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EVANGELICALISM IN MODERN SCOTLAND

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Evangelicals can usefully be defined in terms of four characteristics. First, they are conversionist, believing that lives need to be changed by the gospel. Secondly, they are activist, holding that Christians must spread the gospel. Thirdly, they are biblicist, seeing the Bible as the authoritative source of the gospel. Fourthly, they are crucicentric in their beliefs, recognising in the atonement the focus of the gospel. Three of these four defining qualities marked Protestants in Scotland, as elsewhere, from the Reformation onwards. They were conversionist, biblicist and crucicentric. Seventeenth-century Protestants, however, were not activist in the manner of later Evangelicals. Typically they wrestled with doubts and fears about their own salvation rather than confidently announcing the way of salvation to those outside their sphere. Hence, for instance, there was a remarkable paucity of Protestant missionary work during the seventeenth century. But from the eighteenth century onwards an Evangelical movement sprang into existence in Scotland and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Its activism marked it out from the Protestant tradition that had preceded it. Evangelicalism was a creation of the eighteenth century.

The customary view of the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century divides it into two parties. The Moderates are usually described as liberal in theology, scholarly in disposition and strongly attached to patronage. The Popular Party is held to have been conservative in theology, unfavourable to contemporary learning and opposed to patronage. Increasingly, however, it has become apparent that the model does not correspond with reality. Some ministers who were theologically conservative nevertheless favoured patronage. Others seem to have been aligned with no party. Even more anomalously, the leaders of the two supposed parties, William Robertson and John Erskine, shared the same pulpit at Old Greyfriars, Edinburgh, from 1767. It seems clear that there were not two monolithic parties waging perpetual struggle over patronage. Recent work on America suggests that there were three main tendencies in eighteenth-century Presbyterianism. The same pattern can be discerned in Scotland.

Tendencies in Presbyterianism

The first tendency consisted of traditional Protestants. They were the inheritors of seventeenth-century ways – what contemporaries in America called the ‘Old Side’. They were firmly orthodox and punctilious over church order. They heartily endorsed the Westminster Confession. They rejected new modes of thinking associated with the Enlightenment. Their most extreme wing, the Reformed Presbyterians who were the successors of the Covenanters, contended that the National Covenant of 1638 remained obligatory. Another zealous group formed the first Secession from the Church of Scotland in 1733. Led by Ebenezer Erskine of Stirling, they deplored the declension in belief and morality they saw around them. The breaking point came over patronage. Ungodly patrons, they insisted, should not be allowed to impose unfitted ministers on spiritually minded elders and heritors. The scrupulosity of the Secession on points of church order is illustrated by its division in 1747 into Burghers and Anti-Burghers, the issue being whether or not lay members could legitimately promise to uphold the established church. Similar convictions about the importance of right belief and practice were maintained by many in the Church of Scotland. Puritan works continued to circulate, reinforcing traditional forms of piety. Readers were encouraged to test the genuineness of their faith. Assurance of salvation was expected to emerge only after protracted periods of anguish. Many therefore held back from communion. The pessimism and introspection of this spirituality were long to be hallmarks of Highland religion.

The second tendency was composed of the Moderates. In their case the usual characterisation of their stance as liberal and enlightened is not far from the mark. Technically the ministers of the group professed allegiance to the Westminster Confession, but their beliefs were strongly influenced by the new thinking of the eighteenth century. Many were scholarly men. They numbered in their ranks some of the greatest figures of the Scottish Enlightenment such as William Robertson, Principal of the University of Edinburgh and an early historian of America. Many were swayed by the Stoic style of ethics taught at Glasgow by Francis Hutcheson. Their sermons tended to concentrate on points of moral teaching rather than on the drama of salvation. They naturally associated with the educated upper classes, who in turn exercised patronage in their favour. Moderates were consequently the champions of the rights of lay patrons. Never a majority in the ministry, the Moderates owed their ascendancy in the church to their support in the General Assembly by an army of Edinburgh lawyers who sat as representatives of distant presbyteries. The grouping was identified with the elite.

The Evangelicals

Evangelicals formed the third tendency. Like the traditionalists, they were strongly attached to central doctrines of the faith; but like the Moderates, they were affected by rising Enlightenment influences. Evangelicals differed from the traditionalists in holding loosely to aspects of customary practice. Thus in 1749 John Erskine advocated reform of the conventional communion season: all but one sermon beforehand was to be dropped. The differences extended to theology. 'His general doctrine', wrote Erskine's biographer, 'is Calvinistical. But it is not the vulgar Calvinism which exhausts itself on intricate and mysterious dogmas; which more frequently addresses the imaginations than the understandings of the people, and which it is easy to separate, both from the business and the duties of human life.'¹ Evangelical theology, that is to say, was simple, rational and practical. It showed the hallmarks of the Enlightenment. In the Secession the newer views made headway until, in the 1790s, both the Burghers and the Anti-Burghers split into 'Auld Lights' and 'New Lights'. The traditionalist Auld Lights stuck to the letter of the Westminster Confession; the Evangelical New Lights wished to modify it. The very name of the Evangelical party in the Secession reveals their debt to the new light of the Enlightenment.

Several of the Evangelical leaders in the Church of Scotland corresponded with Jonathan Edwards, the great American Congregational theologian who blended Reformed orthodoxy with Enlightenment thought. Like Edwards, the Scottish leaders learned from the philosopher John Locke to place confidence in knowledge derived from sense experience. They held that a convert's new sense of God creates an assurance of salvation. Believers, they taught, should normally be confident that they were among the elect. Christians should turn from the preoccupation of the traditionalists' spirituality with self-doubt to a vibrant desire to spread the gospel. A missionary concern, especially for the Highlands of Scotland, developed among Evangelicals. Their strength lay in the central belt, especially Glasgow, in the thriving centres of commerce and early industry. In many places congregations wanted gospel preaching but patrons would not select Evangelical ministers. The consequence was a succession of patronage controversies in the later eighteenth century. The Relief Church, created under the influence of Thomas Gillespie in 1761, consisted of Evangelicals forced reluctantly out of the established church by their desire for sound teaching. The

¹ Sir Henry Moncreiff Wellwood, *Account of the Life and Writings of John Erskine, D.D., Late One of the Ministers of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1818), p. 380.

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separation, unlike that of 1733, was entirely pragmatic. It represented the temper of the rising tide of Evangelicalism in Scotland.

The later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed gradual Evangelical mobilisation. The New Light Seceders and the Relief Church, which were to merge in 1847 as the United Presbyterians, grew enormously, particularly in urban areas. By 1835 over a quarter of Glasgow churchgoers belonged to these branches of Presbyterian dissent. From the 1790s itinerant evangelism became a major force. Although the Methodists made little impact except in Shetland, travelling preachers commissioned by the Haldane brothers and by others such as Christopher Anderson of Charlotte Chapel laid the foundations for many of the Congregational and Baptist churches of the Highlands. By the 1820s there were a few Evangelical congregations even amongst the Episcopalians with their High Church traditions. Meanwhile an increasing proportion of Church of Scotland parishes fell into Evangelical hands. Even where non-Evangelicals occupied the pulpits, lay people often assumed responsibility for the gospel cause. Thus at Lochs on the Isle of Lewis in 1823 a lay-led prayer meeting assembled outside the walls of the parish church. Loud prayers were deliberately encouraged to drown the sermon. Evangelical influence made progress even in the General Assembly. In 1834 the Evangelicals carried the Veto Act to insist that patrons' nominees must have the assent of their prospective congregations. The old Evangelical bugbear of patronage was to be swept aside. It was a sign that the party now possessed a majority in the highest court of the church.

The Evangelical Free Church

The Veto Act led on to the Disruption of 1843. The secular courts upheld the right of patrons to ignore congregational objections to their presentees. Parliament confirmed the decisions of the Scottish courts and then failed to deal with the grievance of the Evangelical majority in the church. It seemed a gross interference by the state in the affairs of the church. In 1843 Thomas Chalmers led some 450 of the 1,200 ministers out of the Church of Scotland. A large number of Evangelicals remained in the ministry of the established church, but the chief result of the Disruption was the creation of a new wholly Evangelical Presbyterian denomination, the Free Church of Scotland. In every parish it set about erecting a church and school to rival the Church of Scotland. By 1851 it was supported by a third of Scottish churchgoers, the same proportion that attended the established church.

Evangelical religion dominated Scottish society in the later nineteenth century. The only official religious census ever taken

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showed in 1851 that 26% of the Scottish population attended morning service, 17% attended in the afternoon and 5% in the evening. Although middle-class churchgoing was higher, a significant proportion of the working people were among the worshippers. In Aberdeen an astonishing 92% of the population claimed a link with a particular congregation. This high penetration of society by the churches represents the result of sustained evangelism. Ecclesiastical issues dominated politics. Anti-Catholicism generated a surge of feeling against the endowment of the Maynooth seminary for Irish priests in 1845. Denominational rivalry was central to debate over education in the 1850s. Disestablishment was the liveliest issue in Scottish politics for twenty years from the later 1870s. Literature was touched by Evangelical influence. The Kailyard School of the 1890s, which is long overdue for warmer appreciation, was preoccupied with spiritual issues. Few aspects of life could remain immune to Evangelicalism.

Concern for social questions was seen as a branch of Christian obedience. The legacy of Thomas Chalmers was immense. His technique of district visiting was widely practised by a variety of agencies that brought help to the poor. Thomas Guthrie, another Free Church minister, was a persistent advocate of ragged schools for destitute children. William Quarrier, a Glasgow bootmaker and Baptist deacon, established an orphanage at Bridge of Weir in 1871. Philanthropic societies, hospitals and medical missions proliferated with Evangelical backing. Several causes were taken up as sustained moral crusades, the agitations often passing over into the political sphere. Anti-slavery was widely supported, so that in 1832, for instance, Evangelical voters insisted that parliamentary candidates should pledge themselves to abolition. Sabbatarian pressure was generally stronger than in England. An English Nonconformist minister coming out of Sunday morning service onto Sauchiehall Street was cautioned by a policeman for whistling on the sabbath. There were campaigns against Sunday trains and the Sunday postal service. Temperance feeling, often allied with sabbatarianism, was also powerful. Sunday closing was secured for Scotland in 1854. By comparison it was achieved for Ireland in 1878, for Wales in 1881 and for England never. The variety of agencies promoting temperance received an increasing volume of support from the churches as the century went on. Evangelicals exerted a major social influence.

The Broadening of Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism itself was changing in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a number of ways it was broadening. Theologically there was a liberalising trend. The forces at work have been catalogued as historical relativism, the moral criticism of

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doctrine, the challenge of science, optimism about human nature, greater tolerance, a preference for apologetic over dogmatism and knowledge of other religions. Most could be summed up as the effects of Romantic cultural trends on theology. Evangelicals were influenced. Henry Drummond, the most effective evangelist among students in late nineteenth-century Scotland, incorporated evolutionary social theory in his sermons. Many ministers began to call themselves 'Liberal Evangelicals'. They included John Cairns of the United Presbyterians and, by the 1920s, A.L. Drummond the historian. The trend was reinforced by liturgical developments that also reflected Romantic taste. Beginning with Robert Lee of Old Greyfriars in 1857, new fashions of kneeling for prayers and reading from service books gradually spread. The so-called 'Scoto-Catholics' were often those most liberally inclined in theology. Yet many who introduced higher liturgical practice remained loyal to Evangelical convictions. The process was one of broadening, not repudiation.

Likewise there was an intensification of attention to social questions. Between 1891 and 1896 five out of six moderators of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland dwelt in their addresses on social issues. It has been common to see the emerging social gospel as a movement in conflict with Evangelicalism. Again, however, there was in reality no antithesis. The early impetus for the social gospel came from the moral crusading temper of Evangelicalism. Scott Matheson, a social radical among United Presbyterians, retained an evangelistic priority when he wrote about *The Church and Social Problems* in 1894. 'Social reform', he declared, 'ought never to draw the Church aside from her proper work of saving men.'² Yet the social gossellers did sometimes allow their initial Evangelicalism to be eroded. It came to be believed by a few of them that sin could be eliminated from society by human effort. Furthermore the energy of the churches in the Edwardian period was beginning to be diverted from distinctively religious activities, such as prayer meetings, to programmes of social welfare. The concern with social issues did contribute to sapping the vitality of the churches in the early twentieth century.

Conservative Currents

If a more liberal theology, higher liturgical practice and increased attention to social questions broadened Evangelicalism, there was a simultaneous counter-current tending in a conservative direction. Revivalism had played a significant role in Scotland since the 1840s.

2 A. Scott Matheson, *The Church and Social Problems* (London, 1893), p. v.

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The American evangelist Charles Finney taught that careful 'scientific' planning could produce revivals. A number of candidates for the Congregational ministry were persuaded and formed a new denomination, the Evangelical Union, to use his techniques. It was in the van of evangelistic novelty until its merger with the Congregational Union in 1897. A wave of revival, some of it more traditional and spontaneous, swept across the land in 1859-60. A number of lay initiatives such as the Perth Convention followed in its wake. The impact of the American evangelists Moody and Sankey in 1874-75 was, if anything, even greater, especially in Glasgow. Their legacy of undenominational evangelism was to find permanent form in the Bible Training Institute of that city. Uncontrived spiritual movements were to continue into the twentieth century with the Jock Troup Revival of the Moray Coast in 1921-22 and the Hebrides Revival of the early 1950s, but they were increasingly confined to remote traditional communities. Organised revivalism, on the other hand, was a major determinant of the ethos of much early twentieth-century conservative Evangelicalism.

There were other contributory factors. The Keswick movement, teaching that sanctification, like justification, is by faith alone, made a significant impact on Scotland, though chiefly after 1900. The Bridge of Allan National Convention was begun in 1892, the Scottish Northern Convention at Strathpeffer in 1931. Premillennialism, the expectation of the second coming before the millennium, was often allied with Keswick teaching. Its leading Scottish advocate in the mid-nineteenth century was Horatius Bonar, the hymn-writer. Much of its subsequent diffusion was due to the work of the Christian Brethren, who became a major Evangelical presence in the industrial west of Scotland. There also sprang up a series of new missionary organisations upholding the faith principle. The China Inland Mission, the Heart of Africa Mission, the Regions Beyond Missionary Union and many others dispensed with money-raising structures, believing that missionaries should go out in faith that their financial needs would be met. The Faith Mission, originally very similar to the Salvation Army in holding holiness to be a second decisive experience of grace, undertook extensive home missionary work. All these movements were pietistic, undenominational and predominantly lay. They contributed to the emergence of a conservative form of Evangelicalism in the twentieth century.

It is remarkable that in Scotland the liberal and conservative tendencies did not come to blows in the inter-War years. In America this was the period of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies, which had their echoes in England, Wales and Ireland. In Scotland there was no organised Fundamentalist group. The one Scottish Fundamentalist controversy, among the Baptists, did not take place

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until the 1940s. Conservative Evangelicals were generally irenic and co-operated with their more liberal fellows. Thus Fraser of Tain, one of the leading conservatives of the earlier twentieth century, was scrupulous to play his full part in presbytery affairs. The denominations did not make conservatives feel out of place. When the United Free Church reunited with the Church of Scotland in 1929, the event was marked by a Forward Movement designed to spread the faith and recall church members to Christian devotion. It was natural for Daniel Lamont, professor of practical theology at Edinburgh, a prominent Scottish supporter of the conservative Inter-Varsity Fellowship, to be chosen moderator of the General Assembly in 1936. The national church was an evangelistic church.

Present and Prospect

That remained true after the Second World War. The war stimulated a return to basic values. In 1946 the Church of Scotland issued a report urging renewed mission, 'Into All the World'. Even the Episcopal Primus declared in 1947 that his church had not taken evangelism sufficiently seriously. 'Christian Commandos' descended on parishes. D.P. Thomson, for the Church of Scotland Home Board, encouraged team missions. The 1950s was the decade of 'Tell Scotland', co-ordinated by Tom Allan. In its middle year, 1955, more than a million people heard the young American Billy Graham preach at the Kelvin Hall, Glasgow. In the following year Glasgow church attendance was some 10,000 higher than in the year before. After another year attendance was still some 5,000 up. Parish-centred work continued. In Aberdeen, William Still, beginning his long ministry in 1945, created a model of effective church growth. There was a remarkable range of evangelistic endeavour in post-war Scotland.

Yet since 1959 church membership in Scotland has fallen drastically. In that year it constituted 59% of the population over 20 years of age; by 1984 the proportion was down to 37%. The rise of 'the permissive society' in the 1960s symbolised a decay of Christian values. The fall in church membership, on its Protestant side, however, should be seen primarily as part of a long-term process. It was the ebbing of the Evangelical tide that had flowed so strongly in the nineteenth century. Perhaps there are contemporary signs of a resurgence in Bible-teaching ministries, charismatic renewal and the fact that some three-quarters of the candidates for the Church of Scotland's ministry are conservative Evangelicals. Certainly the story of Scotland's Evangelical past has an important implication. Many sociologists have assumed that Western societies have steadily become more secular since the Reformation. Religion, they suppose, has gradually become less socially salient. The assumption is invalid. Church attendance and the Christian tone of society at large both

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increased during the nineteenth century. The process of secularisation is not necessarily unidirectional. It can be reversed. Evangelicalism has transformed Scotland in the past and may do so again.