declaring the Westminster Confession to be “the Confession of his Faith and that he owns the Doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine which he will constantly adhere to.” But to alter the terms in which a minister of the Church of Scotland subscribed to the Westminster Confession would have required an Act of Parliament. There were those who argued for just that, and for the replacement of the Westminster Confession with the Scots Confession of 1560.

Into this controversy in 1899 stepped Alexander Mitchell, Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of St Andrews (and later Moderator of the General Assembly) to deliver his second series of lectures, on the Reformation in Scotland. He claims that as a result of the formula arrived at in 1889, “the position of the ministers of our Church is as nearly what it should be as is the ministers in any of the allied Presbyterian churches.”⁹ Dealing with the Scots Confession, Mitchell says that despite what was being said “both within and without the Presbyterian churches” about the Scots Confession as a preferable alternative to the Westminster Confession, “no one, who with a good conscience and honest intent could sign that [the Scots] Confession and answer in the affirmative the questions regarding election put to candidates for the ministry at their ordination need hesitate to put his name to [the Westminster Confession]”¹⁰

Incidentally, Mitchell regards the main argument against returning to the Scots Confession of 1560 as “the unmeasured language of vituperation” which it uses of the pre-reformation Church, and cites such phrases as “filthy synagogue”, “horrible harlot” and “kirk malignant”. Mitchell continues, “however excusable it may have been in the fierce battle there can be no doubt that the calmer and more measured language of the later Confession is a decided improvement on the statements of the earlier one”.¹¹

Everything, of course, is relative. When in the early 1980s the General Assembly was persuaded by an elder from Stirling to exclude from subscription to the Westminster Confession references to the papacy it was on the grounds that phrases which Mitchell regarded as examples of “calmer and more measured language” such as.....were now regarded as vituperation.

Mitchell had used his earlier series of Baird Lectures in 1882 on the Westminster Assembly and to mount a vigorous defence of its Confession, and to do so in 1882, as the campaign in the churches to modify adherence to the Confession

⁹ MITCHELL, A.F. 1900, *The Scottish Reformation*, Edinburgh p 122 (Edited D H Fleming) Accessed, www.bairdtrust.org.uk, 16.10.07

¹⁰ Ibid., pp 117-8

¹¹ Ibid., pp1200-1

was gaining momentum is to invite one of George Macleod's favourite refrains: "If you think this is a coincidence, I hope you have a very dull life"!

Mitchell insists against those who have said that the Westminster Confession prevents preaching the love of God to perishing sinners that from Leighton to Chalmers and McCheyne, and most recently by T J Crawford, who gave the second series of Baird Lectures, the gospel of forgiveness has been preached. To the doctrine of predestination contained in the Confession means 'that scarcely anybody can be saved', Mitchell that "the number of the saved will at last far exceed that of the lost". Mitchell disputes the view that the Calvinism of the Confession "has been unfavourable to literature". He also handles complaints that the Confession's view of Creation contradicts Darwinian science.

The Baird Lectures began in 1873, when the Church of Scotland was having to defend itself against those who wanted it to be "disestablished". The General Assembly of the Free Church held a big, set-piece debate that year. Eventually the vote came down to a division between those who believed that "the reconstruction of our Scottish ecclesiastical polity by the formation of a truly national Presbyterian Church.....is rendered impossible by the maintenance of the existing Establishments" and those who held to Chalmers' understanding that the Free Church still believed in an established religion, and who could not contemplate disestablishment. The anti-establishment cause prevailed.

Into this controversy stepped the third Baird Lecturer two years later, William Smith, who was minister of North Leith, and, significantly convener of the Church of Scotland's Endowment Committee, and his subject was "Endowed Territorial Work".¹² His lectures were a manifesto for the established, endowed, Church of Scotland.

At a time of intense ecclesiastical controversy, this was yet another vigorous contribution to one side of a contemporary debate

Smith's subject of endowed territorial work did not necessarily imply the recognition of the Church of Scotland by the state. He points out, for example, that the donation of James Baird "stands unparalleled on the roll of Christian beneficence; and by the conditions according to which it has sagaciously determined that its benefits are to be dispensed, it promises to exert the most salutary influence in the cause of promoting church extension in those districts where unhappily spiritual destitution unhappily prevails".¹³ And later, when he deals with the argument that the the success of the Free Church both at home and abroad is "an unanswerable argument in favour of Voluntaryism as against endowment" which is used to persuade the Church of Scotland to surrender its privileges, he argues that the Free Church's Sustentation Fund was a form of endowment, though less secure than the Church of Scotland's, but "it is drawn in

¹² Smith, W., 1875, *Endowed Territorial Work*, Edinburgh

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 207

large measure from a source which is really fixed and permanent in its character and which to a large extent mitigates what Smith describes as “the evil inherent in mere Voluntaryism, by which the minister is made the minion and slave of those whom he is bound as the ambassador of Christ to ‘exhort and rebuke with all authority’”.¹⁴

Smith argues for an endowed establishment in fairly conventional terms: that the command to “go forth and baptize all nations” requires the church to have a national character, “connecting the church with civil and political relationships” and enabling the Gospel to be communicated in appropriate cultural contexts;¹⁵ that the support of the clergy from statutory endowment frees them having to please congregations and combines territorial privilege with territorial responsibility;¹⁶ and it builds up what today would be called “social capital”.¹⁷ Smith’s language, however can be as colourful as his arguments are conventional: a voluntary system rather than a state endowed one, he says,

tends to produce mere vapouring orators and popular demagogues and tinkling cymbals rather than judicious expositors or valiant defenders of the truth and faithful pastors. It renders the exercise of sound and wholesome ecclesiastical discipline next to impossible and fills the advertising columns of Saturday newspapers with the announcements of sermons and orations couched in clap-trap phraseology, the puffery of which is simply disgusting to serious minds and cannot but be fearfully deteriorating to the spiritual quality of any man, forced to seek by such unworthy expedients to fill his chapel and increase the coppers cast into his treasury.¹⁸

Just over twenty years later, in 1897, the Principal of Glasgow University, Robert H Story, returned to defended establishment with a survey of what he called the apostolic ministry in the Scottish Church.¹⁹ Story was Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Glasgow and the Principal Clerk of the General Assembly.

The year is significant. In 1897 the United Presbyterian Church celebrated the union forty years earlier of the Secession and Relief Churches. Joined by representatives of the Free Church, the celebrations were marked by talk of union between the two denominations which was then being explored by a joint committee of the two churches. The United Presbyterian Church and a

¹⁴ Ibid., p 214-5

¹⁵ Ibid pp 16,17

¹⁶ Ibid p 202

¹⁷ Ibid pp 236ff

¹⁸ Ibid pp215-6

¹⁹ STORY, R.H., 1897, *The Apostolic Ministry in the Scottish Church*, Edinburgh

considerable part of the Free Church believed that if there was to be the eventual reunion of the two churches with the Church of Scotland, the auld kirk would have to be disestablished. At the same time moves were being initiated within the Scottish Episcopal Church which were to result in the formation in 1899 of the Christian Unity Association of Scotland under the leadership of Bishop Wilkinson of St Andrews. Against that background, Story delivered his Baird lectures. He follows a route which had been taken before him in the seventeenth century by, for example, the Episcopalian Archbishop Spottiswoode and the Presbyterian David Calderwood, and afterwards by George Macleod, of tracing the “true” Church of Scotland to St Columba to find in Columba a reflection of themselves. For Spottiswood, Columba was a proto-episcopalian, for Calderwood a proto-presbyterian, for George Macleod a forerunner of the Iona Community. And for Robert Herbert Story, writing in 1897?

Story writes that “in the church founded by Columba, and which from its birthplace in Iona reached forth and overspread the land, we recognise the parent of the National Church of Scotland. And the organization of the Columban church was monastic rather than congregational) and its government was based on an elected abbot rather than an appointed bishop, and from that seed the Presbyterian system emerged.

Leap-frogging the Roman Church’s place in Scottish church history allowed Story, as it later allowed George Macleod, to claim a kind of historic succession than conveniently avoided the pre-reformation church. Thus Story says that the Columban church was “ignorant of papal claims and Episcopal pretensions, a Christian community free from errors which were part and parcel of the Latin Church”.²⁰ And, rather astonishingly, he claims that “Columba and his friends were.....primitive in spirit.....were thus near those who had been near the Lord.” Who needs apostolic succession when, to paraphrase George Macleod, Columba was only two handshakes away from Jesus himself!

And then, at the beginning of the tenth century, church and nation came together in what Story calls “a mixed council” at Scone.

The assemblage which met there in 906 is the first symbol of that union of Church and State which has lasted in this country ever since.....Here for the first time we find the official representatives of both meeting in solemn council, in the presence of the people, and along with them entering into common engagements and covenants, civil and religious.....What was involved in either branch of this engagement we have no means of exactly determining. What were the particular laws and customs of the faith, and rights of the churches and the Gospels does not appear. But obviously there was a covenant made between king, bishop and people,

²⁰ Ibid., p 113

to maintain, in their respective places and relations, the purity of faith on the one hand, and its rights as an evangelical corporation on the other.....and to compel each member of the body politic to do his duty by them.²¹

So the Columban Church was the prototype of the National church acknowledged by the state which Story was determined to preserve.

At the reformation, John Knox did not require to “invent novelties”. His task was simply to clear away the Roman accretions and restore the church in Scotland to its Columban simplicity.

(Incidentally, in his view of the Reformation, Story anticipates the sound but tendentious conclusion of the late Professor Gordon Donaldson that Knox was entirely sympathetic to episcopacy and that his principle objection was not to episcopacy as such but to prelacy as experienced. Story says that the evidence indicates that the reformers had “no dogmatic hatred” of episcopacy, that it was prelacy which “brought episcopacy into discredit” and that the appointment of superintendents continued “the episcopal function”, though he concedes that although “the reformers were not hampered in this by any theory either for or against the episcopal order.....They did not believe it was of divine institution [nor did] they believe it was of satanic origin”.²²

I want to turn now to two more recent lectures which can only fully be understood in the context of the time when they were delivered.

When Ronald Falconer delivered his Baird Lectures in 1975 to an invited audience in Aberdeen, and later broadcast by Grampian television. He had, in fact offered the lectures as a series to BBC Scotland and Falconer’s then successor in charge of religious broadcasting at BBC Scotland, Ian Mackenzie, who later wrote that he “had been given a strict brief, recently reinforced by the head of programmes, to branch out into new kinds of TV religion, not to look backwards,” and that when Mackenzie said he would consider the proposal along with others, Falconer was “visibly shocked”.²³

From the tenor and tone of Ronald Falconer’s lectures, it is clear that looking back was what he intended to do, and in one sense his Baird lectures are an invormativ series of decriptions of how television programmes are made and anecdotes about those with which Falconer had been closely associated for over twenty years.

But alongside the anecdotes there is an attack on the BBC’s religious broadcasting policy in the mid-1970s and the practical consequences of it.

²¹ Ibid., p 122

²² Ibid., pp 253-4

²³ MACKENZIE, I., 2003, *I was Invited*, Glasgow, p 188.

Falconer says of that in the world of broadcasting “the Outside Broadcast Unit reigns supreme”,²⁴ and he records, touchingly, “When people ask me, as they frequently do, what I miss most from my BBC days, I reply, “Working with the OB Unit”. But when Falconer wrote that he knew well that the prohibitive costs of outside broadcast units meant that a choice was having to be made between very few outside broadcasts (which meant very few televised church services) or far more programmes based on studios or shot on film. Backed by BBC management and the BBC’s Religious Advisory Committee, Mackenzie chose to make more broadcast and reduce church services. So Falconer said in his Baird Lectures: “I am all for experimentation in its right and proper place. But Sunday morning is neither the time nor the place.....I firmly believe that Sunday morning services should be televised, as attractively as possible, of course, but in the more traditional forms which the, by now, millions of aged and infirm people genuinely need to support them”.²⁵

Underlying everything that Ronald Falconer said in 1975, of course, is his conviction that, as he put it himself in one of his Lectures, quoting James Welch, the most powerful head of Religious Broadcasting, “religious broadcasting is the handmaid of the churches”, whereas he knew the policy of the BBC was that its religious broadcasting department has “spiritual broadcasting obligations to non-presbyterian Christians as well as to non-Christians agnostics and atheists”.²⁶

Ronald Falconer only hired ordained ministers to be producers in his department, because, as he said in his Baird Lectures, quoting another London Head of Religious Broadcasting, Roy Mackay, “On the whole it is easier to take a theologian and teach him the mechanics of television, than to take an able layman technician and teach him the necessary theology”.²⁷ That was written at precisely the time when BBC Scotland’s Religious Broadcasting Department in television was hiring people who were not ordained, who were first class programme makers first, and their religious affiliation came a very poor second. It was the programmes which mattered, and a programme such as the *Yes, No Don’t Know Show*, which was the responsibility of a brilliant director called Paul Streather, who wasn’t a minister or even a conventional Christian was exactly the sort of programme which Ronald Falconer had in his sights. Some on the BBC’s Religious Advisory Committee, according to the controller of BBC Scotland at the time, Alastair Hetherington, “objected that some people taking part were not Christians and had said blasphemous things, second that the Christian religion was not always winning the votes in the debates, and third that it was chaotic, not intellectually sound. At the same time the audience figures were ‘rocketing’.

Read closely against the background of the battle for the future of religious broadcasting which was taking place, Ronald Falconer’s Baird Lectures are

²⁴ FALCONER, R.H.W., 1977, *Message, Media, Mission*, Edinburgh p 26

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 54-5

²⁶ MACKENZIE, p 194

²⁷ FALCONER, p 116

much more that what he described as “putting on paper my reflections, theories, indeed my heresies of a lifetime spent amid the exciting, testing, creative and wholly satisfying realm of BBC Scotland.” They were an argument against change.

Andrew Herron’s *Kirk by Divine Right* traces the conflicts which arose from the Church of Scotland’s claim to autonomy: conflicts when the Crown or the State tried to interfere and Covenanters and those who eventually formed the Free Church felt they had to resist; and conflicts when individual consciences were pitted against the Church’s claim to authority, and which resulted in the secessions of the eighteenth century. Herron narrates these conflicts in a typically pawky but unoriginal way but as a prelude to the points he really wants to establish in his final lecture.

Writing in 1985, he claims that if the Church of Scotland were to become or unite with an Episcopal church, then it would thereby retain the settlement with the state which is reflected in the 1921 Church of Scotland Act under the provisions of the Church of Scotland’s Articles Declaratory, which guarantee that the Church of Scotland’s autonomy. Herron points out that the first of the Articles Declaratory, which is unalterable, refers “only” (his word) to what the Kirk believes and says nothing about how she is to be governed.²⁸

In passing, I find it interesting that an ecclesiastical lawyer like Herron can use the word “only” about what the Church believes and contrast that unfavourably with how the church is run. But it doesn’t surprise me! One of the most startling pieces of New Testament exegesis I ever heard was in the sermon which Andrew Herron delivered when stepping down as Moderator of the General Assembly in 1972. As it often does, the Assembly met around the time of Pentecost, and Herron took as his text the verse “When the day of Pentecost was come, they were all together in one place”. This showed, Andrew Herron went on to say at considerable length, the vital part church administrators and bureaucrats play in the Pentecostal scheme of things, as it they are the ones who have to ensure that all are together in one place!

However, back to Herron’s Baird Lectures. Although the unalterable Article 1 says nothing about how the Church of Scotland is to be governed, Article II “affirms bluntly enough that that the government of the Church is Presbyterian and is exercised through Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, Provincial Synods and General Assemblies, and while it makes provision [in Article VII] for this to be ‘interpreted or modified by Acts of Assembly or by consuetude’ it makes no provision for it to be abandoned altogether – by Acts of Assembly or by any other method”.²⁹

²⁸ HERRON, A., 1985, *Kirk by Divine Right*, Edinburgh p 123

²⁹ Ibid.

Herron delivered his Lectures in 1985, the year when the Report of the Multilateral Conversations involving the Congregational Union, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Methodist Synod, the United Free Church and the United Reformed Church, along with the Church of Scotland produced a report "Christian Unity – Now is the Time" which asked for the agreement of the Churches to draw up a basis of union. The report concluded that the Church of Scotland should modify her Declaratory Articles to allow them to be accepted by the other churches and then these new Declaratory Articles would be adopted by the united Church. The Assembly of 1985 was asked to send the report to presbyteries and Andrew Herron unsuccessfully moved that there be delay until there was specific information about what changes in the Declaratory Articles were envisaged. He lost by 321 votes to 247 but he got the backing of presbyteries and the Assembly of 1986 required there to be a precise statement of any changes to the Articles Declaratory before the proposal for a united church could be considered.

So Herron's 1985 Baird Lectures, and his view of the Church's history have to be seen against the ecclesiastical politics of the mid 1980s and Herron's view of them.

In fact Andrew Herron's view in his Baird Lectures of the unalterable status of Presbyterianism was to be seriously questioned eight years later by the late Douglas Murray in his Chalmers' Lectures of 1985. Murray explains that in the negotiations which produced the Declaratory Articles, Presbyterianism was left out of the first unalterable Article "so that it would be possible to make considerable alterations in the government of the Church."³⁰ And Dr Murray adds, since "Article 1 does not mention matters of church union or government.....the Kirk is free to be 'sole judge in this matter without reference to the state'".

³⁰ MURRAY, D., 1993, *Freedom to Reform, The Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland 1921*, Edinburgh, p 9