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The Influence of Macmurray on Scottish Theology

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Several constant themes in the writings of John Macmurray resonate with the preoccupations of Scottish theologians in the twentieth century. These might be listed under four headings all of which merit attention and provide ways of exploring his influence upon a generation of theologians in his native land. Nevertheless, I shall argue that despite the resonances between Macmurray's thought and that of mid-twentieth century Scottish theologians there is a surprising lack of direct influence which requires some explanation. In turn, this may shed light on the overall significance of Macmurray's work.

The four distinctive emphases of Macmurray's philosophy might be summarised as follows.

1. The attack on the Cartesian dualist doctrine of the self leads to a more holistic account of the human being as a psychosomatic unity set within a social and physical world.
2. The stress on the human self as a person generates an account of identity as constituted by relations with other persons. These relations are properly marked by freedom, action and love.
3. The importance of a community of friendship is to be understood not in terms of its instrumental value but as an end in itself.
4. Religion must be represented as a vital element of community life, particularly the Hebraic religion as taught by Jesus. At its best, it is this-worldly, political and international.

Each of these themes was central to Macmurray's philosophy as it took shape from the 1920s onwards and was expounded for about half a century of teaching and writing in Oxford, London and Edinburgh. During the same period, we find Scottish theologians with matching concerns and convictions.

The dissatisfaction with Cartesianism and its influence upon the Christian tradition can be found in several writers, perhaps most notably in John Baillie who returned from New York to the Chair of Divinity in Edinburgh in 1934. In *Our Knowledge of God* (1939), Baillie claims that the self is always situated within the world of material things and human society. It does not precede

or transcend the world, nor can it be abstracted from it. Recalling William Temple's famous remark that the assertion of the *cogito ergo sum* was perhaps the most disastrous moment in the history of Europe, Baillie states that 'Only in the knowledge of what is other than myself am I able to rise to the knowledge of my existence at all'.[1]

An interest in personalism is also a marked concern of several other Scottish theological writers. Ronald Gregor Smith, SCM secretary and later Divinity Professor in Glasgow, produced the English translation of Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (*I and Thou*) in 1937. In the preface, he notes that already in independence from continental writers, 'Professor John Macmurray has developed the thesis of the ultimate reality of personal relation in its application to theories of the State, of marriage, of family life, and of economics'.[2] Gregor Smith's own writings display an interest in an account of the human being that is personal, existential and historical. To cite another example, John Macquarrie, a colleague of Gregor Smith in Glasgow before his translation to chairs in New York and then Oxford, devoted a section to personalism in his discussion of *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*. In this context, Macquarrie claims that Macmurray was the one personalist who had sought to provide a proper philosophical account of the person unlike the more poetic and prophetic utterances of thinkers like Buber and Berdyaev.[3]

A concern with community is also apparent in much mid-twentieth century Scottish theology. In large measure, this may be a result of the ecumenical enthusiasm that stimulated much greater concentration on the subject of the church than had been the case in previous generations. From the Edinburgh conference of 1910 onwards, the modern ecumenical movement aspired towards a union of the major confessional bodies. Within this context, ecclesiology became a stronger focus of theological study. Donald Baillie, brother of John, held the chair of systematic theology in St Andrews. His study *God Was in Christ* (1946) is probably the most widely discussed work by any Scottish theologian of the last century. In the epilogue dedicated to ecclesiology, Baillie offers the image of the church as a dancing community gathered in a circle facing inwards to a common centre. Macmurray, who believed ritual to be more important to the community of faith than doctrine, must surely have approved of this image.

[1] *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 153.

[2] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), xi.

[3] John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* (London: SCM, 1963),

The importance of religion to politics is also a feature of much Scottish theological thought from the late 1930s onwards, although one can find this already in the work of the Scottish idealists and others in the late Victorian period. Donald Smith in his study *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest* tells of how the Scottish churches shifted from political and economic quietism in the early nineteenth century to a more critical, engaged form of social theology after about 1870.[4] In this respect, both Macmurray and his theological contemporaries drank from the same well. Nevertheless in the years following the Great War, Scottish church life largely turned away from wider socio-political issues. The drive towards Presbyterian church reunion expended large amounts of energy. This was accompanied by a campaign to build churches in areas of new housing, and more negatively by a hostile and misguided campaign against Irish Catholic immigration. There was little here of the radicalism of Macmurray's vision. However, by the late 1930s a new generation of thinkers including John Baillie, Archie Craig, J. H. Oldham and George Macleod had emerged.[5] The Oxford ecumenical conference of 1937 on 'Church, Community and State', which Macmurray attended, had called for a more active Christian role in the struggle for economic and social justice, particularly with reference to racial minorities. This was also the most significant time for the Christian Left, a movement in which Macmurray played a leading role. Later he would become involved with George Macleod in the founding of the Iona Community.

All this suggests the consonance of Macmurray's philosophical work with the concerns of the Scottish churches and their theologians by the late 1930s. Yet it is somewhat surprising in light of this not to find more evidence of a stronger and more direct influence. Given the baleful effect of logical positivism and linguistic philosophy upon theological pursuits, one might expect a British philosopher more favourably disposed towards religious thought, organisation and activity to have had more devoted theological followers than Macmurray gathered. His active involvement in the SCM auxiliary in the 1930s, moreover, would have brought him into contact with a whole generation of Scottish church leaders and theologians. Why then did his work not create a greater impact than appears to have been the case?

[4] Donald Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830–1945* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

[5] For discussion of this period see Stewart. J. Brown, 'Presbyterians and Catholics in Twentieth-Century Scotland' in Stewart J. Brown & George Newlands (eds), *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 255–281.

While there are scattered references to his writings in several places, there is little evidence of sustained engagement let alone intellectual discipleship. For example, although John Baillie dutifully records in his later books his significant measure of agreement with Macmurray one is left with the impression that they have arrived at similar conclusions by different routes.[6] There is always a qualification in almost everything Baillie states about Macmurray which makes one wonder how close they were despite their intellectual affinities and professional proximity in Edinburgh. Was Macmurray too fierce a critic of the institutional church for the comfort of Scottish divines? Did Baillie find Macmurray frustratingly elusive and lacking conviction on the question of God? Was there an anxiety about theology being reduced only to a set of ethical and political commitments? Baillie considers Macmurray's famous dictum that 'all meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of friendship'.[7] He comments, 'All this is very like what I myself have been saying; and I agree with it all, if by action is meant…the total response of our spirits…to the universal reality with which we are confronted, human and divine. Perhaps this is what Professor Macmurray has in mind, although I do not think it is what Marx had in mind'.[8] Even while acknowledging this convergence, Baillie is curiously cautious in his endorsement of Macmurray. He puzzles over the intention of this dictum, but there is little hint of any actual conversation or exchange between these two Edinburgh professors that might have resolved the issue.

In his biography of Macmurray, Costello registers his surprise that Macmurray never become a member of the Moot, a think-tank of leading Christian intellectuals organised by J. H. Oldham in 1938. The Moot included some of Macmurray's associates such as Karl Mannheim, the aforementioned John Baillie and latterly Donald MacKinnon; it would have been a natural habitat for Macmurray, especially given the consonance of its agenda with many of his preoccupations. Although, according to Costello, Macmurray's absence from the Moot is difficult to explain, it is consistent at any rate with his tendency to remain outside all institutional groupings of an ecclesiastical sort.[9]

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6 See for example *The Belief in Progress* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950) and *The Sense of the Presence of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

7 *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber, 1957), 15.

8 *The Sense of the Presence of God*, op. cit., 152.

9 See John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography* (Edinburgh: Floris, 2002), 286. Discussions with Keith Clements, biographer of J. H. Oldham, suggest that Macmurray was never invited to join although he exercised some influence on the group's deliberations. There is no record in the hitherto unpublished papers of the

The consequent lack of sustained interaction with theologians and church leaders may have limited his influence.

In assessing Macmurray's impact, moreover, one is also struck by his intellectual isolation even within the academy. Dorothy Emmet remarks upon this from her experience of studying under Macmurray in Oxford in the 1920s. It seems also to have marked his later work in Edinburgh. His philosophy appeared too angular, definite and yet lacking in sustained interaction with classical sources and contemporary trends to be easily mapped within the discipline. Peter Heath, one of his Edinburgh colleagues, comments upon the absence in Macmurray of any clear-cut philosophical ancestry and obvious allegiances in the subject.[10]

A further possible cause of Macmurray's failure to influence younger scholars may have been the lack of dialogical interaction with his students. This seems to have become more marked in his later years, as Costello also notes. 'When queried or challenged, Macmurray would usually just restate his view. This feature of his seminar style added a slightly cynical dimension to the impression of him being more of a religious prophet proclaiming eternal truth than a university teacher for whom the truth was something to be worked out collaboratively and by approximations'.[11] This also resonates with the views of John Hick in his personal reminiscences of Macmurray as a teacher and philosopher.[12]

One might also attribute a failure on the part of some Scottish theologians to interact more fully with local thinkers and movements. As a consequence of education at one or more of the leading centres in Europe (Göttingen, Marburg, Tübingen, Basel or Zürich), there was a preoccupation with German-language theology in mid-twentieth century Scottish theology. The work of Barth, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer receives far more attention in their writings than does that of British writers, perhaps also creating some detachment from the socio-political context in which they worked. Only Donald Baillie with his interest in Anglican theology may be regarded as a partial exception, although his writings too seldom register the historical setting in which they were produced.

In view of all this, it is striking to note that the most marked influence of

Moot of any invitation being extended to Macmurray. The papers are held in the New College Library, Edinburgh.

[10] Costello, 311.

[11] Costello, 310.

[12] John Hick, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: One World, 2002) 66–68.

John Macmurray is to be found in the work of T. F. Torrance, who held the Chair of Christian Dogmatics in Edinburgh from 1952–79. Torrance is widely regarded as a leading exponent of Karl Barth in the English-speaking world. His early study of Barth and supervision of the translation of the *Church Dogmatics* place him among the foremost interpreters of Barth's work. Noted for his Reformed stress on the sovereign grace of God and his reinvigoration of the classical Christian doctrines, together with a tendency to political conservatism, Torrance seems an unlikely ally of Macmurray. Yet his writings from the 1960s onwards are replete with references to his older philosophical colleague. These reveal a borrowing from Macmurray's work that has seldom been properly recognised by recent studies of Torrance. (This applies also to the teaching of his brother James B. Torrance who had studied as an undergraduate philosophy student under Macmurray in Edinburgh and later held the Chair of Systematic Theology in Aberdeen from 1976–89.) How is this to be explained?

Although a follower of Barth, Torrance sought to position theology in relation to other disciplines, particularly the natural sciences. In recent scientific advances, he discerned a methodology that resonated with that of classical Christian thought. The mediating influences here are John Macmurray and Michael Polanyi. This is particularly evident in his 1969 publication on *Theological Science*. The constant tilting at the deleterious patterns of dualist thought is redolent of Macmurray's work, particularly the subject-object split. The claim, presented tirelessly, that the mode of knowledge must be appropriate to the nature of the object as it discloses itself to us, is again drawn largely from Macmurray. He writes, 'It is Professor Macmurray's contention that knowledge in action is our primary knowledge, for the knowing Self is an agent having his existence in time where he is active both in pre-scientific and in scientific knowledge'.[13] Torrance goes on to assert that a new logical form of personal activity 'may be developed in which the theory of knowledge occupies a subordinate place within actual knowledge, and in which verification involves commitment in action'.[14] In theological terms, what this means for Torrance is that the knowledge of God is always and only shaped in a life of faith and obedience to the divine Word that becomes incarnate. The strongly realist cast of this theology is here reinforced by epistemological arguments that derive from Macmurray. It is also linked to an anthropology that insists upon the embodiedness and

[13] *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 3–4.

[14] Ibid., 4.

sociality of human life, themes that are strongly Hebraic and that also find support in Macmurray's writings.

Commentators on Torrance have often stressed the influence upon his thought of patristic writers, especially Athanasius, of John Calvin and the other Reformers, and of modern scientific thinkers such as Clerk Maxwell and Einstein. But if this reading of his writings on theological science is correct then we have to reckon with more local influences, particularly that of John Macmurray. Torrance himself offered a glowing eulogy to Macmurray after his death in 1975, describing him as the 'quiet giant of modern philosophy, the most original and creative of savants and social thinkers in the English-speaking world'.[15] We do not have to agree with these sentiments to recognise Torrance's indebtedness to and affection for his philosophical colleague.

On the other hand, Macmurray would hardly have endorsed the uses to which Torrance put his work. He was generally critical of Karl Barth's theology with its dialectical shape. The defence of classical Christian doctrine was never high on his agenda. Writing about God, particularly towards the end of his Gifford Lectures, Macmurray became elusive, almost agnostic. Living outwith any institutional religion, he had decisively abandoned the Calvinism of his upbringing in the north east of Scotland. His intellectual world generally seems far removed from that of Torrance.

All this may provide confirmation of a more general thesis about Macmurray. The force and enduring value of his work lie in its suggestive rather than its systematic quality. He is a writer who stimulates ideas and fresh vision for scholars in a variety of fields. His influence is more apparent outside than inside the professional guild of philosophers. Attempts to develop his philosophy can often be frustrating but his work yields arresting insights, conceptual resources, and important connections that continue to be valuable in several disciplines. This should be recognised as applying to theology in Scotland even if an identifiable group of Macmurrians can nowhere be discerned.

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[15] Quoted by Jack Costello in David Fergusson & Nigel Dower (eds), *John Macmurray: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 34.