Professor Dawson on John Knox: A Review Article

Donald Macleod

Edinburgh Theological Seminary, 15 North Bank Street, The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 2LS
dmacleod@ets.ac.uk

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Professor Dawson confesses that John Knox has been a 'brooding presence' throughout her academic life. On the other hand he, were he alive, would have every right to claim that she has been a very intrusive presence in his, searching through all his private papers. She certainly has every right to assume, as she does, that she now has a more than passing acquaintance with the 'wee man in the quad', whose statue she has to walk past every day on her way to work at Edinburgh University's New College. Indeed, her acquaintance with the documentary evidence is well-nigh exhaustive. We even learn that in the case of one letter from the English exiles in Geneva to their fellow exiles in Frankfurt the two sides of the letter became separated and ended up on two different shelves in the Bodleian Library.

But what really excited Professor Dawson was the discovery of significant new material on Knox, and especially the manuscript papers of his friend, Christopher Goodman. These include thirty-five documents from the period of the Marian exile: documents which, according to Professor Dawson, transform our understanding of the years (1553-59) that Knox spent in Germany, Switzerland, and France, and especially our understanding of the troubles in Frankfurt during Knox's ministry to the English exiles there in the years 1554-5. The result is an 'entirely new account of this period in Knox's life'. Whether entirely new or not, it certainly makes for sombre reading.

LITURGICAL REFORM IN FRANKFURT

The exiles quickly divided over the issue of liturgical reform, one party insisting on adhering strictly to the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*, the other seeing the exile as an opportunity to amend it. As Professor Dawson points out, this was not merely a battle for the soul of Anglicanism in Frankfurt. It was part of a broader battle for the future of the Church of

England itself. The lines of the later conflict between Puritans and High Churchmen were drawn in Frankfurt, and they are with us still.

Knox's presence there was due to the fact that after his release from the French galleys in the spring of 1549 he had found refuge in England, then ruled by the Protestant Edward VI. First at Berwick and latterly in London he exercised an effective ministry in the Church of England, becoming a Chaplain to the King, having a voice in the councils of the church and commanding sufficient confidence to be offered the Bishopric of Rochester and 'the plum archiepiscopal living' of All Hallows, Bread Street, London (Knox declined both offers).[1] The ascension of Mary Tudor in 1553 put an end to all this, and Knox was forced into exile. Christopher Goodman was in a similar position, having been dismissed from his position as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford. The two men quickly became key figures in the Frankfurt controversy over the Prayer Book, throwing their weight behind the arguments for reform and for closer conformity between the liturgy of the Church of England and those of continental Reformed churches.

Central to this was Knox's belief in the so-called Regulative or Puritan Principle, which had already found clear expression as the First Syllogism in his 1550 *Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*: 'All worshipping, honouring or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without his own express commandment, is idolatry.'[2] Professor Dawson is clearly not enamoured of the principle, nor, indeed, is modern Evangelicalism, where liturgy is always a low priority, but it is already implicit in the appeal to *sola scriptura*. Luther himself insisted that, 'God wishes nothing to be said among Christians except that which we hold with certainty to be the Word of God';[3] and it was on this that he, too, had based his opposition to the doctrine that the Mass is a sacrifice. 'Where,' he asks, 'is it written that the mass is a sacrifice, or where has Christ taught that we should offer consecrated bread and wine to God … Why are you then so bold as to make a sacrifice out of this remembrance?'[4]

The alternative to Knox's position was that whatever is not forbidden is permitted. This was the position adopted in the Prayer Book, which acknowledged that certain ceremonies could claim no higher authority

1 See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 529.

2 *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1846-64), Vol. 3, p. 34.

3 *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), Vol. 36, p. 195.

4 *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36, pp. 146-7.

than that 'they have been devised by man' but should nevertheless be retained on the grounds of decent order and edification. In response to such thinking, Knox simply referred to Genesis 6:5, 'The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.' In view of this, the formula, 'I like', is a dangerous one in Christian liturgy.

Professor Dawson reduces the Regulative Principle to the 'rigid formula' that, 'everything in liturgy must be justified directly by Scripture' (p. 94). This is scarcely accurate. There were many details in *The Forme of Prayers and Ministration of the Sacraments* which Knox introduced to Scotland from Geneva which could not claim direct sanction from Scripture: for instance, the use of the Apostles' Creed in baptism. Nor was this a case of blatant inconsistency. Advocates of the Regulative Principle have always drawn a clear distinction between the *elements* of worship and the *circumstances* of worship. It was for the former, not the latter, that there had to be clear biblical sanction; and these elements, according to such documents as the Westminster Confession (21:3-5), were prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, the singing of psalms (and hymns and spiritual songs), the preaching of the Word, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. What was not sanctioned, directly or indirectly, were such 'elements' as the invocation of the Virgin, the veneration of saints, the adoration of the host, the use of images, statutory holy days and the mandatory use of clerical 'ornaments' (vestments).

On the other hand, neither Knox nor any other Puritan demanded direct biblical sanction for the *circumstances* of worship. These were to be ordered 'by the light of nature and Christian prudence' (Westminster Confession, 1:6); and they included not only such details as the time and place of worship, but also questions of clerical attire, the preferred version of the Bible, the appointing of Fast Days, the choice of Psalter and Hymnal, and the frequency of Communion (which, said Knox, shall be 'once a month, or so oft as the Congregation shall thinke expedient'). Even more important, instead of being bound to recite prescribed prayers and follow the order of the Christian Year, ministers were free to adapt their prayers and their homilies to local and weekly circumstances. In practice, then, far from binding worship by a 'rigid formula' the Knoxian principle gave more, rather than less, liturgical freedom. This is why, during a visit to London in 1641, Alexander Henderson, felt constrained to write a tract, *The Government and Order of the Church of Scotland*, precisely to counter the Episcopal claim that Presbyterians 'had no certain rule or direction for their public worship, but that every man following his own extemporary fansie, did preach and pray what seemed good in his own eyes'.

KNOX AND THE 'BLACK RUBRIC'

However, Knox's involvement in liturgical controversy (the sixteenth-century equivalent of our modern worship-wars) did not begin with his sojourn in Frankfurt. He had already been in dispute with Archbishop Cranmer over the Prayer Book, and particularly over the Archbishop's insistence that communicants should receive the Sacrament kneeling. Professor Dawson's account of the controversy closely follows that of Cranmer's 1996 biographer, Diarmaid MacCulloch, according to which it was 'game, set and match' to Cranmer, who reduced Knox's arguments (and particularly his use of the Regulative Principle) to rubble.

It is important to note that there was no fundamental difference between the two men with regard to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Cranmer no more believed in the bodily presence of Christ in the Sacrament than did Knox. It is also important to note that Cranmer's motives were no less worthy than Knox's. He saw kneeling at the Sacrament not as an adoration of the bread and wine, but as a gesture of humility and gratitude.

The dispute certainly highlighted Knox's limitations as a diplomat and political tactician (a theme which runs through Professor Dawson's biography). But was his position inherently indefensible (or, even worse, petty)? He was certainly right in his conviction that the administration of the Lord's Supper could not be a matter of man's devising. The Apostle Paul had made clear in 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 that the Order of the Lord's Supper must follow that of the Last Supper; and for Knox one key feature of that supper had been precisely that it was not a sacrifice, but a meal, and as such to be received not at an altar but at a table (Luke 22:21). The appropriate posture, therefore, would be that commonly assumed when sharing a meal.

There was nothing unusual in Knox's appeal to the Last Supper as the norm. Luther had taken exactly the same position, even with regard to the details of the Sacrament: 'the more closely our mass [*sic*!] resembles that first mass of all, which Christ performed at the Last Supper, the more Christian it will be!'[5] It was from this point of view that he answered the question (often put to him!) whether something other than wine should be used in the Sacrament: 'One shouldn't use anything other than wine. If a person can't drink wine, omit it [the Sacrament] altogether in order that no innovation be made or introduced.'[6] Knox would certainly have viewed kneeling at the Table as, at the very least, an innovation.

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5 *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36, p. 52.

6 *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54, p. 438.

Did Knox, then, lose 'game, set and match'? Cranmer claimed, in effect, that Knox was hoist with his own petard since 'scholarship conclusively showed' that first-century century Orientals did not sit down to dine, but ate their food 'lying upon the ground'. This may look like an unreturnable volley (to continue the tennis analogy), but it falls considerably short of proving that the disciples *knelt* when receiving the bread and wine at the Last Supper. Besides, Cranmer could have 'reduced Knox's argument to rubble' only by showing that the Greek verbs *anakeimai* (Mark 14:18) and *anapiptō* (Luke 22:14) should be translated, 'I lie flat on the ground'. No major English version has adopted this rendering: 'reclining', probably; 'lying flat on the ground', improbable. Whatever they were doing, they were doing it at a table (Luke 22:14, 21) and on this point Knox never 'caved in'. In Frankfurt, he refused to administer the Lord's Supper according to the 1552 Prayer Book, and in what came to be known as 'Knox's Liturgy' (the Genevan Service Book adopted by the General Assembly in 1564) it was clearly stipulated that, 'the Exhortation ended, the Minister commeth doune from the pulpit, and sitteth at the Table, every man and woman in likewise taking their place as occasion best serveth'. The Order concludes, 'so that without his worde and warrant, there is nothing in this holy action attempted'. This leaves Presbyterians little scope for 'innovative' ways of administering the Sacrament.

Cranmer may indeed have wrong-footed Knox in the political game, but it remains true, nonetheless, that the Archbishop found it politic to insert in the Prayer Book what came to be known as 'the Black Rubric'. Initially at least, it was not 'black' in the sense of 'sinister', but only in the more mundane sense that whereas the Prayer Book as a whole was printed in red ink, this rubric was a later insertion, the red ink had run out, and the printer had to set it in black. Later, however, High Anglicans came to view the insertion as a 'black' day for their cause, but whether it was a personal victory of Knox is another matter. What is undeniable is that, one way or another, sufficient pressure was generated to persuade Cranmer that some disclaimer was needed in order to make plain that the act of kneeling implied no adoration of the bread and wine, and no real presence of the body of Christ within them.

Incidentally, years later, despite their differences over the Prayer Book, Knox was generous in his tribute to Cranmer and his fellow Oxford martyrs, highlighting their 'lenity, sincere doctrine, pure life, godly conversation and discreet counsel', and at the same time singling out the Archbishop as 'the mild man of God'.[7]

[7] McCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 622.

KNOX AND MARY

But if Knox's relations with Cranmer were somewhat fraught, his relations with Mary, Queen of Scots, were fraughter still. On his side, they were compromised from the beginning by his previous experiences of her mother, Mary of Guise; on hers, they were doomed by Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558).

Mary entered Edinburgh on the 2nd of September, 1561 and had her first meeting with Knox a mere two days later. The initiative did not come from Knox, and he himself was unsure whether it came from the Queen or from 'the counsel of others'. Professor Dawson is careful to warn us that virtually all we know about this meeting comes from Knox himself.[8] She also warns us that Knox's view of the young Queen was already set in stone (but then, so was hers of him); that when he wrote-up the account he had his own very specific objects in view; and that, as one who would have made a 'magnificent screenwriter', Knox creates a series of dramatic dialogues in which he gives the Queen 'one-line feeder comments' which allow him to defend himself at length and then, for good measure, to throw in some dramatic gestures, such as the Queen bursting into tears or staying silent for fifteen minutes.

Unfortunately we have no objective record by which to judge Knox's veracity or otherwise, and our assessment will no doubt depend on the opinion we have formed of him from other considerations. There is certainly no reason why an account should not be simultaneously dramatic and true, especially if the event was one of high drama in the first place. The high point of the dialogue comes when Mary challenges Knox, 'Think ye that subjects having power may resist their princes?' It was here that Knox introduced his famous analogy between a prince and a father. It is often overlooked that the basic premise of the analogy is that it is no more lawful to resist kings and princes than it is to resist your parents, but Knox went on to argue that if the father is stricken with a frenzy, and attempts to murder his children, they are fully justified in disarming and arresting him: 'It is even so, Madam, with princes that would murder the children of God that are subject unto them… to take the sword from them, to bind their hands, and to cast themselves in prison till that they brought to a more sober mind, is no disobedience against princes, but just obedience, because that it agreeth with the will of God.'[9]

Professor Dawson suggests that in making this comparison Knox jumped over several logical steps by making an association between mad-

[8] *John Knox's History of the Scottish Reformation*, 2 vols, ed. William Croft Dickinson (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1949), Vol. 2, pp. 13-19.

[9] Knox, *History of the Scottish Reformation*, Vol. 2, p. 17.

ness and persecution. Surely, however, Knox's point was not that it was legitimate to resist any king who became insane, but that it was legitimate to resist any sovereign who resorted to violence against their own subjects? Neither Mary of Guise nor Mary Tudor was clinically insane (any more Adolf Hitler) but their 'blind zeal' made them as dangerous as any psychopath. It was in this light that he viewed the Marian persecutions, as he had made plain in his *Faithful Admonition to the Professors of God's Truth in England* (1554): Jezebel 'never erected halfe so many gallowes in al Israel as myschevous Mary hath done within London alone'.[10]

Professor Dawson also offers the suggestion (p. 213) that if Knox was a revolutionary, he was an unsure and tentative one: 'Contrary to the modern image, Knox was not a revolutionary "action man". Though an excellent army chaplain, he was not a military commander or an urban freedom fighter.' It is certainly true that Knox was not a radical in the mould of Che Guevara or Mao Tse-tung. But then, neither was Karl Marx, yet in the long run Marx's impact was greater than that of any 'action man'. The same may be said of Knox, described by Professor J. W. Allen as 'one of the chief personal factors in the history of political thought in the sixteenth century'.[11] This influence would be seen not only in the impressive body of resistance literature produced in Scotland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,[12] but also in the emergence of later 'action men' such as Richard Cameron (1648-80).

Yet Knox was also a realist, and resistance was an issue over which, as he puts it, 'I began to dispute with myself'. He knew full well what civil war would mean, and in April 1558 he expressed his misgivings clearly in a letter to 'His Sisters in Edinburgh'. It would be hard, he wrote, to preach Christ, the author of peace, in a climate of war, sedition and tumult; the

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10 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 294.

11 Quoted in Roderick Graham, *John Knox: Democrat* (London: Robert Hale, 2001), p. 119. Professor Dawson does not refer to this work.

12 See, for example, George Buchanan, *De Iure Regni apud Scotos* (Edinburgh, 1579. Reprinted Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982); Alexander Henderson, *Instructions for Defensive Arms* (composed in 1639, but not intended for publication); Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex* (Edinburgh, 1644. Reprinted, Harrisonburg, Va: Sprinkle Publications, 1982) Questions XXVIII-XXXIV; John Brown, *An Apologetical Relation of the Particular Sufferings of the Faithful Ministers and Professors of the Church of Scotland since August 1660* (Rotterdam, 1665. Reprinted in The Presbyterian's Armoury, Edinburgh: Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846, Vol. 3); James Renwick, *An Informatory Vindication* (Utrecht: 1687); Alexander Shields, *A Hind Let Loose: an Historical Representation of the Testimonies of the Church of Scotland* (Utrecht: 1687).

gospel itself would be impugned as the cause of the ensuing calamities; and it would be heart-breaking to see one half of the nation rise up against the other.[13] He also knew that the oppressed were frequently in no position to offer *active* resistance. When Mary challenged him on the principle that subjects could not receive a religion other than the one allowed by their princes, Knox pointed out that the Israelites in Egypt had not taken their religion from Pharaoh, nor Daniel and his compatriots theirs from Nebuchadnezzar, nor the apostles theirs from the Roman emperors: 'And so, Madam, ye may perceive that subjects are not bound to the religion of their princes, albeit they are commanded to give them obedience.'[14] This was a well-trodden Protestant track: if the state commanded what God forbad or forbad what God commanded, believers had no option but to withhold compliance.

But then Mary pushed the argument a stage further: 'Yea, but none of these men raised the sword against their princes.' This immediately raised the question of how far Knox was prepared to go. 'Yet, Madam,' he replied, 'ye cannot deny but that they resisted: for those that obey not the commandments that are given, in some sort resist.' 'But yet,' responded the Queen, pursuing her case, 'they resisted not by the sword.' 'No,' replied Knox, 'because God had not given them the power.'

This was a clear (and realistic) doctrine of passive resistance, but at no point in his public life did Knox believe that this was the only option open to the oppressed. It may well be the case, as Professor Dawson points out, that Knox was radicalised by persecution and particularly by the ferocity of Mary Tudor against his friends in England. But belief in the legitimacy of active resistance was there from the beginning. When we first meet him he stands beside George Wishart, sword in hand; after Wishart's death, he immediately joined the Castilians under siege at St. Andrews; and during the Wars of the Congregation (1559-60) he served in the field as an army chaplain. Such actions bespeak a man who from the beginning had no compunction about bearing the sword against what he saw as tyranny. When Mary put her questions, she did so (as Professor Dawson points out) as one who was thoroughly conversant with the religious literature of her age and knew full well what Knox had advocated in such publications as the *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) and his *Appellation [Appeal] from the Sentence Pronounced by the Bishops and Clergy* (1558). In the former, he had argued not only that the reign of Mary Tudor was illegitimate on account of her gender, but that she deserved deposition and punishment

[13] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 250.

[14] Knox, *History of the Reformation*, Vol. 2, p. 16.

because of her savage cruelty and her promotion of idolatry. He appealed, therefore, to the nobility of England: 'They must refuse to be her officers, because she is a traitoresse and rebell against God; and finallie, they must studie to represse her inordinate pride and tyrannie to the uttermost of their power.'[15] In the *Appellation*, he states categorically that it is the duty of every man in his vocation, but chiefly of the Nobility, to 'bridel and repress' princes who cruelly rage against their brethren.[16] Such statements make plain that Knox was committed to the principle of active resistance long before the debate with Maitland of Lethington in July 1564, when he famously commented, 'that the Prince may be resisted, and yet the ordinance of God not violated, it is evident'.[17]

But who, precisely, has the right to resist? Around the same time as Knox was penning his *First Blast*, his friend, Goodman, was publishing his tract, *How Superior Powers oght to be obeyd of their subjects: and wherin they may lawfully by God's worde be disobeyd and resisted*.[18] Ronald Graham suggests that Knox may have collaborated with Goodman in drafting the tract ('Large passages of it are, indeed, very Knoxian in tone')[19] but that is pure surmise, and there is a discernible difference of emphasis between the two friends. Goodman believed passionately that the common people had both a right and a duty to resist magistrates who despised the laws of God, and to do so without waiting for the nobility to take the initiative. He declares, 'And thoghe it appeare at the firste sight a great disordre, that the people shulde take unto them the punishment of transgression, yet, when the Magistrates and other officers cease to do their duetie, they are as it were without officers, yea, worse than if they had none at all, *and then God geveth the sworde in to the peoples hande*'.[20]

It would be hard to find in Knox any such empowering of the populace. Instead, he placed the responsibility for resisting tyranny and suppressing idolatry firmly on 'the Nobility and Estates of Scotland'. One reason for this would have been the influence of Calvin, who had spoken out clearly against private individuals violating the authority of magistrates, but had then gone to argue that 'the lesser magistrates' ('the magistrates of the people') were by God's appointment protectors of their communities and

15 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 415.

16 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 497.

17 Knox, *History of the Reformation*, Vol. 2, p. 117.

18 For a comparison of Goodman and Knox see Professor Dawson's article, 'Trumpeting Resistance: Christopher Goodman and John Knox' in Roger A. Mason (ed.), *John Knox and the British Reformations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 130-53.

19 Graham, *John Knox: Democrat*, p. 121.

20 Quoted in Dawson, 'Trumpeting Resistance', p. 150; italics mine.

therefore duty-bound to oppose 'the fierce licentiousness of kings … who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk'.[21]

This was exactly the position Knox took, as appears in the terms he uses in his *Appellation*. Addressing the nobility, he writes: 'I thoght it expedient to admonish you, that before God it shall not excuse you to allege, We are no kings, and therefore neither can we reforme religion, nor yet defend such as be persecuted. Consider, my Lordes, that yee are powers ordened by God, and therefore doth the reformation of religion, and the defense of such as injustly are oppressed, appertain to your charge and care.'[22] Had the 'Lordes' not eventually accepted this charge there would have been no sixteenth century Scottish Reformation.

But Knox and all the other Protestant advocates of resistance also had to take care not to seem to contravene St. Paul's warning that anyone who rebelled against the governing authorities was violating the ordinance of God (Rom. 13:2). *Prima facie*, this was a very convenient shield for tyranny, but it was circumvented by arguing that the 'magistrates of the people' were themselves part of the governing authorities, charged with restraining vice, punishing iniquity and protecting the oppressed. This is why, in the *First Blast*, Knox laid down that it was the duty of the English Nobility to 'remove from authority all such persons as by usurpation, violence, or tyrannie, do possesse the same'.[23] Otherwise, by giving their consent to tyranny, they would be complicit in its crimes. Similarly if, north of the Border, the 'Lords of the Congregation' resisted the cruelties of a despotic Regent, that, in Knox's view, could not be castigated as the seditious resisting of a lawful power. They would merely be doing their duty as protectors of the people.

Above all, Knox was acutely aware that the common people had no power. This may be reflected in the way he worded the Queen's question in his account of their first meeting: 'Think ye that subjects *having power* may resist their princes?'[24] Similarly, when Mary pointed out that the early church had offered only passive resistance to the Roman emperors Knox responded, 'God, Madam, had not given unto them the *power* and the means' (italics mine). This may be no more than the pragmatism Jesus commended when he reminded his hearers that any king thinking of going to war against another must consider whether he is able with 10,000 men to defeat an adversary with 20,000 (Luke 14:31). Knox knew that the

[21] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV:XX, 31.

[22] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 498.

[23] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 416

[24] Knox, *History of the Reformation*, Vol. 2, p. 16 (italics mine).

people by themselves had no 'sword', no leadership and no organisation. Without its 'Lordes', therefore, the Congregation would be helpless in the face of state-might. Any merely popular uprising could end only in tears and bloodshed.

Yet Knox also knew that without revolution there could be no Reformation. In the very same epistle to his 'Sisters in Edinburgh' in which he made plain how he shrank from the horrors of civil war, he expressed equally clearly his despondency at the prospect of his native country being 'betrayed in the hands of strangers'.[25] So long as the House of Guise held the reins of power in Scotland, its freedoms (especially its religious freedom) would be suppressed by the military might of France. Only regime-change could bring reform: otherwise the principle, *cuius regio, eius religio*, would assert itself to destroy the nascent Protestantism, as it did in Italy, Spain and France, where brutal repression ensured that the green shoots of reform were never allowed to flourish.

KNOX'S RELATIONS WITH WOMEN

Readers will need no reminding of the offence caused by Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regimen of Women*. As he himself acknowledged, it blew away all his friends in England. It also exposed him to the implacable fury of England's Queen, Elizabeth, to the extent that he could never again safely set foot south of the Border. Even Calvin was mightily displeased, but his disavowal of the tract (in a letter written to William Cecil in May 1559)[26] was not enough to prevent an irreparable rift between Geneva and the Anglican establishment, with the fateful result that the Church of England would turn its back on a more radical agenda of reform and make life increasingly difficult for 'puritans' tarred with the Genevan brush.

Knox himself protested, in his first interview with Mary, that when he wrote the *Blast* it 'was written most especially against that wicked Jezebel of England,'[27] but as the Queen was quick to point out, 'Ye speak of women in general.' Yet at the heart of the outrage, then and now, there is a good deal of humbug. In the sixteenth century, reigning as a hereditary monarch was just about the only profession to a woman. Even as late as

[25] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 251.

[26] *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 7 vols., ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-58. Repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), Vol. 7, pp. 46-8. Calvin even went so far as to declare, 'I shall nevertheless always cherish the most profound respect for your most excellent queen'.

[27] Knox, *History of the Reformation*, Vol. 2, p. 15.

the nineteenth century a woman could not practise law or medicine, enter parliament or (in the case of the novelist, Mary Ann Evans) get published under her own name.[28] Until well into the twentieth century she could not vote in Parliamentary elections. Even in the twenty-first century, the Church of England can still experience turmoil over women bishops, society still grudges women equal pay, the United States still has to elect its first woman President, and only in 2012 did the UK Parliament concede that a first-born royal daughter would be first in line to the Throne.

At the root of all this lies the very chauvinism we rightly deplore in Knox: a patriarchy which assumes that women are inherently inferior to men (except when they are heirs to a throne). But Knox's language was extreme by any standards. He was not content to speak of what is referred to today as functional subordination. He spoke plainly of ontological subordination. Women should have inferior roles because they were inferior: their [in]sight was blindness; their strength was weakness; their counsel, foolishness; their judgement, frenzy.[29] Nature itself painted them frail, impatient and foolish, and experience declared them inconstant, variable and cruel. She might be the image of God when compared to animals, but she was not the image of God compared to a man, and when the nobility of England quaked at the presence of a Queen they did what no male beast of the forest would do in the presence of a female.[30]

Yet over against the charge of outrageous misogyny we have to set the fact (to which Professor Dawson does full justice) that throughout his life Knox's closest friends and most loyal supporters were women,[31] and this is reflected in his surviving correspondence, consisting mainly of letters to his mother-in law, Elizabeth Bowes; to his 'loving sisters in Edinburgh', Mrs. Janet Guthrie and Mrs. Janet Anderson; and to Mrs. Anne Locke, wife of a London merchant. These women were literate, educated and well-connected, but unfortunately we have no way of knowing what they thought of the *Blast* since almost all the correspondence antedates its publication. It certainly did not disrupt relations with his mother-in-law, who moved in to the Knox household after his wife, Marjorie, died in 1560; nor did it put an end to Knox's correspondence with Anne Locke, who was still writing to him from Geneva in 1561. This suggests that neither woman took the sexist insults personally.

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28 Ms. Evans had to adopt a male pen-name, 'George Eliot'.

29 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 374.

30 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 396.

31 One of the most perceptive treatments of this question is Robert Louis Stevenson's essay, 'John Knox and his Relations to Women' in his *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (Nelson: n.l., n.d.,) pp. 241-86.

Apart from their bearing on the question of Knox's hatred of women, these letters show a side of his character quite different from the 'vehement furie' of such documents as his *Faithful Admonition to the Professors of God's Truth in England* and his 1565 *Sermon on Isaiah 26:13-20* (which led to his being banned from preaching in Edinburgh while the Queen and her Consort were in the city). They reveal a Knox who was self-accusing and even self-doubting, but above all they show a pastor bringing all his experience and all his theological acumen to bear upon the troubles of his correspondents, and particularly on the 'dolours' of the self-tormented Mrs. Bowes. Indeed, Mrs Bowes deserves her own place in the history of Protestant theology as a monument to the fact that the problem of assurance existed in the Reformed church long before the preaching of the magisterial Reformers was allegedly corrupted by the excesses of 'High Calvinism'. True, Luther and Calvin both taught that assurance was of the essence of faith (indeed, *was* the essence of faith), but Mrs. Bowes was tormented even while Calvin was still alive, and the root of the problem lies not in the doctrine of double predestination, but in the tension at the heart of Luther's paradox, *Simul iustus et peccator*. How can I be at one and the same time righteous and a sinner?

The wording of these letters is consistently well-chosen and tender. In one of the earliest (written in February 1552-53) we can even see the sort of language later associated with Samuel Rutherford: tranquillity of conscience, writes Knox, rests on the fact that we embrace Jesus as the only Saviour of the world 'and that we learne to apply the sueitnes of his name, which precelleth [excelleth] the odouris of all fragrant smelling spyces, to the corruptioun of our woundis'.[32] In another, he assures his 'Rycht deirly belovit Mother' that he remembers her 'strong battell', but also reminds her that he is in no way superior to her. On the contrary he, too, is a 'wrechit man, subject to syn and miserie lyk yourself', and he urges her to find comfort where he finds it himself: 'for Chrystis perfection is imputit to be yours be [by] faith whilk ye haif in his blude.'[33] And then, recognising that Mrs. Bowes is suffering from an 'infirmitie' he assures her that God is no more displeased with one of his children suffering from a disease of the soul than an earthly parent would be displeased with a child suffering from a disease of the body. He also expresses his own personal confidence that she has no need to fear for her soul, because wherever contempt of God has been replaced with a love of righteousness (as he is sure it has in her case) 'thair is the infallible seall and testimonie of the Holie Ghoist'.

[32] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 348.
[33] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 347.

Mrs. Bowes was a determined soul-barer, and though Knox deals with her patiently he also knew full well that sometimes the best therapy for doubt is to ignore it. On one occasion he has mislaid Mrs Bowes' letter (or so he says) and he writes inviting her to send him another copy. He then offers advice specifically targeted at an introspective depressive, suggesting, in effect, that she take a rest from worrying about whether she's saved and get on with the rest of her life: 'Be fervent in reiding, fervent in prayer, and mercifull to the pure, according to your power, and God shall put end to all dolouris.'[34]

Anne Locke, one of the few women of the Reformation to write for publication,[35] was clearly a different type of personality from Mrs. Bowes but she, too, is a 'loving sister', 'deirlie belovit', and has her own spiritual troubles. As with Mrs. Bowes, Knox assures her that her 'grevous complaint and ernist prayer' is a clear sign that she is not destitute of the Holy Spirit.[36] It is precisely when God shows us a little of our own weak corruption and his own anger against sin that we most glorify him by appealing to him as 'a trew, mercifull, and benyng Father towardis us'.

KNOX THE THEOLOGIAN

Behind Knox the pastoral counsellor lay Knox the theologian. He was not by temperament a contemplative or a man of the closet, and in any case the times would not have allowed it. His duty, as he saw it, was not to write, but 'to blow my Master's trumpet', and this makes it all too easy to overlook his intellect and education. He had sat under John Major at St Andrews University, been ordained to the priesthood, worked as a notary apostolic, travelled extensively in Europe, corresponded with other major reformers such as Calvin, Bullinger, and Beza, learned Hebrew during his time in Geneva, been welcomed as a kindred spirit by a Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, and was comforted on his death-bed by hearing Calvin's sermons read to him in French.

Yet his literary output was comparatively meagre. The spoken word was his natural medium, and unlike Luther and Calvin he did not have the benefit of a stenographer. The result, we can be sure, is that most of his output was lost; and most of what survived did so only because it had to be published to meet a pressing emergency.

Even Knox's major theological publication, his treatise on Predestination, fell into this category, bearing the title, *An Answer to a Great Nomber*

[34] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 402.

[35] See Professor Dawson's discussion, pp. 147-9.

[36] Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 237.

of blasphemous cauillations written by an Anabaptist, and aduersarie to God's eternal Predestination. Professor Dawson says little by way of comment on the theology of this work. She does, however, give valuable background. The doctrine had been attacked in Geneva by Jérôm Bolsec and Albert Pighius, and Calvin had published his own defence, *De aeterna Praedestinatione Dei*, in 1552,[37] but it had also been a matter of heated debate among Protestant prisoners awaiting prosecution in London for heresy. One of these, John Careless, executed in 1556, had stoutly defended the doctrine, but he in turn had been 'refuted' in a pamphlet whose title (*The Confutation of the Errors of the Careless by Necessity*) was a pun on his name. This pamphlet was passed to Knox, and his fellow exiles pressed him to reply to it. This reply was published in 1560, and an additional interest attaches to it in that it contains the first quotation in print from the Geneva Bible, published that same year. It is a symptom of the jitteriness of Geneva following the reaction to the *First Blast* that the City Council would not sanction its printing till they had carefully checked a Latin summary of its contents; and even then they insisted that another (trusted!) exile, William Whittingham, personally vouch for its orthodoxy.

Knox sets forth a doctrine identical to Calvin's, often in the same terms. Predestination, he writes, 'we call the eternall and immutable decree of God, by the which he hath once determined with himself what He will have to be done with everie man. For He hath not created all to be of one condition.'[38] Professor Dawson hints that this close agreement with Calvin was a deliberate attempt to mollify the Genevan Reformer, but surely the truth is that any statement of the Reformed doctrine of predestination is bound to echo Calvin (just as Calvin echoed Augustine)?

The *Scots Confession*, as is well known, contains no chapter on Predestination, while its chapter on Election is concerned mainly with Christology, and this is often taken to indicate that Knox thought the doctrine unimportant. Quite the contrary! 'The doctrine of God's eternal Predestination,' he writes, 'is so necessarie to the Church of God, that, without the same, can Faith neither be truely taught, nether surely established; man can never be broght to true humilitie and knowledge of himself; neither yet can he be ravished in admiration of God's eternal goodness'. [39]

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37 ET, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961).

38 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 5, p. 36. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* III:XXI, 5.

39 Knox, *Works*, p. 25.

The key issue for Knox (as indeed for Augustine, Luther and Calvin) was 'the absolutely unconditional nature of God's grace'.[40] But any attempt to portray the early Reformers' doctrine of predestination as somehow more moderate than that of 'Westminster Calvinism' is misguided. The later formulation is much more carefully nuanced, and carefully avoids the idea of a symmetrical double predestination which bears in the same way on the elect and on the reprobate; or, in the language of Holy Willie, 'sends ane to heaven an' ten to hell, A' for thy glory!' The Westminster Confession, for example, nowhere speaks of a 'predestination' to destruction, but refers only to a 'passing by'; and it takes care to stress the reality of both liberty and contingency (Westminster Confession, 3:1). Even more important, it is clear that Knox's belief in predestination did not in any way inhibit his commitment to the universal and unconditional offer of the gospel. In his *Letter to the Commonalty of Scotland* he addresses his 'beloved brethren' and tells them, 'ye are Goddes creatures, created and formed to his own image and similitude, for whose redemption was shed the most pretious blood of the onlie beloved Son of God, [and] to whom he hath commanded his gospel and glad-tidings to be preached'. This 'blessed Evangile', he writes, God 'now offereth unto you'.[41]

David Calderwood, no mean critic (and not always a generous one) had a high view of Knox's work on Predestination: 'How profound he was in divinitie, that work of his upon Predestination may give evidence.'[42] But the most impressive of Knox's few theological publications is the much briefer *Sermon on the Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness: an exposition of Matthew IV*.[43] First preached in 1556, he later wrote it up for private circulation among his friends (notably his 'deir sisteris', in whose theological acumen he must have had considerable confidence). Published posthumously (1583) it reflects, throughout, a pastor's concern to relate the temptations of Jesus to the trials of his followers. He reminds them that grievous vexations of body and mind are never signs of God's displeasure: if they were, 'then should we condemn the best beloved children of God'. But Knox also shows an intriguing modesty. Addressing the question whether the temptations took place only in Jesus' spirit and imagination, he gave it as his own opinion that Christ suffered real hunger in a real desert and heard Satan's tempting words through the

40 Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), p. 16.

41 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 526.

42 David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 8 vols., ed. Thomas Thomson (Edinburgh: The Wodrow Society, 1842-1849), Vol. 8, p. 29.

43 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 85-114.

'externall eare'. He acknowledges, however, that most expositors take the opposite view, and then adds: 'I will contend with no man in sic cassis, but patientlie will I suffer everie man in his awn knowledge'.[44] He merely asks that his view be weighed and measured by Christian charity.

Knox expounds the Temptation itself primarily in terms of victory. Christ, he writes, did not repel Satan by the power of his godhead, placing himself beyond the reach of all temptation. Instead, he permitted the Adversary to 'spend all his artillery', taking his strokes and assaults in his own body in order to render the tyrannous power of Satan impotent by his own longsuffering. There follows a splendid apostrophe, perhaps the most brilliant passage in the whole Knoxian corpus, in which the preacher pictures Jesus 'provoking' the enemy to battle: 'Lo, I am a man lyke to my brethren, having flesche amd blude and all properties of manis nature (sin, whilk is they vennoume, exceptit). Tempt, try and assault me … do what thou canst, I sall not fliue the place of battell: Yf thow become victor, thow may still continew in possession of thy kingdome in this wreachit world: Bu yf thow can not prevail aganis me, then must thy pray [prey] and unjust spoyle be takin from thee: Thow maun grant thyself vanquischit and confoundit, and must be compelled to leif off frome all accusation of the memberis of my body; for to thame doth appertane the frute of my battell; my victorie is thairs, as I am appoyntit to tak the punishment of their synnis in my bodie.'[45]

Here are the great gospel themes: the true humanity of Christ, vicarious atonement, union with Christ, even the *Christus Victor* motif associated with the so-called 'classic' doctrine of the cross.[46]

'O deir sisteris,' Knox concludes, 'what comfort aucht the remembrance of theis thingis be to our hairtis! Chryst Jesus hath fouchtin oure battell.'

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

There remains the question of Professor Dawson's overall assessment of Knox, the man and his work. The biography conveys the distinct impression that the longer she lived with him, the less she liked him, the earlier chapters being significantly more generous than the later, even to the extent that it looks as if after his return to Scotland in 1559 Knox could do nothing right. The final chapter offers an enigmatic summary: like Dr.

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44 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 106.

45 Knox, *Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 103-4.

46 See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1931), especially Chapter III.

Martin Luther King, Knox was able to make 'that indefinable difference that redirected the future flow of events'. Specifically, he played an invaluable part in the Wars of the Congregation as preacher and propagandist: hardly fulsome praise in an age which views preachers and propagandists as scarcely honourable professions; and Knox is further demoted by the observation that most of the achievements linked to his name were in fact collaborative projects such as the *Scots Confession*, the *Book of Common Order* and the *First Book of Discipline*. Taking him all in all, his contribution to the establishment of the new Kirk was restricted, mainly 'because he could never see beyond the Old Testament model of disobedience to God's covenant'.

But, considering the formidable catalogue of faults to which we have been introduced in the preceding chapters, it would hardly be surprising if Knox's achievements were meagre. Apart altogether from his being a woman-hater, he was vindictive, unpleasant, heavy-handed and paranoid. In his 'self-appointed prophetic task' his thundering reached legendary status. His sermons were marked by extreme violence of language, always severe and uncompromising, often sharp and wounding, sometimes downright vitriolic and on occasion economical with the truth. The story he tells in his *History of the Reformation* is replete with propaganda and spin, he was given to re-writing the history with the benefit of hindsight, he quietly side-lined contributions when it suited him, there was often a defensive note in the way he described an episode, and he absolved himself of all responsibility for 'the mess' at Perth. He had a 'holy (?) hatred' for Mary of Guise and gloated over her death; he treated Mary, Queen of Scots's loss of her husband, childhood companion and friend as a purely political matter; he was given to heavy-handed and malicious humour; and he made a point of getting his retaliation in first. Defamatory insults came to him naturally, he was an abrasive leader who always needed around him men who could pour oil on troubled waters, and he had a hard-edged tone linked to his normal desire to flatten an opponent in a public fight. He was intransigent and disingenuous, and never mastered the art of apologising. Despite having an excellent intelligence network, he made serious tactical mistakes, was completely incapable of compromising in order to secure long-term goals, was locked into an incorrect analysis of the actual situation in Scotland, blind to many of the real challenges facing the Reformed Kirk, and drew comfort from being in a minority, even a minority of one. He started on the wrong foot in his first Edinburgh ministry and never quite fell in step with the burgh. In any case, he had no experience of the parish ministry, lacked the skills needed to alter the city's religious landscape, and was ill-suited in outlook and temperament for the challenges he faced as Minister of St. Giles. Even

his courage is questionable. At one dangerous moment, his colleague, John Willock, bravely stayed in the city when Knox left along with the Lords of the Congregation. And even in death, he showed his appreciation of the dramatic: 'he took care over his performance of the "good death" and consciously provided a legacy for his loyal supporters.'[47]

Any attempt, especially on my part, to offer a counter-picture would quickly lead to shouts of, 'Hagiography!' Nevertheless, questions remain. The most intriguing is why Professor Dawson allowed a man with whom she clearly has little sympathy to become a 'brooding presence' in her life. But there are other questions, too. How, for example, did such a nasty little man earn the admiration not only of his valet, but of contemporaries like James Melville? And how was such an incompetent, paranoid and tactless individual able to achieve anything?

The answer to that may be that he didn't, and that the Reformation project was a failure: an idea that should not be dismissed out of hand. The blame may not have been Knox's (in my view, it wasn't), but when he died, the Reformation was in the balance; it was still in the balance a hundred years later, and five hundred years later still, it has been airbrushed out of Scottish history. But the corollary of dismissing Knox and the Reformation as failures is that Scotland must stop blaming Calvinism for its ills. It was never the faith of her movers and shakers.

'Knox,' wrote R. L. Stevenson, 'has been from the first a man well hated'.[48] This book will not change that, but its rigorous research will ensure that it will long remain the standard point of departure for all future study of 'the wee man in the quad'. And it is a gripping read.

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47 This assessment is largely based on a very problematical use of the record kept by Knox's secretary, Richard Bannatyne, *Memorials of Transactions in Scotland*, a.d. MDLXIX – MDLXXII (Edinburgh: The Bannatyne Club, 1836).

48 Robert L. Stevenson, 'John Knox and His Relations to Women', p. 243.