

## **'RABBI' DUNCAN ON LITURGY AND OTHER MATTERS**

*A selection with an introduction and notes by the Editor*

"I," said a Scottish Divine, "am first a Christian; secondly, a Catholic; thirdly, a Calvinist; fourthly, a Paedo-baptist; and fifthly, a Presbyterian." With these words John M. Barkley opens *The Worship of the Reformed Church*<sup>1</sup>. He did not, however, identify this 'Scottish Divine', to whose words I warmed. Who was he? It was some time before I discovered that he was John Duncan (1796-1870). Interest was further stimulated by discovering that he preached his first sermon after license in 1825 from the same pulpit in the West Church, Aberdeen, from which I regularly held forth.

According to his own account, it was only in the following year that he was converted. It took another ten years before he was called to Milton Church in Glasgow and ordained. He had, however, for long held a strong interest in Hebrew and other oriental languages. That led to his appointment by the Church in 1841 as a missionary to the Jews in Budapest, and also in Leghorn in Italy. In common with other missionaries he joined the Free Church in 1843 and was chosen to be Professor of Hebrew in the New College in Edinburgh.

During part of the summers of 1859 and 1860, the 'Rabbi' Duncan and William Angus Knight, who was, at that point, at the outset of a Free Church theological course, lived, as the latter recorded "under the same roof in a seaside Fifeshire village". The professor's conversation, as they walked together on the seashore and in the woods, fascinated Knight and he tells us that he immediately noted it down in his own private system of shorthand. In 1876 he was appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy in St Andrews and three years later he published '*Colloquia Peripatetica*, his record of the conversations, prefaced by a 'Memoir of John Duncan'. It is from that volume that the following excerpts are taken.

It has been asserted that in the period following the Disruption the Free Church was too busy with other concerns to devote much thought to liturgical matters, and although its counterpart to the Church Service Society, the

Public Worship Association, was not formed until 1891, these conversations indicate that thought was also being given to such matters in the context of that Church and were of such a character as to remain suggestive even at the present day.

“In forgetting our Directory we are too little liturgical; and if the Church were very spiritual it would need no liturgy. We have far too many preaching prayers; many good ministers preach to God. The best of our forefathers were more anti-erastian than anti-episcopal, and more opposed to a bad liturgy than anti-liturgic. I do not wonder that the desire for forms of prayer is returning. I could say nothing against the use of liturgy as a catholic question, for all the churches; but I am definite against confinement to it; and as for us in Scotland, I am opposed to it in any form at present. But a good liturgy forms a fine common bond for the churches. I remember, when in Leghorn, hearing a very painful from the bishop of \_\_\_\_\_; and on leaving the church a friend remarked, “I’m thankful he can’t spoil the prayers.”

It seems likely that the church Leghorn was an Anglican one but unlike, one supposes, many of his contemporaries he did not regard even things Roman as beyond the pale:

“There are magnificent prayers the missal. They are chiefly relics of a very early and much purer age, and many a good Romanist gets on very well in his Church by the help of these alone.”

His position was essentially a mediating one.

“The cultus of the ritualist, and of the old Scotch seceder, are at opposite extremes. In the one we have the external forms, often without the internal spirit. In the other we have the internal element, without the smallest regard to its outward form. But it is the ghost and the body together that make the man.”

The move in Scottish Presbyterianism towards the authorisation of the use of hymns in public worship began outside the Established Church - in the Relief Church which issued a hymn book in 1794. The Seceders were in process of doing the same when they and the Relief Church united in 1847 as

the United Presbyterian Church. The hymn book prepared by the Seceders was then issued by that Church in 1852. The Free Church and the Church of Scotland were still ‘untainted’ by ‘human hymns’. Such was the background against which Duncan delivered himself of his opinions on hymns.

“Hymnologies are of great use; but we should have a better selection of hymns. We might have portions of scripture translated into verse besides the Psalms, keeping as faithfully to the original as the Psalms do. But what I would prefer would be the singing of prose.<sup>1</sup> For example – “We have strong city. Salvation hath God appointed for walls and bulwarks. . . . . Our Scotch collection of paraphrases is not good as a whole, nor are they bad as a whole. A few men (none of them poets) merely recast the old paraphrastic hymns of Wesley, Watts, and Doddridge, and the result is our ‘paraphrases’. They are often too classical, often commonplace, and some are both ultra-classical and commonplace. The two best hymns in Christendom, in my opinion are the Te Deum and the Veni Creator.”

He seems to have found in the former of these, in particular, a satisfying vehicle of devotion and had, on an earlier walk, given his judgment that

“The ‘Te Deum’ is a grand piece of writing; by far the finest fragment of post-apostolic devotion. I am particularly fond of the lines – ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ. Thou are the everlasting Son of the Father. When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man, thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb. When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.’”

Despite the less than enthusiastic judgment on the Paraphrase quoted above he also spoke more warmly of them:

“There is fine poetry in some of our Scotch paraphrases.

‘So days, and years, and ages past  
descending down to night,  
Can henceforth never more return  
back to the gates of light.’

That is very fine poetry. But it was born in Hellas, and never visited Judea. Now we are to sing the songs of Sion. ‘Gates of light!’ I begin to think of Aurora, fair daughter of the dawn! On the whole I prefer the Psalms to the Paraphrases and Hymns. They call them paraphrases or translations – and queer translations some of them are. If they had given me translations I would have let them keep their paraphrases to themselves. But George Buchanan’s psalms are magnificent; perhaps the finest translations we have. They are literal and yet imaginative. Yet he errs sometimes by being ultra-classical, as when he addresses God ‘O Rex Olympi.’ The Roman Church, even, would have used his psalms, had not their author been a heretic. So one of their popes, (Urban VIII) said. They found nothing amiss in the doctrine introduced – only that it was the production of a heretic.”

Despite the fact that slightly over half of the Paraphrases are based on New Testament passages there is very little reference in them to the redemptive and salvific work of Christ but such a lack does not seem to have been a major concern to Rabbi Duncan, or else he would not have expressed a preference for the Psalms. He speaks thus of what appeals to him in them:

“The way the psalmists speak of nature is very touching, and their sympathy with the life of lower creatures: ‘The wild asses drink their fill.’ It is a grand thing that God appointed such a thing to be sung in Christian churches in all time to come.”

Although much of what John Duncan has to say about matters which lie within the particular concerns of our Society has to do with words for singing he does deliver himself of opinions on other such matters also.

“It is exceedingly foolish, but exceeding common, for men to put the adiaphora into the place of the essentialia. Eg, I am a strong paedobaptist; but I favour immersion in theory, and if I built churches, I would build for immersion. But it is an adiaphoron. It is strange that you often find good theologians straining at a gnat, and swallowing camels. So, too, standing when singing is the best attitude. Musical men say it is the best posture for the voice; and I say it is the most reverential attitude for the worshipper. So is kneeling at prayer. But our churches are not built for it. That is, on the whole, a pity; but it is altogether an adiaphoron.”

We may conclude this potpourri from Rabbi Duncan's *Colloquia Peripatetica* with a general comment which may be thought to be still of relevance to the 21st century.

“Whenever we worship, we acknowledge that there is a region above us, at once known and unknown, half-clear and half-dark. And I have no fear of the results of religious fervour in worship. Aberrations generally correct themselves in time. It is total lack of fervour that is lamentable.”

### (Endnotes)

- 1 It may be noted that, about the same time, a much younger contemporary, John Marshall Lang recorded a similar opinion in the preface which he for a hymn book which he prepared for his congregation in the Established Church.