
The Theological Development of the Young Robertson Smith

by Donald R. Nelson

Dr. Nelson, Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities at Michigan State University, was awarded his doctorate by that university in 1969 for a thesis on "The Life and Thought of William Robertson Smith, 1846-1894". Here he studies the early influences on Robertson Smith's thought, and finds that these included determinant philosophical influences as well as those of philological and historical study.

WRITING in 1889 of the impact of theories of higher criticism upon the Christian's understanding of the Old Testament, Mary Augusta Ward interpreted "the present collapse of English orthodoxy" as resulting from "one cause only—the invasion of English by German thought."¹ Though doubtless there were believers who contested her assessment of the state of the Faith, few would have contradicted her notion that in recent decades British religious insularity had been breached by a theological barrage of Teutonic origin. The publication in 1860 of an incendiary little volume titled *Essays and Reviews* was a clear warning that the Channel no longer provided protection against "German rationalism." The chief intention of its seven Anglican contributors was to "break down the conspiracy of silence" that they felt had kept otherwise educated people in ignorance of the revolutionary developments that had long before occurred in German theology and biblical study.² *Essays and Reviews*, its non-committal title notwithstanding, sparked two ecclesiastical trials and a literary battle of considerable magnitude.

When in the eighteen-seventies and eighties the German "historical consciousness" first made its way to Great Britain on a scale significant enough to warrant Mrs. Ward's term "invasion", no one did more to prepare the beachhead than the Scottish Old Testament scholar, William Robertson Smith (1846-94).³ Appointed in 1870 as Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College at Aberdeen, Smith introduced into the hitherto conservative Scottish biblical scene the higher critical theories of

¹ Mary Augusta Ward, "The New Reformation," *The Nineteenth Century*, XXV (March, 1889), 465.

² Leonard E. Elliott-Binns, *English Thought 1860-1900: The Theological Aspect* (Greenwich: The Seabury Press, 1956), p. 24.

³ The standard biography is John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912).

such German scholars as Karl Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen, and of the leading Dutch liberal, Abraham Kuenen. In 1871 Smith became the regular reviewer of works in German and Dutch Theology for the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. From its inception this journal had been largely concerned with combating continental infidelity. Ironically it served as one of the major channels by which knowledge of higher criticism was disseminated in Great Britain.⁴ In the six years of his affiliation with the *Review* Smith wrote some thirty articles. During the same period he contributed essays on biblical criticism to the *British Quarterly Review* and to the *Academy*.

Smith's forthright espousal of the documentary theory of the Pentateuch in his article "Bible", appearing in 1875 in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, led to formal charges of heresy against him by authorities in the Free Church of Scotland. A four year struggle ensued during which Smith sought to vindicate his views first before the Presbytery of Aberdeen and then before the General Assembly of the Church. Public interest ran high and evoked an abundance of books, pamphlets and newspaper comment. Churchmen throughout the English-speaking world watched the Robertson Smith case closely, realizing that nothing less was being debated than whether or not the wine of the new biblical learning fermented in such places as Göttingen, Tübingen, Greifswald, and Leiden could be contained by the wine skins of the old Reformation creeds.⁵ Smith's problem was not only to make clear the findings of modern biblical scholarship but to show that in teaching them as "assured results" he had not thereby contradicted the doctrine of Scripture set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith to which he was bound as a Free Church professor. Smith's defence was brilliant and if in the end he was removed from his Chair he nevertheless succeeded in introducing a generation of Christians to the intricacies of Old Testament higher criticism as the science was practised in German universities while simultaneously educating them to a "deeper" understanding of the Bible as a divine revelation. Smith was firmly convinced that after the higher critics had wrung from the Bible what they supposed to be confessions about the humility of its origins they still had in no way detracted from the Bible's power to convey the Word of God. In arguing this point during his trial and in several publications, Smith claimed

⁴ Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism* (London: Independent Press, Ltd., 1954), p. 41.

⁵ The Smith case was followed with great interest, for instance, in the American Presbyterian Church. It was viewed as a harbinger of a coming crisis in that communion. See Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), p. 28.

to stand squarely with the Protestant Reformers in their doctrine of revelation. As we shall show in this paper, he was also in no small degree influenced by the theological currents arising from Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher and leading to his own mentors, Richard Rothe and Albrecht Ritschl.

Following his dismissal from the Hebrew Chair in 1881, Smith accepted a post as editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The ninth edition had been progressing under the direction of Thomas S. Baynes. The last thirteen of its twenty-four volumes were edited by Smith. This project occupied much of his time until 1888. Smith personally wrote over two hundred articles for the *Encyclopaedia*. The majority of these articles dealt with Biblical and Semitic subjects. In these articles, as in those he solicited from such scholars as Wellhausen, Hatch, Nöldeke, Schürer, and Harnack, there was further opportunity to advance the popular understanding of higher criticism.

Smith did a great service, too, in promoting knowledge of Old Testament higher criticism with the public lectures he gave to large audiences in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1881 and 1882. The lectures were subsequently published in two books entitled *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church* and *The Prophets of Israel*. Together they comprise the first comprehensive statement in English of the radical reconstruction of Old Testament history that was coming to be called the Graf-Wellhausen theory. Speaking of the second series of lectures, that on *The Prophets of Israel*, Smith's biographers noted that "they accepted as established the two great negations."

They almost wholly ignore the "predictive" element—as that had formerly been understood—in the prophets' work; and they convey with unmistakable clearness that it was no part of the prophets' business to preach a return to "Mosaism," for the simple reason that Mosaism as we now understand it had not yet come into being.⁶

This paper will deal especially with the development of Smith's understanding of revelation in the years prior to his entry into the fray over higher criticism. His departure from received doctrine at this point preceded the adoption of the particular critical positions that led to his heresy trial. It is significant that while his opponents consistently sought to link his views with those of Kuenen and other biblical scholars of the "rationalist" school, at an early stage in the trial Smith wrote to his former professor of theology, Albrecht Ritschl of Göttingen, hailing him as "den Urvater der 'Aberdeen Heresy!'"⁷

⁶ Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

⁷ Otto Ritschl, *Albrecht Ritschls Leben* (2 vols.: Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1892, 96), vol. II, p. 314.

I.

From 1866 to 1870 Smith was enrolled as a theological student at New College, Edinburgh. The New College had been founded in 1843 as a citadel for the defence of the faith against all heresy and infidelity and for the training of Free Church ministers. There is no evidence to suggest that in his twentieth year when he first moved to Edinburgh Robertson Smith harboured any doubts about the truth of the doctrines he could expect to hear propounded at New College. Indeed, he has been described by friends as having "entered on his formal studies for the ministry with a spiritual horizon clear of the slightest cloud." He occupied what at the time were considered "the extreme positions of Presbyterian orthodoxy," and was "eager to be enrolled among the defenders of a system of knowledge and belief in which he had the fullest confidence."⁸

The regnant orthodoxy was nowhere more clearly defined than in the teaching of Dr. James Bannerman under whom Smith studied apologetics. Though he later repudiated Bannerman's thought, we have Smith's father's word that "to the work of Dr. Bannerman's class William gave himself with zest and enthusiasm."⁹ Falling under the spell of Bannerman's crusade against all forms of modernism, Smith wrote a paper during his first year at Edinburgh on the topic of Herbert Spencer's theory of development. Summarizing his idea in a letter to his father, Smith wrote:

In Spencer's book the fallacies are very obvious. The manner in which Spencer contrives really to assume the materiality of the soul, in particular (which, of course, is the foundation of the whole doctrine) is very ingenious, but contains one egregious *petitio principii*. Of course the correlation of physical forces forms a great feature of the argument. I think, however, that I can show that the doctrine is not understood by the development school, and that the doctrine of the dissipation of energy directly disproves the theory of evolution.¹⁰

Still at work on the subject five weeks later, he wrote: "Spencer's book seems to me pretty much to sum up all infidelity, or at least professedly Christian infidelity."¹¹ Dr. Bannerman was highly pleased with his student's performance. Smith relayed to his father Bannerman's words to the effect that the paper "was to be viewed as quite beyond a mere college exercise, . . ." and that the writer "had mastered it and not it him."¹²

⁸ Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

⁹ William Pirie Smith, "Father's Memorandum," Smith MSS, 7467-7. The Smith MSS are located in the Anderson Room, Cambridge University Library.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Quoted from a letter of 14 December 1866.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Quoted from a letter to William Pirie Smith dated 23 January 1867.

¹² *Ibid.* Quoted from a letter dated 5 March 1867.

Since it was the doctrine of revelation as defended by Bannerman against which Smith raised his standard,¹³ we must take a close look at what was being taught. In 1865 Bannerman published his major work under the title *Inspiration: The Infallible Truth and Divine Authority of Scripture*. Inasmuch as the following year Smith came to New College there can be little doubt but that the book contains the material and viewpoint to which he was exposed. Bannerman gave a classic statement of the view of Scripture that prevailed in Scotland at the time. Until as late as 1875 (the year of Smith's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article "Bible"), says one authority, "Ideas of a static Revelation and a verbally inspired Bible held the field almost without question."¹⁴ As though preparing, however, for the siege that lay ahead Bannerman set forth at length and without a shadow of compromise the doctrine of an infallible Bible.

Bannerman attempted to refute the two fallibilist views of Scripture that he saw lurking on the horizon. As he defined these, one taught "a supernatural inspiration limited as to its degree and its place throughout different portions of Scripture," and the other an "inspiration, not supernatural, but due to the ordinary or the gracious influences of the Spirit common to all, or at least to Christian men, and elevating their rational or religious nature throughout the whole authorship of Scripture."¹⁵ Claiming the Bible's self-interpretation as his authority, Bannerman maintained that revelation and inspiration were correlates and equally supernatural. He defined revelation as "the presentation of objective truth to a man in a supernatural manner by God."¹⁶ Inspiration was entailed in "a statement, in speech or writing, made with infallible accuracy, through the operation of the Spirit, of objective truth revealed to man to be so stated."¹⁷ It followed that the record

¹³ Insofar as he ever mentioned by name contemporary spokesmen for the doctrine of revelation against which he contended, Smith singled out Bannerman and also Charles Hodge. Hodge was an American Presbyterian and leader of the so-called Princeton School of theology. On Hodge and his doctrine of Scripture see Ernest R. Sandeen, "The Princeton Theology," *Church History*, XXXI (1962), pp. 307-21. Writing in 1870 to a friend about the difficulties in the orthodox formulations of the doctrine of inspiration, Smith said "I glanced over the standard authority, Hodge (!), a few days ago. He has no conception of the modern form of the problem and proves nothing. I fear it is so with all our orthodox men." Letter to John Sutherland Black, 4 September 1870, Smith MSS, 7449-2.

¹⁴ J. R. Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland 1875-1929* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1933), p. 16.

¹⁵ James Bannerman, *Inspiration: The Infallible Truth and Divine Authority of Scripture* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1865), p. 146.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

of revelation and not the revelatory event was the ultimate authority. This was true since:

The same supernatural power which guarded the revelation, in the act of being made to the prophet, from all incompleteness and mistake, also presided over the act by which he recorded it in the Bible; so that the result of this second step in the process, no less than the first, was miraculously guarded from error, and the product was a record marked by infallible truth and divine authority.¹⁸

The cardinal issue, then, for Bannerman, was the plenary and verbal inspiration and authority of Scripture. Any other view, he said, foundered on the problem of dividing truth from falsehood in Scripture.

There is no principle embosomed in the theory of a supernatural revelation recorded by a merely natural instrumentality which distinctly declares, or indeed declares at all, what amount of truth is to be set to the credit of the divine communication and what amount to the discredit of human error.¹⁹

From this standpoint any project of higher criticism was unlawful. There was simply no court to which to appeal in criticizing the content of the Bible. No legitimate ground was afforded on which to formulate objections based on supposed historical inaccuracies, apparent contradictions in the text, or on the difficulty and mystery of revealed truths. All such objections were "drawn from a province in which it is not competent for man to enter as a judge and still less as an objector."²⁰ Not only was criticism of the inspired record beyond the ken of man but even in its interpretation Scripture was not to be treated by common canons. The inspiration of the writers "bestowed on them an exemption from error, and a plenitude of divine truth which, except by the supernatural gift of God, they could not have possessed, so that in this respect their writings are not like those of other men, and must be viewed and read and interpreted differently."²¹ Bannerman thus denied the cardinal tenet of the higher criticism: that Scripture is to be analysed by the same methods as any other ancient literature.

Such was the prevailing doctrine of Scripture in the Church circles in which Smith was trained. The very uncompromising rigour with which Bannerman stated his position, however, arose from his awareness that there were Christian thinkers who had grown dubious of such formulations.

Bannerman's colleague on the New College faculty, Andrew Bruce Davidson, was one such restive soul. Writing to a friend shortly after the appearance of Bannerman's book, Davidson noted that so far it "seems to have called forth no opposition and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 564-65.

no assent," but for his own part Davidson did not find its central thesis above dispute. "I need not say," he wrote, "that the learned doctor keeps up a holy war with 'proud human reason,' which is hell-born, and imposes eternal silence, except to concur, on its stubborn voice—though why its concurrence should be so eagerly sought when its lead is so vigorously denounced I cannot see."²²

Through Davidson Smith gained his first exposure to the higher critical view of Scripture. As one unsympathetic writer put it, "Davidson's teaching, . . . became the source of an alien infusion in Old Testament studies in Scotland. Robertson Smith caught the infection and spread the plague."²³ But Davidson's posture in the years that Smith sat in his classes and even later was ever one of considerable caution and circumspection.²⁴ Where Davidson in the eighteen-sixties stood in opposition to Bannerman and more traditional Scottish theology was in his view of the place of Scripture in relation to theology. Davidson believed that the process of ascertaining the true contextual meaning of a Biblical passage, however inconvenient for theology this meaning might be, must precede the building of a system of dogmatics. Thus as early as 1862 in the preface to his first published work, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, Davidson asserted the priority of the grammatical and historical understanding. "We in this country," he wrote, "have been not unaccustomed to begin at the other end, creating exegesis and grammar by deduction from Dogmatics . . ." Furthermore, "there has been too much tendency to dissever Revelation from any relation to the human mind in its origin, and to the men of its immediate application." Thus Scripture is viewed "as coming from heaven like a meteoric stone, amazing to spectators but to be analysed and used by a subsequent era." His own approach was to determine the historical and therefore human situation in which Scripture was written. Davidson concluded that "the books of Scripture so far as interpretation and general formal criticism are concerned must be handled very much as other books are handled."²⁵ It is little wonder that Professor Davidson was unimpressed with his friend Bannerman's interdict on the critical study of Scripture.

Davidson's lectures opened up for Smith new lines of thought and study. Though Davidson refused to stand by his pupil when the

²² As quoted in James Strahan, *Andrew Bruce Davidson* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), p. 105.

²³ John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: The Publications Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, 1943), p. 288.

²⁴ Thomas Kelly Cheyne, *Founders of Old Testament Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1893), pp. 226-27.

²⁵ Andrew Bruce Davidson, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862).

hour of trial came,²⁶ Smith's admiration for his teacher never waned. Late in life Smith placed the name of Davidson beside those of the German theologians, Rothe and Ritschl, as having been most influential in his life.

II.

In April of 1867 following his first year at New College, Edinburgh, Smith went to Germany to spend the summer months studying theology at the University in Bonn. It was, he said, out of fear of "exposing himself to the most rationalistic teaching in Germany" that he had chosen Bonn over the more illustrious Tübingen or Heidelberg faculties.²⁷ But despite this precaution his intellectual contacts in Germany were to open his eyes to new vistas. It was after his return from Germany that the first clear indications of a tendency to deviate from the prevailing canons of Free Church orthodoxy became evident.

At the University of Bonn, Smith attended the lectures of Kamphausen, Köhler, and Lange. Through them he was introduced to what was then called the *Vermittlungstheologie*, a school which was attempting to find an intermediate position between liberalism and orthodoxy. The leading light of this group and a man who had a subsequent decisive influence on Smith was Richard Rothe. In his *Zur Dogmatik* Rothe defined the mediating posture as follows:

The matters I handle in this volume inevitably place me in a most unfavourable position . . . I find myself in direct conflict with both the leading parties in the theology of the present day. My mode of regarding Holy Scripture runs counter to modern orthodoxy. My supernaturalism and firm belief in Revelation are no less opposed to theological liberalism. This very antagonism encourages me to hope that I may be found to have spoken a word in season. On the one hand it is my belief that the consciousness of the age will never thoroughly re-assimilate Christianity till it can take courage to believe again in miracle and supernatural influence. I am no less firmly convinced on the other hand, that miracle and supernatural influence will never find their way into the conscious belief of Christian in the form in which Church theology has allowed those ideas to be inoculated into it. That which is past can never be called to life, after history has once buried it. But there are not a few persons who long for the reconciliation of the old and new.²⁸

It was to this problem of reconciling the old and the new that Smith was to devote his talents. He first heard the problem broached

²⁶ Strahan, *op. cit.*, p. 239 gives this explanation: "When he saw his best pupil, himself now a teacher, seeking to force critical methods upon an unenlightened and unconvinced Church, attempting to convert with law, logic, libels, brilliant dialectic and splendid scorn, his instinct told him all this was gravely wrong."

²⁷ Quoted in Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

²⁸ Richard Rothe, *Zur Dogmatik* (Gotha, Perthes, 1863), p. iv. as quoted in a review of his book in the *Westminster Review*, LXXX (1863), p. 104.

in a positive manner in those Bonn lectures of 1867. Writing to his father of Kamphausen's lectures he said:

I found him rationalistic, as we should say, that is, he holds for example that a passage of SS can contain no more for us than for the author, and that its full meaning is to be obtained by placing ourselves in the author's standpoint. At the same time, though his view leads him to admit there may be historical errors in the Bible, and to refer Daniel to the period of the Maccabees, etc., he is not a rationalist according to the Germans, who reserve that name for those who deny supernatural inspiration and prophecy altogether . . . Certainly the language in which he spoke of the Messianic Psalms today seemed very orthodox. . . . I do not follow his lectures well enough to speak with certainty.²⁹

As the summer progressed Smith's grasp of the language deepened as did his feeling of respect for the *Vermittlungstheologie*. Writing to his father on July 10 he told of a conversation with Professor Kamphausen on the question of inspiration. While noting that Kamphausen was "very far from orthodox" he added:

He is a very sincere and pious man; in fact it is quite absurd to regard the heterodox Germans as infidels. Of course I do not mean that such men as Strauss are not infidels. But Kamphausen, though on some points quite heterodox (e.g., he goes about as far as Colenso in the Pentateuch question), is on other points, I may say, strictly orthodox. So far as I can see, he holds quite orthodox views on the person, miracles, etc., of Christ, and lays special weight on the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*.³⁰

Returning to Edinburgh for the winter term Smith embarked on an intensive study of German theological, philosophical, and Biblical literature. To his father he wrote:

I am going in wholly for German books, chiefly exegetical, Delitzsch on Isaiah, Keil on the Minor Prophets, Rothe's *Zur Dogmatik*, Hupfeld's *die Quellen der Genesis*, Ewald's *Grammar*, and for the rest probably Kamphausen's part of Bunsen's *Bibelwerk* . . .³¹

This reading would equip him for the task of mediating to the British people the revolutionary findings of the continental Biblical critics. No less revolutionary was the doctrine of revelation by which Smith was to legitimize the critical method. He brought back from Germany the conviction that one could confidently assert the reality of a supernatural revelation in history while denying that the records through which knowledge of the history is conveyed were themselves supernatural or infallible.

Also during his first German sojourn Smith had begun the study of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He continued his reading of Kant in the winter of 1867-68.³² Kant's shadow falls over all modern thought and not least in the theological tradition

²⁹ Quoted by Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³¹ Letter dated 24 March 1868 (Edinburgh), Smith MSS, 7449-5.

³² Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 94.

running from Schleiermacher through Rothe to Ritschl, the tradition with which Smith aligned himself. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant pointed out that the human mind can no longer be understood as a mirror which passively reflects the patterns, the logos of things-in-themselves (i.e., the ultimate realities which Kant called noumena). The theory running back to the Greeks that the objects of experience are given independently of thought was rendered untenable by Kant's "Copernican Revolution." The mind, he said, was an active agency which ordered the raw material of sense experience under the categories and spatial-temporal forms peculiar to the human understanding. And though the categories may be *a priori* as Kant held, nonetheless all knowledge is conditioned by the knower. The epistemological basis of any knowledge of God based on traditional metaphysics was destroyed since the reason is trapped in the phenomenal world of its own "making." For Kant "God" became a postulate necessary for the enforcement of morality. For many of Kant's disciples, including Smith, the religious consequence of his philosophy was a stress on revelation as existential encounter (as opposed to the natural revelation which Kant had undercut) and on faith as the response required in encounter even though reason's grip on the object of faith had loosened. Along with his German theological mentors Smith thought he had found a viable foundation for a post-Kantian theology in the historical stream of religious experience. That this was the direction of Smith's thought is clear from the extant essays written while he was yet a student at New College.

In the last weeks of 1867 Smith was busy writing an essay entitled "On Prophecy and Personality."³³ His purpose, as he stated it for his father, was to discern how "the prophet's mind, acting according to its natural laws, was yet the organ of a supernatural revelation."³⁴ Though Smith had some reservations about the intelligibility of what he had written, he reported that the essay was warmly praised by Davidson who predicted his student would "on the *human side* of the science do good service to theology."³⁵ Despite some complaint that it was "somewhat German and obscure" the essay was "very favourably received" by the New College Theological Society before whom it was read on 25 January 1868.³⁶

Since only a fragment survives we cannot reconstruct the entire

³³ A fragment of this essay under the title "Prophecy and Personality" will be found in *Lectures and Essays of William Robertson Smith*, eds. John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912), pp. 97-108. This work as a whole is hereafter cited as *Lectures and Essays*.

³⁴ Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

argument of the essay, but what is of interest is the way in which Smith employed his recent Kantian studies to probe into the nature of prophetism. The prophet, said Smith, was not a passive instrument, "not a mere lyre struck by the plectrum of the Spirit." Nor would it do to say simply that the revelation had to be "intelligently apprehended" by the prophet before it could be given forth. There must be a recognition of the total operation of the prophet's mind on that which he apprehends.

For whatever difference of view exists as to the objective *per se* (*Noumenon* or *Ding-an-sich*), there is no difference of opinion among competent psychologists as to the fact that what appears to us as objective is really a product of personal activity acting on certain *subjective* elements, that the objective is never apprehended except through the subjective. If, for example a picture stands before me, I do not perceive the colour, figures etc., as noumenon, I receive from the picture only a series of subjective impressions which an exercise of my own personality builds up into the picture I *really* see.³⁷

Smith was saying that though there be an objective, indeed supernatural, vision vouchsafed to the prophet nevertheless the prophecy itself was always a human and therefore a subjectively conditioned utterance.

If nothing can be apprehended as objective in the first instance, since the vision must somehow be broken down into subjective feelings and built up again by the person affected before he can apprehend it,—this being so, it is clear that no absolute security can be given that the prophet will not add elements of his own . . . No complete freedom from admixture would be possible unless all the prophet's previous recollections were for the time cancelled, i.e., unless he lost his self-consciousness, which we know he never did.³⁸

This was not meant to be a denial of the prophet's authority or of the supernatural origin of his message. It simply meant, said Smith, that "since the prophetic consciousness was continuous with the ordinary consciousness, the supernatural revelation was not independent of the previous thoughts of the prophet but only supplemented these thoughts so as to bring forth a new and perfect revelation."³⁹

Of even greater importance for tracing the evolution of Smith's thought is the paper entitled "Christianity and the Supernatural."⁴⁰ It revealed the elemental shift in his stance since his contacts with the *Vermittlungstheologie*. In a letter to his family Smith described the paper as "very much a rendering of Rothe's ideas from an English starting point and in English forms of thought."⁴¹ This

³⁷ *Lectures and Essays*, p. 98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-36.

⁴¹ Black and Chrystal, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

paper is of interest, too, because it brought Smith's first public confrontation with his more conservative brethren.⁴²

The essay was a frontal assault on the reigning school of apologetics and a frank denial of the doctrine of an infallible Bible. Coupled with this attack was a constructive attempt to place the Faith on what seemed to Smith a more certain foundation. The need of the hour, he said, was to "reconsider the whole treatment of the premises of Christianity." It would no longer do to defend Christianity as a hypothesis having a high degree of probability because it suits certain facts better than any alternative. For then one felt bound to accept the truth of Christianity only until further facts turn up *pro* or *con*. Such a hypothetical Christianity, said Smith, was not worth having because "the essence of personal Christianity lies in love of a personal Saviour"; faith between persons must rest on "something deeper than a mere balancing of probabilities." It was on the ground of an unshakable *personal* element that Christianity must be defended and not on "mere phenomenal probabilities."⁴³

One result of this stress on the personal quality of revelation was the rendering of a sharp distinction between revelation and the Bible. Orthodox theologians had frequently confused the two or used them interchangeably. Against this view Smith asserted, "the Bible is not revelation but the record of divine revelation—the record of those historical facts in which God has revealed Himself to man." It followed, said Smith, that Christianity does not consist of faith in an inspired book or in revealed propositions but in the knowledge of a revealed Person.

That God really . . . has revealed himself to man—not that we possess an inspired record of this revelation—is the point on which Christianity stands or falls. Of course, on this view we can no longer speak of revelation as a revelation of truths. The knowledge given in revelation is not the knowledge of facts but knowledge of a person. What God reveals is simply HIMSELF—His own charcter and disposition towards men.⁴⁴

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Lectures and Essays*, pp. 109-13. Though Smith was surely unaware of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, it is noteworthy that Kierkegaard had but a few years earlier raised a like protest which, though falling on deaf ears at the time, was to reverberate through twentieth century theology. Kierkegaard turned the full weight of his irony on the Christian who "clings to probabilities." "The wader," he wrote, "feels his way with his foot, lest he get beyond his depth; and so the shrewd and prudent man feels his way with the understanding in the realm of the probable, and finds god where the probabilities are favourable, and gives thanks on the great holidays of probability." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 208.

⁴⁴ *Lectures and Essays*, p. 123.

Smith contended further that it was precisely because Christianity rests on the reality of this fellowship between man and God that the idea of the *supernatural* is indispensable.

Our Christian faith that God in Christ has made Himself personally known to us, has entered into personal relations with us is . . . in one word our faith in a supernatural self-manifestation of God; and the apologetic in which we seek to justify our Christian faith must have for its central point this idea of the supernatural.⁴⁵

Traditional theology had been wrong in claiming for its starting point a supernatural communication of truth in which miracles occurred primarily to attest the divine commission of the prophet. The miracle had in this view a merely adventitious connection with the revelation, the revelation being a set of propositions to be believed. Smith argued to the contrary that miracles should be understood as the central facts of Christianity, intrinsically related to the history of redemption. Moreover, miracles should not be viewed as isolated events each coming like "a meteor flashing through the sphere of man's spiritual vision." but rather as organically related events each revealing but a facet of the personality of God. From this standpoint the history of revelation becomes paramount.

The miracles of Scripture are not isolated facts but a connected chain running onwards from the fall, and so interwoven with the history of redemption, and that history evacuated of miracles would be meaningless.⁴⁶

As a witness to doctrine isolated miracles might suffice; but as a display of God's character a continuous action of God in history is needful. . . . Not one act but a whole life is needed fully to declare a character. And then this supernatural activity of God is not merely something superadded to natural history but enters into natural history, gradually moulding it in conformity with God's redemptive purpose.⁴⁷

Smith was cautious so to state this doctrine of God's action in history as to preserve the truth of God's transcendence. "Revelation," he said, "is no mere organic process, no mere evolution of energies naturally existent in the world, but a new and specifically divine history let down into the world."⁴⁸

So far Smith had concerned himself with the idea of revelation. His emphasis on revelation as the history of encounter between persons was a departure from received doctrine. His corresponding idea of inspiration was no less divergent from approved teaching. The traditional view (which Smith identified with Bannerman) was of the authentic *relaying* of an infallible communication of truth. While Smith, in agreement with orthodoxy, could say "side by side with the stream of miracle we have a stream of inspired prophecy," he did not mean by this the inscripturation of an infallible record.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

Inspiration was not a characteristic to be attributed to Scripture but rather a phenomenon of the human consciousness. Inspiration, he said, "is not an imparting of knowledge, it is a renovation of the human consciousness [rendered necessary by the noetic effect of sin] whereby man is enabled to see God in manifestation."⁴⁹ It is not any guarantee of the accuracy of Scripture but its superior personality that causes later generations to value it.

That the events of revelation can be brought before us in perfectly real and lively form only by a record at first-hand . . . is obvious. The great point is not the superior accuracy of a contemporary record, but its superior personality. In the record of an actor the events of history live again. A subsequent historian may by the help of criticism produce a much more accurate narrative, but never a narrative possessing the same living power.⁵⁰

Smith did not hesitate to draw out for his audience the full implication of his teaching. The infallibility of Scripture need no longer be either a cornerstone or a stumbling block. The Christian's certainty of knowledge of God rested on the unshakable ground of his encounter with God in the historically mediated person of Christ. "No criticism," said Smith, "can take from us our fellowship with God in Christ—no criticism can withdraw from the Bible its power as a medium wherein we are brought face to face with Christ; for a personal faith lies too deep to be touched by criticism."⁵¹ Smith's pious reassurances notwithstanding, many of his contemporaries would evaluate quite differently the power of historical criticism to sever the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.

III.

Early in 1869 with his friend (and later biographer) John Sutherland Black, Smith departed for a period of study at the University of Göttingen. The great attraction there was the theologian Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889). In his first letter from Göttingen, Smith told of attending Ritschl's lectures. "Ritschl," he wrote, "is a strong Calvinist and has been giving a very interesting lecture against the Lutheran doctrine of the law in the N.T. He is a man of great acuteness and his lectures are of a kind that will be directly useful in Scotland."⁵² A few weeks later he wrote, "I have never heard anything so interesting on a theological subject as Ritschl's lectures. He has evidently such thorough clearness in his own views and such complete acquaintance with the views of others as to make his lectures exceedingly interesting."⁵³ By the end of the summer his

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵² Letter to father dated 8 May 1869 (Göttingen), Smith MSS, 7449-5.

⁵³ Letter to father dated 24 May 1869 (Göttingen), Smith MSS, 7449-5.

praise knew no bounds. "Ritschl has been very profitable," he wrote, "far the best course of lectures I ever heard."⁵⁴

There were several reasons why Robertson Smith found Ritschl's theology so appealing. Ritschl, it has been said, saved Christianity from degenerating into Hegelianism.⁵⁵ In the golden days of the Tübingen School, when David Strauss (1808-1874) and Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) had won a wide following for their reinterpretation of Christianity as an illustration of Hegelian philosophy, Albrecht Ritschl, once one of Baur's most promising disciples, had led a reaction against the intrusion of Hegelianism and every other kind of metaphysics into Christianity. In his anti-metaphysical bias Ritschl had not merely returned to Kant. He accepted Kant's dictum that things-in-themselves are unknowable; only appearances are apprehended by the pure reason. But Ritschl introduced a distinction which made a positive theology possible once again. It has been said of Ritschl that:

He held that things-in-themselves can be known through their action upon us and through our response to them. Thus, while God in abstraction from the world cannot be proved by the traditional arguments for theism, yet he can be known through the revelation in which he makes a personal impact upon men.⁵⁶

"Every claim," Ritschl said, "to teach something concerning God in himself apart from some real revelation on his part, felt and perceived on our part, is baseless."⁵⁷ The reality of God's personal revelation as the only starting point in theology was a position with which Smith was in heartiest agreement. It was no coincidence that Ritschl had studied briefly under Rothe, the "mediating" theologian so highly regarded by Smith.

The letters from Göttingen contain long discussions of those Ritschlian ideas which had captured Smith's imagination. For instance there was the question of the relation in which the individual and the individual's religious experience stands to the community of Christians. Ritschl, though his thought owed much to Schleiermacher's pietistic method of basing theology on the interrogation of the believer's religious consciousness, had a marked aversion to subjectivism. He attempted to avoid this pitfall by a due consideration of the life, teaching, and works of Christ as an objective point of reference (Ritschl did not share the prevalent scepticism about the historicity of the Gospels) and by stressing the importance of the historical Church as a normative witness to Christian Truth. In this connection Smith was struck by Ritschl's critique of the "un-churchly individualism" of the Protestant sects particularly

⁵⁴ Letter to father dated 12 August 1869 (Göttingen), Smith MSS, 7449-5.

⁵⁵ See the chapter entitled "From Strauss to Ritschl" in Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 101-11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

in their emphasis on a "conversion experience." Smith wrote approvingly to his father of Ritschl's idea that:

The Sects treat the Church merely as the sum of saved individuals. They demand that every member should have an empirical certainty of his saved state. . . . The Church, on the other hand, while not denying that such an empirically given conversion is possible does not demand that a man should have such experience—For the Church recognizes the fact that the Church is before the individual, that is in the Church that God's grace works, and that the development of the individual Christian takes place in the Church.⁵⁸

Ritschl's stress on the priority of the community to the individual, of the Church to the believer, is a concept that Smith would later apply with great fruitfulness in the anthropology of religion.⁵⁹

His session at Göttingen was the beginning for Smith of a lifelong friendship and extensive correspondence with Albrecht Ritschl. John Sutherland Black, Smith's friend, biographer, and co-labourer in the spreading of Ritschl's ideas in Great Britain⁶⁰ did not hesitate to call Smith a "Ritschlian."

Smith returned to Edinburgh in September, 1869, to take up his last year of study at New College. If some major shifts had occurred in his theological posture since his matriculation three years earlier it can be safely said that these had come largely through contacts with German theological scholarship and not by virtue of his Free Church Professors. We are fortunate to have an extensive statement from Smith's pen indicating where he stood theologically as he neared the end of his formal education for the ministry. The occasion for the statement was his Presidential Address, entitled "On the Work of a Theological Society,"⁶¹ given before the New College Theological Society on 8 November 1869. Some months earlier his paper "Christianity and the Supernatural" had provoked an unsuccessful attempt by one of the more conservative students to secure a motion binding all members of the Society to absolute acceptance of the statements of Scripture. This incident led Smith in this subsequent address to raise the problem of theological method. Though it was by no means cast in a biographical form, in this statement Smith put his finger firmly on the pulse of his own recent religious and intellectual life. His concepts, indeed his very vocabulary, betrayed the extent to which his own heart had been

⁵⁸ Letter dated 7 July 1869 (Göttingen), Smith MSS, 7449-5.

⁵⁹ See especially Smith's *The Religion of the Semites* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1889). On the close relationship of Smith's early theological development to the seminal ideas he later advanced in anthropology and comparative religion see the writer's *The Life and Thought of William Robertson Smith, 1846-1894* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1970).

⁶⁰ Otto Ritschl, *op. cit.*, 11, 101. In the preface to his translation of Ritschl's *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (1872) John Sutherland Black acknowledged Smith's assistance.

won by a style of thought which, though flowing in the deepest currents of the age, was yet alien to most of his brethren.

Smith opened up to its manifold ramifications the question of how the Scriptures are related to the creeds and to theological discourse. Was theological progress a matter of drawing ever more accurate deductions from the fixed axioms of Scripture or did it demand, in Smith's words, "a recognition of a positive activity of the theologising subject dialectically evolving the contents of an internal consciousness"?⁶² The orthodox position was that the Bible contained divinely communicated propositions. The creeds and theologies were then derived by a process of deduction; the theologian's task was a purely formal one of classifying the revealed data. Theological discourse on this view, Smith said, could only be polemical; it could not bring a dialectical advancement toward the truth. If the truth had been fully, indeed infallibly, given in Scripture, then conflicting theologies could be reconciled only as more adequate exegesis made refutation or vindication possible. For example the difference between Calvinists and Lutherans must be considered to be the result of logical slips made by all the theologians of one church and none of the theologians of the other. "Slips of that kind," observed Smith, "may be made by individuals but not surely by all the theologians of one Church and no theologian of another."⁶³ The conservative theologians of the day recognized this problem but answered it by saying that the Christian system of doctrine was less explicitly set forth in Scripture than might be desired or than was once claimed to be the case. This admission, said Smith, led him to the conclusion that:

The confession is to us no longer the spontaneous utterance of the faith of the Church, offered for subscription only because no one who sincerely accepts Scripture could for a moment hesitate to endorse its doctrines, but a theological formula claiming an independent theological value as a statement of doctrine, and devised as a more crucial test of theological views than the words of Scripture afford.⁶⁴

But this, thought Smith, was a dangerous stance for the Protestant to take for it seemed to be setting theology above the Bible.

The way out of these problems was clear to Smith but a major reorientation was required. We must recognize, said Smith, that:

Our theological systems are not simply *deductions* from Scripture, . . . they are the product of an activity of the human mind which is not merely *formal*, not mere classification of immediately revealed data, but the development, in a dialectical process, into more and more definite scientific form, of a religious consciousness which must always find its canon in Scripture, but which none the less has a life and growth of its own. . . .⁶⁵

⁶¹ *Lectures and Essays*, pp. 137-62.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Such a transition from a theology that advanced "by deduction from axioms that lie outside the theologian" to one that sees advancement "by evolution of a consciousness lying within him" was, as Smith plainly explained, a move from the "philosophy of the eighteenth century as exhibited in Butler" into that of the nineteenth in which "the real restorers of believing theology were . . . followers mainly of Schleiermacher."⁶⁶

Smith then turned to a consideration of the charge that the view he was espousing was rationalistic. To this Smith answered that the matter was quite the reverse. Those orthodox theologians like Charles Hodge⁶⁷ who equated Scripture with the Word of God felt required to prove the authority and inspiration of Scripture. To do so they invoked a line of apologetic argument that rested on natural reason and probability. The real basis of theology, said Smith, became:

An apologetical enquiry into the evidences for Christianity with the view of bringing out the doctrine of inspiration in isolation from all other doctrines as the absolute prius in the system of Christian theology, capable of being demonstrated by evidence convincing to those who have not experienced the power of Christianity.⁶⁸

This resting of theology on a foundation of natural reasoning Smith branded "Pelagianism of the intellect," a sort of rationalism that was the very antithesis of the Reformation principles these apologists claimed to venerate. The Reformers did not begin with intellectual assent to the "fundamentalia" but with the experimental conviction, with a consciousness of new life that gave rise to a "theologia regeneratum." The starting point for Reformed theology was the consciousness of redemption realized in the believer's heart by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. "The Church," said Smith, "is not redeemed by its theology; it theologises because it is redeemed." Doctrine was not the first thing for "it is from this consciousness outward that the Christian develops for himself a true notion of God and a true notion of man." Doctrine while revealed in a true sense by God was yet a human construct "for though presented to a man's mind from the outside yet it has to be made over again from the inside as soon as the Holy Spirit has begun true faith in the soul."⁶⁹

If the accusation of rationalism against the newer theology was ill-founded, what of the charge of mysticism and of unrestrained subjectivism? Smith's answer revealed the unmistakable marks of his recent contacts with Albrecht Ritschl. Like Ritschl he points to

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁶⁷ See note 13 *supra*.

⁶⁸ *Lectures and Essays*, pp. 153-54.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

the historical Christ and the impact He made on his contemporaries as the norm of true spiritual life.

If our intelligible Christ differs from the Christ of history, if the salvation we receive differs from the salvation which Christ bestowed on those who were eye-witnesses of His saving work, then we may be sure either that we have argued falsely from our faith, or that our faith itself is false, having its source within ourselves and not in a true operation of God which can never be out of harmony with His working in days gone by.⁷⁰

Moreover, tendencies to subjectivism will be checked by a proper recognition of the Church's character as an organism "in which no part can be developed save in and through the development of the whole." The theology of the individual is always one-sided and must ever be corrected and supplemented by the faith of the Church as a whole. This is a dynamic and dialectical process in which theology advances "to an ever fuller and fuller comprehension of the ideal relation between Christ and the Church made perfect."⁷¹

Though the charge would be made often enough later, one would not conclude at this point that Smith had abandoned the Faith of his fathers. Nevertheless, all that he said must be understood with a full recognition that nothing less than a shift in the moorings of theology had in fact occurred. Smith emphatically rejected natural theology, propositional revelation, an infallible Bible, and a static system of doctrine. No less emphatically he affirmed the reality of God's self-disclosure in and through the history of redemption. In revelation God did not give a set of propositions to which assent is to be given after reason has somehow certified their inspiration. God gives *Himself* in such a way that only the response of personal faith will lead to knowledge. The record of revelation is human and therefore fallible. Likewise the doctrines revered in the Church are the fruit of the believer's reflection on the meaning of the revelatory events. "Doctrines of theology are the product of faith, the knowledge of the subject and object of faith which are evolved by dialectical necessity from the primitive act itself."⁷²

Though Smith claimed the authority of the Protestant reformers for his position it is clearly evident that he was profoundly influenced by currents of thought flowing in the wake of the Kantian revolution. Smith's conversion to Neo-Protestant theology was the preparation for, not a consequence of, an acceptance of the correctness of the particular higher critical assertions about the Bible that he was to popularize in Great Britain. In his theology no less than in his critical theory Smith was, to use Mrs. Ward's imagery again, captive to the German bow and spear.

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⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 157.