‘MELVILLIAN’ REFORM IN THE SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES

James Kirk

‘I think’, wrote Martin Luther in 1520, ‘that pope and emperor could have no better task than the reformation of the universities, just as there is nothing more devilishly mischievous than an unreformed university’. Luther’s appeal epitomised the search for a new educational programme—a programme of humanist teaching for the citizen as well as cleric—designed to replace the traditional values of scholasticism. This attack on teaching practice coincided with the assault on religious practice. Accepted beliefs in philosophy and theology were rigorously re-examined: divine truth no longer seemed amenable to scholastic reasoning.

The sixteenth century, as a whole, witnessed this renewed expression of the twin ideals of educational progress and ecclesiastical reform. These two themes of renaissance and renewal helped shape the humanist tradition, and they were seen to represent much that was fundamental to the Christian life. These ideals, of course, were shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, though deep and irreconcilable divisions emerged over the different ways through which these ideals should ultimately be attained. In Scotland, good Catholics like Archibald Hay and Archbishop Hamilton in St Andrews, Archbishop James Beaton in Glasgow, Bishop Reid of Orkney and Ninian Winyet, Linlithgow schoolmaster, all advocated a reform of morals and practice, and a revival of learning as part of their reappraisal of Christian values within the existing house of God; and sound Protestants like John Knox, John Douglas in St Andrews, John Row in Perth and George Buchanan, a humanist of European reputation, demanded a far more radical solution in the expectation that this alone would provide the necessary firm foundation for the task of reconstructing God’s house on earth.²

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1 Luther’s Primary Works, ed. H. Wace and C.A. Buchheim (London, 1896), 290.
With the Reformation, a re-formed church, professedly purged of the accretions of centuries, replaced the old ecclesiastical structure, and the reformers claimed that they had restored at last 'the grave and godly face of the primitive church'. The appeal was for a return to first principles, a return, that is, to the teaching, organisation and example of the Early Church itself. By applying the new philological tools of biblical criticism, sound learning and educational enlightenment were seen to bring fresh insights and a new understanding of the church of the New Testament which, in turn, was viewed by many including Calvin as the model for the church in all ages. The humanism of the Scottish Reformation was substantially a Calvinist humanism: the reformers in their First Book of Discipline of 1560 planned to reorganise the whole field of education; and before the century ended two new university colleges had come into being at Edinburgh and New Aberdeen, and two more were projected for Orkney and Fraserburgh.

It is a fact of almost universal currency that John Knox, apart from helping to set up the Kirk, wanted to establish a school in every parish; and indeed much of that vision became a reality in the course of the seventeenth century. But as Knox’s successor, Andrew Melville has fared less well in popular imagination. He still remains an essentially enigmatic character. When he is remembered at all, it is usually in the form of some such epithet as ‘the father of Scottish presbyterianism’ or possibly even as ‘episcoporum exactor’, the thrower-out of bishops; or as the man who addressed King James VI as ‘God’s sillie vassal’. To some, Melville was none other than a troublemaker, a distasteful little man, argumentative and overbearing, who returned home from Geneva intent on upsetting good order in the Kirk by attacking the newly created Protestant bishops and so initiating a period of controversy in the church. This was Archbishop Spottiswoode’s assessment, and Spottiswoode, who once considered Melville as 'more


Knox, Works, i, 306; ii, 264.

Cameron, ‘Renaissance tradition’, 253; FBD, 129-55; D.B. Horn, A Short History of the University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 1967); G.D. Henderson, The Founding of Marischal College, Aberdeen (Aberdeen, 1947); APS, iii, 214 (Orkney); Frasers of Philorth, i, 154; ii, 263-9; RMS, v, 2117; vi, 1167; BUK, iii, 958 (Fraserburgh).

Melville, Diary, 52, 370.