

Crises of Confidence and Rules of Faith

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On Thursday, 4th October, 1979 James Mackey, formerly Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of San Francisco, delivered his inaugural lecture as Thomas Chalmers Professor of Theology in the University of Edinburgh. The lecture hall in New College, the Divinity Faculty of the University, was filled to overflowing. Undoubtedly it was Professor Mackey's reputation which had drawn many members of his audience to hear him. Strange to say, that reputation was established not by any of his written works, nor by any extensive familiarity with his personal biography. What had attracted some, at least, of his hearers was his appointment having been the subject of an unprecedented debate in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May of this year.

The General Assembly is the supreme legislative and doctrinal authority within the Kirk. It meets annually in Edinburgh and is attended by a representative number of Ministers and Elders of the Church. It is also visited by representatives of the Sovereign, and the Lord High Commissioner. Unlike the Church of England the Church of Scotland allows no special position of authority to the monarch. Elizabeth II is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England but when she crosses the border into Scotland she becomes, by a kind of pious fiction, an ordinary member of the Church of Scotland. Independence of the Crown is a right which the Church fought hard to obtain and which is jealously guarded. Great respect is shown to the Queen's Commissioner but he has no right to address the Assembly until asked to do so by it.

It was widely held that this year's Assembly was more conservative and slightly less adventurous than last year's. Indeed an important part of its activity seemed to be concerned with undoing the work of its predecessor. However, any positive achievement by the Assembly was definitely overshadowed by what came to be known as "the Mackey affair".

On Monday, 21st November, the first day of the Assembly's business a report was presented by the Board of Nomination to Church Chairs. The administrative life of the Church of Scotland is largely controlled through the work of committees. Each committee reports annually to the Assembly which is then free to comment on its work. The report of the Board of Nomination looked as if it was simply going to be a routine matter. However,

in the debate that followed a complaint was made that a number of Professors and Lecturers in the Scottish Divinity Faculties had no experience of ministry, chaplaincy or mission work, Some hesitations were expressed as to the formative influence which these men might have on candidates for ministry within the Church of Scotland.

The Church of Scotland does not maintain seminaries. Candidates for the ministry are normally graduates of a university who, having gained their first degree, proceed to the Divinity Faculties to study for the B.D. (Bachelor of Divinity). After three years study they then assume the duties of probationer ministers under the direction of a parish minister. When this period of probation is over they may be ordained and 'called' to a parish. The doubt which was initially expressed in the debate on the report of the Board of Nomination suggests that some of the parish ministers were worried that their candidates were being exposed too much to rarefied academic air and were forgetting the 'real' world.

The articulation of this doubt, or implied criticism, allowed one of the Commissioners, Herbert Kerrigan a lawyer and former academic, to put a motion to the Assembly. The motion requested that the General Assembly should instruct the Church representatives on the Board of Nomination "to seek to attain" that the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Theology at Edinburgh University be occupied by a Reformed theologian. After some debate, with intervention from at least one staff member of New College who was attending the Assembly as a Commissioner, the motion was defeated by 558 votes to 339.

It was highly significant that such a motion should have been put to the Assembly at all. Until Herbert Kerrigan raised the matter it had probably not occurred to the rest of the Commissioners that there was any danger of an un-Reformed theologian occupying the chair.

The chair had fallen vacant through the retirement of Professor Thomas Torrance, a theologian of immense learning and erudition with an international reputation. The post had been advertised and it was known that amongst the applicants there had been a number of Catholics. Even those who were not members of the Church of Scotland assumed that there was no chance whatever of a Catholic ever being appointed to succeed Professor Torrance. Herbert Kerrigan's motion implied that a nomination to the chair was about to be made to the University Court. It further implied that this name would not be a Calvinist name, nor even a Lutheran name but possibly a Catholic name. It was only when judicious consultations had taken place outside the Assembly hall that the next step in the campaign could be contemplated.

On Wednesday, 23rd May, at about 9.40 p.m. just before the Assembly was due to adjourn for the night, an overture signed by thirty three Commissioners was put to the Moderator. It expressed "grave disquiet at the possibility of the appointment to the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Theology of a person unable to subscribe to the fundamental dictates of the faith as described in Article 1 of the Church's declaratory articles". It further called for the five Commissioners representing the Church on the Board of Nomination to be called before the Assembly to explain the position.

The formulation of this motion implied that there had been a leak of information as to the identity of the nominee to the University Court. Moreover, it was strongly rumoured that this nominee was in fact James Mackey, not only a Catholic but a laicised priest. Immediately copies of his most recent book, *Jesus, the Man and the Myth* SCM Press, 1979 were sold out in Edinburgh bookshops. Everybody was attempting to find out something about him.

James Mackey is a laicised priest, formerly of the Waterford diocese. In 1959 he became a lecturer at Maynooth; subsequently he was lecturer in St John's Seminary Waterford and in the Queen's University of Belfast. He later, with the full permission of the Church, ceased to exercise his priesthood, married and pursued an academic career in the United States.

Many of the Commissioners of the General Assembly gave the impression that they were less interested in his personal or academic qualities but more in the fact of his being, at one time or another, a 'Roman priest'. Undoubtedly the possibility of such an appointment to a Chair of Theology traditionally held by a Reformed Theologian was seen as a threat by many Church members. Moreover, Professor Mackey's profession of Catholicism touched a raw nerve in Scottish Presbyterians. Deep and irrational fear of Rome is an important factor in the Scottish Presbyterian character.

On Friday, 25th May an emergency two and a half hour debate was held to discuss the matter. The floor of the Assembly Hall was thronged as was the public gallery. The atmosphere was highly charged and it was obvious that many of those present felt that there was more at stake than the appointment to the Thomas Chalmers Chair.

Dr William Morris, vice convenor of the Board of Nomination appeared before the Assembly to answer questions and to attempt unsuccessfully to allay the fears of the Assembly. He pointed out that the Board was bound by the code of confidentiality. It would be improper of him or of any member of the Board to disclose either the names of the candidates or the name of the nominee.

The questions, which seemed to take the form of a rigorous cross-examination at times, were led by Herbert Kerrigan and John Gray, Minister of Dunblane Cathedral and former Moderator of the General Assembly. They launched a powerful, if perhaps populist, attack on the vice convenor but were unable to press him into giving them any definite information. The Assembly was, by its impatient reaction to Dr Morris, letting it be known that it regarded the protestations of confidentiality as inadequate at best and a downright cover up at worst.

The next member of the Board to appear was the distinguished Dr Sanderson. Dr Gray and Mr Kerrigan were able to extract from him the information that the Board of Nomination had met on 23rd April, 1979 and that the University Court was to meet to discuss the nomination on Monday, 28th May. He too stated that he was bound by the professional convention of confidentiality. By this time many of the Commissioners were roused to a high pitch of fevered frustration and anxiety. Most of them were now convinced that a Catholic was to be nominated and that the rumours were well-founded in stating that Professor Mackey was the nominee. At this point Professor John McIntyre, Professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, appeared at the lectern.

Professor McIntyre, as well as being a distinguished theologian, is also a significant figure in the administrative life of the Church and the University. At the time of the debate he was Acting Principal of the University as well as a Commissioner to the Assembly. He was able to explain gravely and succinctly the legal and constitutional position.

Under the "Universities Scotland Act" of 1932 the Church of Scotland has no legal right to insist that teachers of theology in Divinity Faculties should belong to a Presbyterian denomination, or that they should uphold the Protestant religion or Presbyterian Church government. The Church of Scotland is allowed representatives on the nominating committee simply by courtesy. These delegates were in no way delegates of the Kirk and could not be required to answer questions put to them by anybody other than the University Court. It came as a surprise to the Assembly that if indeed the nominee were to be a Catholic there was precious little they could do about it. This altered the perspective of the debate considerably. Certain issues which had been hinted at in the debate now crystallised and became more clearly visible.

A great deal of emphasis had been laid in the Assembly debate during the week on the position of the Church of Scotland as the 'National Church'. The unconscious assumption which lay behind this view often seemed to be that the Kirk was in a position of privilege and influence vis à vis the State, or at least 'the Establish-

ment'. The possibility of a non-Presbyterian occupying the Thomas Chalmers Chair threatened this assumption. It suggested that the Church of Scotland had become irrelevant, that its views or opinions were neither sought nor listened to. If the appointment could be prevented then the influence of the Assembly could be reasserted. It became vitally important to avert the dangerous possibility of the Chalmers Professorship being lost to Calvinism.

Dr Gray began to seek for ways to avert such a possibility. He asked Professor McIntyre if it was open to the University Court to turn down the nomination made to it by the Board. The Professor replied that there was no precedent for such an action. He implied that it was open to the Court to take such an action but it was unlikely that the Court would do so. This gave Dr Gray the opening he was looking for. He presented a motion to the Assembly asking that the University Court reject the nomination to the Thomas Chalmers Chair of a "Roman Catholic priest or ex-priest". He suggested that telegrams to this effect be dispatched to the University and to the Secretary of State for Scotland. This motion was carried by 412 votes to 254. A compromise motion put by Dr Brodie, a former Moderator, having been rejected. The Moderator, Professor Robin Barbour, who presided with patience and winning eighteenth century charm over an occasionally angry debate, observed gravely as he announced the vote that the total number of ballots cast amounted to 666. The reference to the Book of Revelation 13:18 was evidently intended and recognised by all.

On Monday, 28th May, the University Court, presided over by Anthony Ross O.P. Rector of the University, Dominican Friar and Roman Catholic Priest, met and confirmed the nomination of James Mackey to the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Theology.

So what does this episode in the history of Christianity in Scotland show?

It might be concluded from the 'Mackey affair' that ecumenism has a long way to travel in Scotland. But the observer should beware of making too hasty and flippant a judgement. The Church of Scotland was quite entitled to express its fears about a non-Reformed theologian occupying a Chair of Theology which had previously been the preserve of distinguished Calvinist theologians. The Church was entitled to ask, as Dr Gray asked, if there were no Reformed theologians of sufficient stature to replace Professor Torrance? The implication of his question was that of course there were such theologians and that if the post were re-advertised then such theologians would appear and apply. It must then have occurred to some members of the Kirk and of the Assembly that perhaps there were no such ideal candidates. This then gave rise to the fear, which was barely articulated, that Reformed theology is

in a bad way. The observer might be forgiven for suspecting that the real enemies feared by Dr Gray and Herbert Kerrigan were 'liberals', Bultmannian liberal Protestants holding important positions within the Church and the Divinity Faculties. The motion put to the Assembly at the beginning of the week regarding the lack of pastoral experience of the staff in Divinity Faculties implies this at least indirectly. In order to unite the Kirk, to undo the possible damage done by the enemy within, to deprive them of their public, Dr Gray and Herbert Kerrigan attempted to rally the Kirk against the enemy without, Rome. What might have been a good case for upholding the values and practice of Reformed theology began to look suspiciously like an Orange bandwagon.

The composition of the nominating committee for this particular chair suggests that Dr Gray may have been right in sensing disaffection within the ranks of the Church of Scotland. Of the twelve members of the committee eleven were members of the Church of Scotland, including five Professors of the Edinburgh Divinity Faculty, four of whom were Ministers of the Kirk, and the other a Methodist Minister. Under these circumstances the nomination could not be regarded as a Catholic plot. The responsibility for the nomination rested fairly and squarely with the Church's academics. Indeed the whole tone of the debate suggested a wholesale dissatisfaction of the Kirk with its theologians in the Divinity Faculties. Many of the Commissioners felt that they had been betrayed by their own brethren, even though the members of the committee were men of integrity who were certainly acting in the best interests of academic theology. As a result the suspicion that the Church's academics were not to be trusted became even more strongly entrenched.

On a broader plane the 'Mackey affair' suggests that the Church of Scotland is at yet another crossroads in its history. Conscious of itself as the 'National Church' with a particular position in Scottish society, its failure to get its way over the appointment of the new Professor must have come as a severe blow. The widely felt but seldom expressed fear that the Church is becoming peripheral and that the world has passed it by are now likely to be closer to the surface in Presbyterian debate. Opinions as to how to face this crisis are divided. Should the Church take the world as its agenda for theology allowing 'the world' to set the tone for theological speculation? Or, should there be a greater emphasis laid on the tradition and spirit of the Kirk as a platform from which the Church speaks to the world? One temptation will inevitably be to appeal to the 'old values'. Conservative Presbyterians have always valued the appeal to the 'spirit of the Covenanters'. Such a stress on what divides Calvinism from other Churches

and which emphasises the particular Calvinist experience of a section of a nation bodes ill for theology and the nation as well as ecumenical discussion.

The attitude of Scottish Catholics to the appointment of Professor Mackey varied. Some undoubtedly saw it as a victory for Catholicism, taking it as proof that "our boys are better than their boys". Others took more notice of his being an "ex-priest" with all of the associations which that term inevitably conjures up. Many Catholics, and perhaps some of the bishops could be numbered among these, whilst enjoying the poor press and general discomfiture which the Kirk experienced over this matter, secretly sympathised with the confessional principle Dr Gray and his associates were putting forward. After all Professor Mackey would not be allowed to teach in a Catholic Seminary or instruct candidates for the Catholic clergy.

The principal theme running through this whole business would seem to be that of the crisis of confidence. What might be described as the traditional or conservative wing within the Church of Scotland was reacting to a threat coming from inside its own ranks. The Church's control over the education of its ministers was being threatened. The real enemies, those who work hand in glove with the secularist opponents of the Church, are the academics. Somehow, Dr Gray and his supporters believed, the Divinity Faculties must be preserved from error and false doctrine. The candidates for the ministry and the rest of the Church must be protected. The unbridled and irresponsible license of academics, those who are not in touch with the real world of faith and life in the parish, had to be shown up for what they were, traitors. The dangers besetting the Church must prompt a closing of ranks. In order to high-light this danger and rally the Church, represented by the Commissioners at the Assembly, Dr Gray and Herbert Kerrigan began to bang what sounded ominously like the Orange drum.

What we may see as a result of this crisis of confidence and the defeat of the Assembly over the appointment to the Chalmers Chair at Edinburgh is a more pronounced swing to the right, to national and doctrinal particularism. The rank and file may decide to stand shoulder to shoulder against the Liberals. The loser in such a conflict will be the Church as a whole. The academics will not suffer, their careers are guaranteed by their working within the state sector of education. Indeed they have a security not possessed by academics in similar Catholic institutions. However, because the motion eventually adopted by the Assembly was anti-Catholic, it does pose questions to Catholics as to how to react to it.

It is clear that the halting dialogue already begun with the Church of Scotland must continue. The Catholic Church must not use the attitude shown by the Assembly as an excuse for breaking off relations. The Church must resist the temptation to run the papal Bull at the Orange flag. Indeed the crisis facing the Church of Scotland may offer a striking parallel to our own present situation. The recent activities of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith taken together with episcopal pronouncements about the avoidance of 'dissension' and 'contestation' within the Church suggest that all hands are to be called to the pumps and the hatches battened down on the barque of Peter.

What we may be seeing in the history of this General Assembly is the outline of a crisis in which many Christian churches are finding themselves. Broadly speaking it involves a conflict between theologians and the Magisterium. The questions being asked by those in authority in the churches, and also a good number of the faithful, are many and serious. Have theologians advanced too far and separated themselves from the "sense" of the faith possessed by the ordinary man in the pew? To whom and for whom are theologians speaking anyway? Are there legitimate bounds to theological speculation and inquiry? Is there a *ne plus ultra* beyond which scholars may not go, and if so, who is to define it?

The Catholic answer to such a question would have to be that it belongs to the bishops as pastors and teachers to defend and maintain sound doctrine. However, the climate of the Church and the theological tone, set largely by Paul VI over the past ten years, has been one of tolerance of debate and even of considerable dissent. It now seems that storm clouds are gathering in the sky. We are at the outset of a vigorous and popular papacy. John Paul II is determined to give a lead in matters of doctrine and morals. His very popularity suggests that he fills a need for certainty, authority and definition in a turbulent world. It is to be hoped that the suspicion in many minds that we may be returning to the over-cautious and even repressive climate of the last years of Pius XII may prove to be false. Perhaps the 'Mackey affair' may serve as a parable we would do well to take note of.