

# THE LESLIE CONTROVERSY, 1805

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IN the Spring of the year 1805, after a violent struggle between rival factions in Edinburgh, John Leslie was appointed to the Chair of Mathematics in the university, and the Moderate Party in the Church of Scotland sustained its first major defeat for more than fifty years. Historians have rightly interpreted this incident as a landmark in the story of the eventual decline and fall of the Moderates as an ecclesiastical party, and perhaps rather more controversially as a triumph for liberal and enlightened opinion in Scotland; but they have, I think, failed to understand the deeper significance of what was happening. Ecclesiastical and secular politics played an important part in the struggle, but what was really at stake was "moderatism" as a theological and ecclesiological system. In the arguments put forward by the opposing parties two radically different religious positions came into conflict. The whole framework of 18th century "rational" religion was shaken by Leslie's supporters, and many of the presuppositions upon which Moderatism had hitherto rested were destroyed. At the same time the opponents of the Moderate Party profited from the disastrous way in which the Moderate leaders handled the case. Thus from the point of view both of church politics and of theology Leslie's appointment was to have a considerable and direct influence.

If this claim seems extravagant, consider some of the issues at stake. Not only did the Moderates become involved in an unusually bitter contest with their traditional evangelical opponents, but for the first time they forfeited the good opinion of the educated and professional classes in Edinburgh, and what was perhaps even more significant, they lost the support of several of the most prominent government officers in Scotland. Their *quondam* allies, the Town Council and the *Senatus Academicus*, were alienated, and they themselves were held up to ridicule in a series of widely-read and scarifying pamphlets. The right of the clergy to supervise education and university appointments was challenged, and the propriety of allowing parish ministers to hold academic Chairs was questioned. On a different plane, the nature and tendency of David Hume's philosophy and the relationship between natural and revealed religion were examined, and to the dismay of the Moderates the evangelical attitude to these matters was tacitly endorsed by the General Assembly. It is thus no wonder that (if Lord Cockburn is to be believed) the defeat "undoubtedly

helped to kill Dr. Finlayson", one of the most active of the Moderate leaders, who is described by Cockburn as "the underground soul of the dark confederacy".<sup>1</sup>

## I

The Chair of Mathematics became vacant in February 1805 after the translation of Professor Playfair to the Chair of Natural Philosophy. Among the first candidates to offer themselves was Thomas M'Knight of the Trinity Church, son of James M'Knight who had been one of the leaders of the Moderate party after Principal Robertson's withdrawal from church politics in 1780. His qualifications were acknowledged to be sufficient although not outstanding, and he was willing to resign his parochial Charge if elected by the Town Council, the patrons of the Chair. However, the Moderate leaders in Edinburgh, Grieve, Inglis and Finlayson, made it a condition of their support for M'Knight that he should retain his Charge. When this fact became known it called forth vigorous memoranda from Dugald Stewart and John Playfair to the Lord Provost, drawing his attention to the "dangerous innovation" of uniting university Chairs with city Churches, and alleging that a "powerful combination" was afoot to subvert the independence of the university. Hitherto they had been prepared to acquiesce in M'Knight's appointment, but now they began actively to canvass on behalf of Leslie. Leslie's scientific and mathematical talents were beyond dispute, and his pioneering *Essay on Heat* had recently been acclaimed by those qualified to judge its merits in Scotland and England, and had been awarded the Royal Society's Rumford Prize by a unanimous vote. Unfortunately, like his sponsors Stewart and Playfair, he was believed to be Whig in his political sympathies, and this was intolerable to the Moderate admirers of Lord Melville.

In the middle of February rumours began to circulate. It was hinted that heretical, if not atheistical, opinions were to be found in Leslie's book. In Note XVI in his *Essay* Leslie had spoken favourably of Hume's doctrine of causation, and it was now alleged that if Hume's argument was carried to a logical conclusion it would overthrow the customary "proofs" for the existence and attributes of God. On February 20th Dr. Finlayson of St. Giles took the opportunity of a Fast Day sermon to drop dark hints about the progress of infidelity and irreligion, and "the danger of entrusting the education of youth to the most unprincipled among the learned".<sup>2</sup> The Edinburgh ministers let it be known that they would exercise their ancient right of *avisamentum* which entitled them to advise the Town Council

<sup>1</sup> Henry, Lord Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time*, (1856), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Dr. Robert Lee to Dr. Young, 12th June 1805, (National Library of Scotland, MS.3432, f.49).



about the filling of academic posts. On March 9th the Presbytery took it upon itself to remind the university Senate that Professors were required by law to subscribe to the Confession of Faith if asked to do so by the clergy. In due course they received a sharp and extremely candid reply, in which the Senate accused the Presbytery of trying to re-introduce the Inquisition into Scotland. The practice of requiring Professors to sign the Confession had, they said, wisely been allowed to lapse by Principal Robertson. This piece of information cut the ground from under the feet of the Presbytery effectively, since Robertson's memory was by now revered not only by the Moderates, but by many of their opponents as well.

These various moves were no doubt intended to warn the Council, the Senate and the public at large that Leslie's appointment would be fought by the clergy with every available weapon. So far there was no sign of disagreement between the two ecclesiastical parties (the letter to the Senate was approved unanimously in the Presbytery) and the matter looked like developing into a clash between clerical and lay interests in the city. The only persons in a delicate position were the clerical members of the Senate. (Principal Baird was later severely criticised for having signed both the Presbytery's letter to the Senate, and the Senate's letter to the Presbytery).

Meanwhile on February 22nd Leslie wrote to a member of the Town Council to say that he was a loyal son of the Church of Scotland and fully accepted its doctrines. A few days later he obtained testimonials to this effect from two ministers in Fife who had known him from childhood. At the same time he took the precaution of writing to Dr. Hunter, Professor of Divinity in the university. Hunter was, if not exactly evangelical in his churchmanship, at least *persona non grata* with the Moderates, having quarrelled furiously with 'Jupiter' Carlyle some years before. In his letter to this possible ally Leslie once again affirmed his entire orthodoxy and dissociated himself from the philosophical views of Hume so far as they impinged upon religion.

On March 11th one of the ministers (I rather suspect Henry Grieve of the Old Kirk) met the Lord Provost privately and warned him that the clergy would oppose Leslie's appointment. In return his Lordship confided that the election would take place two days later. The following day, at an unofficial meeting of the Edinburgh ministers, a copy of Leslie's letter to Dr. Hunter was produced and read, and rejected as unsatisfactory. (Hunter himself was ill, and it is interesting to note that he was very reluctant indeed to let his reverend brethren get their fingers on the original letter). A draft Remonstrance to the Council was prepared for use in the event of Leslie's election, and the meeting was on the point of breaking up when news arrived that the Council was in session, twenty-



four hours earlier than the clergy had been led to expect. Two representatives went hot-foot to the Council-Chamber and presented the Remonstrance, still in its draft form. They were asked by the Lord Provost whether they had read Leslie's letter to Hunter, but they declined to discuss the matter further. The Council then duly proceeded to elect Leslie to the Chair of Mathematics.

When the ministers met again, on March 22nd, it became apparent that whereas the Evangelicals were prepared to acquiesce in the *fait accompli* of Leslie's election and accept his letter to Hunter as sufficient proof of his orthodoxy, the Moderates were determined to fight the matter out to a finish. On March 27th the Moderates laid their case before the Presbytery of Edinburgh (the first time that body had officially taken cognizance of the dispute) and by a majority of two votes they defeated the Evangelical attempt to have the matter dropped. The same day, but apparently without the knowledge of the Evangelicals, Grieve, Inglis and David Ritchie of St. Andrew's George Street applied to the Court of Session for a sist against the installation of Leslie. Lord Armadale dismissed the application, pointing out that the right of the clergy to give their advice to the Council did not amount to a right of having their advice taken—a piece of logic which Finlayson, the Professor of Logic, ought to have forseen. In fact this proved to be a false step, since it justifiably annoyed the Evangelical party amongst the clergy, and had no chance of succeeding anyway. The three Moderates were acting as private individuals, and not under the *nomen juris* of the Presbytery or the General Sessions of Edinburgh in which the right of *avisamentum* was vested. The right of *avisamentum* was not disputed by the Council (although it had never before been exerted in the appointment of a Mathematical Professor, and had not been invoked at all since 1779) and as Leslie had not yet been accused officially of any doctrinal or moral delinquency the clergy had no case to lay before the civil courts.

At this point there was an attempt at mediation by Principal Baird. On two occasions he sent for Leslie, but Leslie flatly refused to answer any questions not put to him in writing. He was also kept informed of the proceedings of the Presbytery, but declined to commit himself to anything more than a curt acknowledgement of the clerk's letters.

On March 29th an error in the form of Leslie's election was rectified. In the excitement of the moment the Council had overlooked the fact that technically it already possessed a Professor of Mathematics. In 1785 Adam Ferguson had been appointed to the Chair as a sinecure to enable him to draw a pension after his retirement from the Chair of Moral Philosophy. He and Leslie resigned and were immediately re-elected, with Leslie as

acting and conjoint Professor. At first this transaction was glossed over by the Council, which merely announced in the press that Leslie had been "commissioned". Later, when the implications of the Lord Ordinary's Interlocutor were digested, the Council realised that it was legally in a stronger position than it had been before. The emphasis was therefore laid upon the second "election", and the first was referred to merely as "certain steps". When Dr. Inglis of the Old Greyfriars Church suggested on behalf of the Moderates that the Council had been guilty of a certain amount of jiggery-pokery, his remarks were rather unfairly brushed aside by Playfair as a piece of "egregious trifling".<sup>1</sup>

When the Presbytery met once more on April 10th the Evangelical contingent was absent in protest against the conduct of the Moderates, and on Grieve's motion the affair was remitted to the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale. On May 7th the Synod carried the Moderates' motion to have the case referred to the Assembly, and the Evangelicals (who had by now returned to the fray) astutely lodged a Protest and Complaint, thus ensuring that the Edinburgh Moderates would have to appear at the bar of the Assembly and thus be unable to vote on the case.

Before the Assembly met in the third week of May the Moderates organised their forces. A letter was sent to the government officials and some of the Judges who habitually sat in the Assembly as Ruling Elders, hinting that Leslie's *Essay* was riddled with heresy and that Note XVI had been picked out as a particularly obnoxious example. As "there appears an infidel party arraying itself, with increasing confidence, against the religion of the country", it was hoped that the laity, and especially those in responsible positions, would give the matter "that candid and attentive consideration" which the Moderates claimed always to have bestowed upon questions that concerned the laity. The Moderate leaders clearly relied upon their usual supporters to rescue them from an embarrassing predicament, quite apart from the merits of the case.<sup>2</sup> On May 1st a paragraph was inserted in *The Evening Courant* attacking but not giving the text of Leslie's letter to Dr. Hunter. All this was justifiably regarded by Leslie's supporters as an attempt to influence the members of the

<sup>1</sup> (John Inglis), *An Examination of Mr. Dugald Stewart's Pamphlet*, p. 70ff; John Playfair, *A Letter to the Author of the 'Examination' &c.* p. 52ff. The Council's manipulation of the facts of the two elections can be seen in their *Memorial* written in response to the Court of Session's request for a State of the Case from both parties. The Moderates let the civil case go by default. The *Memorial* is registered in the Bill Chamber on 22nd May, the day the debate opened in the General Assembly.

<sup>2</sup> Dugald Stewart, *A Short Statement of some important Facts, relative to the late Election of a Mathematical Professor in the University of Edinburgh*, appendix ii.



Assembly before the case was heard. By contrast Dugald Stewart's pamphlet (which appeared on May 15th) was legally above-board, since it was "published" and not circulated in manuscript, and morally justified, since it was literally "A Short Statement of Facts" designed to remedy the damage done by Moderate propaganda.

When the case finally came before the Assembly there was unprecedented bitterness and the proceedings were frequently interrupted by members of the public in the galleries. When the vote was called the Evangelical "Complaint" was sustained by ninety-six votes to eighty-four, and the Moderate "Reference" dismissed. The total vote was comparatively small, and it is probable that the name and reputation of David Hume frightened many would-be Evangelical supporters of Leslie into abstaining, while many Moderates undoubtedly sympathised with Leslie but withheld their votes rather than give them to their traditional opponents on the other side of the House. The Moderates immediately claimed that the decision of the Assembly had been influenced by the machinations of the Whigs, who were at that time busy impeaching Lord Melville and certainly welcomed the discomfiture of the Pittite Moderates. On the other hand it was pointed out that many who usually voted with the Moderates, including the Lord Justice Clerk and between thirty and forty of the Moderate clergy, had on this occasion deserted the Moderate party.<sup>1</sup>

## II

Historians, in dealing with the episode, have often expressed surprise at the curious *volte face* in the opinions of the two parties. In the 1750s the Moderates had defended the right of Hume and Lord Kames to express their opinions, misguided though these might be. They had professed to be the enemies of bigotry and fanaticism; and were accused by the Popular Party at that time of being quite indifferent to the progressive secularisation of the intellectual and cultural life of Scotland. Moreover the Moderates had always claimed a certain latitude in respect to the Confession of Faith, whereas in 1805 they brought forward the most intransigent claims on its behalf. The Evangelicals were able to appear in the role of champions of free speculation and enlightened educational ideals in Scotland, and the defenders of a savant of European reputation against clerical persecution. This reversal did not pass unnoticed by contemporaries, and a writer in *The Scots Magazine* remarked that the conduct of the parties occasioned "the extreme surprize of the public, who, from ideas previously formed relative to each, would have been led to expect the

<sup>1</sup> Inglis, *op. cit.*, p. 145; Playfair, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-117; (A. M. Thomson), *A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Inglis*, p. 177.

direct reverse of such an arrangement".<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless by the exercise of a certain amount of historial hindsight it can, I think, be shown that the position of the two parties was perfectly logical if all the factors, theological and ecclesiastical, are taken into consideration. Before going more deeply into the implications of the controversy the following points are worthy of attention.

First, the split between the ecclesiastical parties in Edinburgh did not become apparent until the meeting of clergy on March 22nd. The decision to protest against the election of Leslie, taken on March 12th, was unanimous. Ten days later the Evangelicals decided to accept Leslie's letter to Dr. Hunter as sufficient proof of his orthodoxy, although (with the exception of Hunter himself and one other) they had rejected it ten days ment to the bitter end was later attributed to their desire to obtain the Chair of Mathematics for a member of their own party, and the role of the Mathematics for a member of their own party, and the role of the Evangelical clergy up to March 22nd was ignored by Leslie's apologists. In fact up to that date the clergy were united in trying to seat a *minister* in the Chair: after that date the Moderates concentrated on trying to seat a *Moderate* in the Chair. The Moderates were thus acting consistently, and the Evangelicals (when they saw that the game was lost anyway) were acting prudently.

The Evangelical change of heart was due, ostensibly, to Leslie's letter to Hunter, in which he rebutted the charge of scepticism which had been in the air. It is therefore the decisive document for Leslie's defence, and the Moderate leaders ruined their case by trying to suppress and misrepresent it.

In the letter Leslie pointed out that in a scientific treatise he had not thought it necessary to deal with the theological ramifications of his subject. However to remove all ambiguity he now affirmed that "the note in question refers entirely to the relation between *Cause and Effect*, considered as an object of physical examination", and went on:<sup>2</sup>

"The gross misapplication which Mr. Hume has made of these premises, to invalidate the argument for the existence of the Deity, it did not fall under my plan to point out in a treatise entirely confined to

<sup>1</sup> Vol. LXVIII, pp. 279-80.

<sup>2</sup> (Robert Lundie), *Report of the Proceedings and Debate &c.* (Oct. 1805; 2nd ed. 1806), p. 20. Despite its appearance of official impartiality James Ballantyne the publisher regretted that "it does not seem to have galled the Minority (i.e. the Moderates)" as it was perhaps intended to do, (letter to Lundie, in National Library of Scotland, M.S., 1676, f. 241). Several speakers on both sides did however agree that their speeches had been accurately reported, and number of alterations were made in the 2nd edition (e.g. in Henry Erskine's speech), in response to suggestions and criticism.



physical discussions ; more particularly as this had been done by Dr. Reid and various other writers, in a manner which I conceive to be completely satisfactory."

In refusing to accept this statement the Moderates appear to have been carried away by party spirit, and thereafter they evaded the issue by refusing to recognise it as evidence in the case since it had never been laid officially before the Presbytery.

Secondly, the Moderates were fully justified in resenting Dugald Stewart's contention that the association of the clergy with the university would prove "fatal to its welfare". Clergy of both parties felt that they had as much right as anyone else to recommend candidates to the Town Council, and to stand forward for election themselves. The clergy had a long and honourable connection with most of the Chairs, and they denied that there was any "plot" to capture academic posts—indeed they brought the counter-charge that there was a deliberate intention in some quarters of excluding them. Undoubtedly there was a certain amount of rivalry between clerical and secular interests in the university, but this certainly did not reflect "anticlericalism", as is sometimes suggested. (One of Leslie's most active supporters, Professor Playfair, was himself a minister).

There is however evidence that the Moderates not only condoned but actively encouraged plurality. When Grieve and Inglis made it a *condition* of their support for M'Knight that he should retain his parochial Charge Stewart and Playfair were, I think, justified in protesting to the Lord Provost. In 1800 the Moderate majority in the Assembly had upheld the right of Robert Arnot to hold the parish of Kingsbarns in conjunction with a Chair at St Andrews, and then blandly refused to listen to the arguments of their opponents on the grounds that the laws of the Church were already "sufficiently clear" on the subject. There had recently been a number of similar cases, and the whole matter was very much in the public eye. Rightly or wrongly, Leslie's supporters were suspicious of the Moderates' intentions. In fact the latter were probably more interested in increasing the number of their sympathisers in the Senate without reducing their majority in the Presbytery, than in purposely encouraging plurality. (It is in connection with M'Knight's claims in 1805 that the as yet unregenerate Thomas Chalmers made his famous and scandalous remark about a minister's duty to his parish).

Third, the way in which the leaders of the Moderate party handled the case illustrates the inherent weakness in the Moderate "system". They had a majority of only two in the Edinburgh Presbytery, but for many years they had been used to exercising a psychological superiority there



which was really derived from their comfortable and perennial majority in the Assembly rather than active local support in the metropolis. When Grieve, Inglis and Finlayson failed, by a bare exercise of authority, to carry their colleagues along with them, they appear to have lost all sense of what was practicable and to have acted in an extraordinary stupid manner.

Despite the Lord Ordinary's Interlocutor which made the legal illogicality of their position plain, and despite Leslie's letter to Dr. Hunter which they were forced to exclude from the case rather than answer, they persisted in bringing the matter before the Synod and Assembly in such vague terms that it is difficult to see what they hoped to achieve. They refused to reduce their criticism of Leslie's book to a formal charge of heresy, so that technically there was no case for him to answer ; and they failed to put to him a formal Interrogatory, upon his answers to which they might conceivably have founded a case. They presumably hoped that in the Assembly the rank-and-file of the Moderate party would obey the party whip and support a motion to the effect that Leslie was unfit to hold an academic post. Such a resolution might have forced the Council and the Senate to review the situation rather than face an out-and-out struggle with the Church. It would also have paved the way for a new approach to the Court of Session, since as Lord Cockburn remarked, "he would have been a bold man who would have answered for the Civil Court not giving effect to this decision in those days, when to oppose the Church was to oppose good order and the Government."

In fact the hopes of the Edinburgh Moderates were frustrated by two factors. One was the defection of a large number of Moderates in the Assembly, and the other was the extreme clumsiness of Principal Hill. When he arrived from St Andrews to take command of the party as usual on the eve of the Assembly he tried to persuade his Edinburgh colleagues to abandon the case altogether. When that failed he rose in the Assembly and proposed a motion for setting up a committee to examine Leslie and report the following year. (A similar procedure had been adopted for dealing with the "Marrow-men", and Professor Simson, in the 1720s). However (unlike Simson) Leslie had not yet been accused officially of any error at all, and the whole procedure would have had to start from scratch in his native Presbytery of St Andrews. By deferring the case for a year Leslie would be left under a cloud, and would almost certainly not be allowed to teach in the meantime. Hill's argument was torn to shreds by Henry Erskine, the champion of the Whigs. He accused Hill of trying by a shabby subterfuge to save the faces of his Edinburgh friends at Leslie's expense. "For this", he demanded, "shall Mr. Leslie be sent to a com-

mittee to be examined like a schoolboy?" and before an astonished, and by now thoroughly alarmed audience, he urged Leslie to "raise an action of damages, for slander and defamation" against Hill and the whole pack of them.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it is not generally known, I believe, that exactly the same situation had already arisen twice before at St Andrews. In 1795 Leslie was a candidate for the Chair of Natural Philosophy there, and Principal Hill's step-brother informed the Lord Provost of Edinburgh that Dugald Stewart had refused to write a testimonial for Dr. Rotheram, the Moderate candidate :

"This shows a keenness that I do not like & Leslie whom Stuart (sic) supports is as a philosopher sceptical & in political matters what no good man shou'd be (i.e. a Whig). I cannot bear the thought of such a man getting to St. And. & am astonished at Stuart & Playfair who always go together giving him their Countenance".

In 1804 Leslie was once again a candidate for the same Chair, and Hill himself reported to Lord Melville that Leslie was "a professed Atheist, and was a democratical leader in the times of trouble". Leslie was certainly a Whig, but there is no evidence that he had ever taken an active part in politics. As early as 1789 he himself announced that a visit to America had cured him of the republican notions which had at one time appealed to him, and went on : "I reckon the constitution of Great Britain as the most noble, that can be framed".<sup>2</sup> Moreover he was certainly not an Atheist. He had studied divinity with a view to entering the ministry, but had found his true vocation in science. In 1805 he professed to accept the Confession of Faith in its entirety (which is more than can be said of some of the Moderates), and he remained on intimate terms with a number of respectable and reputable ministers of the evangelical persuasion. None of all this is mentioned by his biographers, and it is obvious that the reports of George Hill and his step-brother were based largely on hearsay. Nevertheless in a decade when Jacobins and atheists were believed to lurk behind every bush such a reputation could be catastrophic. (Moreover it is evident that there were old scores to be settled between Stewart and the Moderates).

<sup>1</sup> (Robert Lundie), *Report of the Proceedings and Debate &c.* (Oct. 1805 ; 2nd ed. 1806), pp. 159-161.

<sup>2</sup> National Library of Scotland, *ms.* 7, ff. 65, 68; St. Andrews University Library, Melville Papers, *ms.* 4802 ; W. Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers*, (1849), vol. i, p. 464.



## III

In the speeches and pamphlets poured out by the Moderates against Leslie and his supporters, we find them defending the whole structure of 18th century Natural Theology, with its emphasis upon the ability of "rational" man to find out the being and attributes of God, the supreme importance of "proofs" and "evidences", and a tendency to regard the New Testament as a source for ethical teaching rather than dogmatic theology. By contrast, their opponents were cutting themselves loose from these characteristic themes of the 18th century, and on the upsurge of the evangelical revival were prepared to take a much more subjective view of the work of God in the souls of men. While the Moderates were still tenaciously defending their old positions the Evangelicals were slowly becoming aware that even the so-called "scepticism" of Hume might be woven into the fabric of christian apologetics. This divergence of outlook can of course be detected long before 1805, and to a certain extent it forms the basis of the long and sometimes embittered 18th century dialogue between Moderatism and "orthodox" Calvinism. Nevertheless in Leslie's Case the issues became sharply defined and were publicly thrashed out. The leaders of the Moderate Party behaved in a politically and morally irresponsible manner, and this was bound to discredit the theological arguments which they put forward.

In the offending Note in his *Essay on Heat* Leslie commended Hume for being the first to deal with the subject of causation "in a truly philosophic manner":

"... it was only wanted to dispel the cloud of mystery which has so long darkened that important subject. The unsophisticated sentiments of mankind are in perfect unison with the deductions of logic, and imply nothing more at bottom, in the relation of cause and effect, than a *constant and invariable sequence*."

He then analysed the meaning and philology of such words as *causa*, *aitia*, *Ursach*, etc. and suggested that they support Hume's thesis; and continued:

"But in conceiving the relation that subsists between cause and effect, do we not *feel* something more than the mere invariable succession of events? I will admit the fact, but I maintain that, like many other spontaneous impressions, it is a fallacious sentiment, which experience and reflection gradually correct, yet never entirely eradicate".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *An Experimental Inquiry into the Nature and Propagation of Heat*, (1804), p. 521 ff.

Since Leslie did not confine these observations to the relationship between *physical* cause and effect the Moderates argued that if Hume and Leslie were correct in their premises it would no longer be possible to argue from the evidence of nature and our own existence to the being and attributes of God. "Does it not take away the foundation of our reasoning, from the marks of power and design which we behold, to any First Cause, as the author of all such appearances?" demanded Grieve, in the General Assembly.<sup>1</sup> The Moderates claimed that Thomas Reid had proved once and for all that our ideas of Power and Causation are instinctive and intuitive, and rest on something much more certain than the empirical observation of "constant conjunction" and "invariable sequence". By repeating the sophistries of Hume, Leslie had (it was alleged) challenged the whole basis of Natural Religion and the arguments upon which the majority of mankind had always based its belief in a Deity who is wise, powerful and good.

The Moderate assumptions were attacked from the philosophical angle by Thomas Brown (later to be Stewart's colleague and eventual successor in the Chair of Moral Philosophy). He pointed out that Reid had seriously misinterpreted Hume's statements about Cause, Effect and Power, which are really much less objectionable than might appear at first sight. According to Brown, Hume was misled by his erroneous theory of Impressions and Ideas, and so was unable to discover the Impression upon which the Idea of Power is based; and thus came to deny that we have an Idea of operating Power at all. Brown now put forward the theory that our Idea of Power in a Cause arises from an intuitive belief that every change must be referred to some prior event as its Cause; and he was thus prepared to define Power as "invariable antecedence"—an advance upon Hume's "uniform antecedence", since it projects our belief about causation to future as well as past and present instances.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of Brown's contribution to the debate lies in the fact that he was prepared to accept Hume's premises, and to maintain that on them we may still argue from the existence and characteristics of the natural world to God's creative activity. Such an argument, however, would differ substantially from the mechanical "proofs" offered by 18th century divines. Brown rejected the old scholastic distinction between "physical" and "efficient" causes, and declared simply that it "is sufficient, that we be fully impressed with the necessity of a Creator, and trace the universe, with all its regularity and beauty, as one great effect, to the

<sup>1</sup> *Report*, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Brown, *Observations on the Nature and Tendency of the Doctrine of Mr. Hume, concerning the Relation of Cause and Effect*, (2nd edition, enlarged 1806), *passim*.



almighty source of being". The argument upon which belief is founded is thus primarily internal and psychological.

At this point a diversion was caused by the sensational discovery that the position of the Moderates, if taken to a logical conclusion, leads to atheism far more effectively than the alleged errors of Leslie. This was probably intended merely as a *jeu d'esprit* by Dugald Stewart, but it was taken up and elaborated by Francis Horner in *The Edinburgh Review*, and thoroughly appealed to these who had been brought up in the atmosphere of the Scotch Metaphysics and the Logic Class. Horner suggested that if the Moderates reject Hume's doctrine of causation then they presumably believe in a *necessary* connection between cause and effect. If so, they must agree with Spinoza that physical causes are endowed with active powers, and that all things are self-existent. On the Moderate premise, God can be ruled out altogether! Horner and Stewart both insisted that Hume's doctrine of causation, so far as it applies to physical connection, had in fact been the basis of all inductive philosophy from Bacon onwards, and had been applied by Barrow, Clarke, Butler and Berkeley.

In an evil hour for the Moderate Party Dr. Inglis committed himself to the following statement :<sup>1</sup>

"From the date of the existence of that party (the Moderates), it has been one of their great objects to rest the claims of our religious faith on the foundation of sober reason and sound argument. And can it be matter of wonder, that men of such a party were alarmed at the publication of a doctrine calculated to deprive them at once of that first principle of rational evidence—without which they could no longer have confidence to address themselves to any enlightened mind—without which their 'preaching would be vain', and the faith of their people 'also vain'."

This passage was pounced upon by the Evangelicals as an example of the arrogance of the Moderates in claiming a monopoly of sound argument, and their ignorance in thinking that sinners can be saved by appealing to sober reason. A. M. Thomson (later of St. George's) was particularly scandalised, and pictured the Moderates saying to those who asked 'what must I do to be saved?': "trust to *sober reason and sound argument*"; and he accused them of maintaining "in the great name of *moderation*, that it is by the *sober reason and sound argument* which they have lately exhibited in their profound metaphysical disquisitions on cause and effect, that sinners are to be convinced, and converted, and healed."<sup>2</sup> Principal W.

<sup>1</sup> Inglis, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 169-170.

L. Brown of Aberdeen was equally outraged, and pointed out that the Moderates must have a curious idea of Christian faith if they thought that it was based upon reason alone.<sup>1</sup> Playfair likewise denied that "reason and argument" can ever do more than provide the evidence upon which the Christian religion is defended: "they are not the foundations on which our faith rests its claims, however important they will ever be as auxiliaries."<sup>2</sup>

Leslie's supporters certainly did not reject the virtues of sober reason and sound argument out of hand, but they challenged the primacy which 18th century Moderatism had given to them. Just as the Evangelicals saw the possibility of taking Hume in their stride, so they now questioned the Moderates' intellectualist approach to religion as a whole. The elaborate system of "proofs" and "evidences" which had been built up to cope with the Deists and Arians and Socinians of a previous generation was being jettisoned wholesale, and the Moderates were finding the apologetics of the Age of Reason very slippery ground indeed.

The Evangelical point of view is well stated by Principal W. L. Brown in his speech to the Assembly:<sup>3</sup>

"I shall suppose that Mr. Hume's treatise on Necessary Connection destroys the whole argument, *a posteriori*, in behalf of the being of a God, and that Mr. Leslie has admitted its validity in doing so. Suppose Mr. Leslie does not think this argument conclusive, and rests his belief . . . on the argument *a priori* . . . Suppose he thinks, that, together with the consent of all mankind with respect to this point, the principles of conscience, and the internal sense of moral obligation, and of responsibility, implanted in every human breast, are fully sufficient of themselves, to evidence to him the existence of Deity, and that these are the sole or principle grounds of his belief, is he to be accounted an atheist, because he is persuaded of this great truth on fewer grounds than those on which we maintain it?"

If Leslie rejects the argument *a posteriori* altogether, it does not therefore follow that he cannot conscientiously subscribe the Confession of Faith of the Church of Scotland:

"For, if he is really persuaded of the existence, attributes, and providence of God, though the grounds of his belief should be different from ours, he may be a sincere Christian, and admit our form and description of Christianity."

<sup>1</sup> William Lawrence Brown, *Remarks on certain Passages of 'An Examination of Mr. Dugald Stewart's Pamphlet'*, (1st May, 1806), p. 59. Brown was an inveterate and unbridled opponent of Principal Hill, to whom he addressed a series of pamphlets on Moderate policy.

<sup>2</sup> Playfair, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> *Report*, p. 92.



A. M. Thomson went even further in questioning the validity of the traditional arguments :<sup>1</sup>

"I hold that Mr. Leslie is under no obligation to admit one of the arguments which I have mentioned (those *a posteriori* and *a priori*) : that he may decidedly reject them all ; and yet resist with perfect propriety and complete success, the charge of irreligion . . . and for him I plead the right to discard all the ordinary foundations of natural religion, and assert, at the same time, his claim to the character of a sound theist."

He proceeded, rather oddly, to claim the support of Limborch and Socinus, although the Moderates seem to have been too unnerved to make any capital out of Thomson's choice of authorities. Both had maintained that "all the arguments which we derive from the light of nature to prove the being and providence of God, are either of a very inferior kind, or altogether inconclusive". He then played his trump card, Robert Riccaltoun of Hobkirk, a determined opponent of Moderatism in the mid-18th century, who, it is said, "did not scruple to express his approbation of those parts of Mr. Hume's writings, in which the foundations of *natural* religion were attacked".

Not all Leslie's supporters went as far as Brown and Thomson in challenging the light of nature, but many of them were sarcastic about the Moderate claims. Thus Sir Henry Moncrieff-Wellwood insisted that "Happily for us, the evidence of the being and attributes of God does not rest on the speculations of Mr. Leslie, nor on the far darker speculations of his opponents", and Henry Erskine taunted the Moderates with having done more harm than good to their cause by venturing into the field of metaphysics.

For their part, the Moderates were quite unable to comprehend the indifference of their opponents to Natural Religion and the traditional framework of Christian evidences. Dr. Inglis was scandalised by Moncreiff's attitude to the tendency of Hume's philosophy :<sup>2</sup>

"If I had nothing but *sequence* as the foundation of my belief for the existence of the Deity, I should, were it possible, consider that belief to be ill-founded indeed."

With nothing but 'sequence' as a guide, man would never be able to "deduce the belief of an Almighty Author from the contemplation of His works". Likewise Robert Knox of Larbert was horrified at the prospect of being deprived of the argument *a posteriori* by which man ascends to the knowledge of God—a typically Moderate turn of thought.

<sup>1</sup> *A Letter to the Rev. Principal Hill*, (1805), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Report*, p. 64.

There was thus a clash of religious attitudes in Leslie's Case which goes very deep, and which, I think, has considerable significance for the history of theology in Scotland in the 19th century.

The Moderates were always inclined to argue from man up towards God, whether in the field of ethics or christology, and they were genuinely puzzled by the ability of their opposing brethren to dispense with a theoretical and philosophical groundwork for their faith when it came to the most central matter of all, the existence of God. The Moderates had always been careful to limit the sphere of Natural Religion and to point out that it is not a substitute for Revelation in and through the Word of God and the Person and work of Christ. This is obvious in the case of Hugh Blair, who comes back again and again to the proposition that whereas Nature leads mankind to hope for immortality and a Mediator between man and God, it is Scripture which brings "life and immortality to light"; and George Hill himself devotes much space to this theme in his *Institutes*. Nevertheless throughout the 18th century there had been disagreement between the Moderates and Evangelicals about where exactly the frontier between Natural Religion and Revelation was to be drawn.

After Leslie's Case, and I would suggest as a result of it, the frontier was shifted. In 1816 Principal Brown published *An Essay on the Existence of a Supreme Creator* in which he re-examined the old arguments which had been taught to generations of students in the Scottish universities, and expressed his admiration for the argument *a posteriori*; but he concluded by pointing out that while such an argument might convince rational minds of the existence of God, belief can only arise from a man's felt need for God. Similarly although Thomas Chalmers admitted that Natural Theology challenges the attention and leaves the "natural man" without excuse in the sight of God (a proposition with which Calvin would not disagree, and which is reflected in the opening words of the Westminster Confession) yet it is "quite overrated by those who would represent it as the foundation of the edifice". Natural Theology provides *inklings* of the truth, but Christianity has its own proper evidence in the Gospel, and the conviction of individual souls that the gospel promises are in earnest, and it only confuses the issue to appeal to Natural Religion. The latter is neither the premise nor the basis for Christian belief; at most it is the starting-point for what Chalmers, as an active evangelist, calls "Christianisation".<sup>1</sup>

To a Moderate of the old school this seemed to be a reversal of the order of nature. In the Moderate sermons of the second half of the 18th

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *On Natural Theology*, (1835), (in Chalmers' *Collected Works*, vol. ii, p. 395 ff.).



century there is a persistent tendency to argue from things natural to things revealed ; and the Moderates therefore expected men to seek arguments which satisfied their "reason" before they committed themselves to the slippery path of "faith".

By shaking the foundations upon which the Moderate approach to Christianity was based David Hume did more than has perhaps been realised in preparing the way for a resurgence of Evangelical, and specifically Calvinist, theology in Scotland. It is arguable, despite learned opinion to the contrary, that Hume's aim in *The Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* was quite simply to show that if Christianity was to be justified to a generation which regarded itself as "Enlightened", it must be on grounds other than those offered by the Moderates and their contemporaries in other churches. By throwing "proofs" and "evidences" into the melting-pot he forced theologians to reconsider their position, and to take as their starting-point God's dealings with the world rather than man's hypotheses about God. (For example the twin argument from Miracles and Prophecy had become a commonplace in the divinity schools, until Hume's *critique* of the former forced theologians to give to the concept of "Miracle" a new dimension in history and the processes of credence). In claiming that "faith" in the Christian context partakes of the nature of a miracle and subverts "experience" as normally interpreted, he accurately indicated the direction which theology was to take in Scotland in the 19th century. It is at least arguable that Hume saw the *impasse* into which 18th century Moderatism was heading, and that it was not entirely foreign to his purpose to give due but characteristically enigmatic warning to those who had ears to hear.

From the outset of the 19th century Scottish theology began to move out confidently into a sphere of its own, breaking loose from its 18th century dependence upon Scottish philosophy. This is not the place to discuss the work of Reid, Oswald, Beattie and Campbell ; but it would I think be agreed that the weakness of Moderatism lay in its failure to face the ultimate problems at the point where philosophy and theology meet. The Moderates faithfully reflected the prevailing climate of philosophical opinion in the Scotland of their day—an inductive psychology primarily concerned with exploring the phenomena of conscience and the moral sense in man. (Hence the emphasis in their preaching and writing upon conduct and practice, and Christian ethics). The Moderates invoked the famous principles of the "Scottish Philosophy"—*common sense, the natural convictions of mankind, intuitive belief* etc., but it was their evangelical opponents who used them to build, or rather re-build, an autonomous theology in which things natural and revealed were no longer kept apart or super-



imposed in unstable layers. Biblical revelation and the conscious subjective experience of God's activity in the world at large and in the souls of individuals were, for the Evangelical supporters of Leslie, a more satisfactory basis for religious faith than the "proofs" and "evidences" of 18th century Moderatism.

It would be rash to claim that these issues were clearly understood in Leslie's Case, and that the vote of the General Assembly represents a cut-and-dried decision to abandon Moderatism. The whole drift of theological opinion at the beginning of the 19th century in Scotland was far too complex to be reduced to such a simple formula ; and the Moderates were not disposed of as easily as that. Moreover I have to a certain extent been using Leslie as a symbol of a movement which was going on all over Europe, and especially in the Reformed Churches in Holland, France and Switzerland. It is already perfectly well known that in the second half of the 18th century, under the impact of Hume and Kant, there was growing dissatisfaction with the old categories of "general" and "special" revelation, vouchsafed in Nature and Scripture respectively. Subsequently this dissatisfaction has given rise to three lines of argument ; straight-forward criticism of the "evidence writers", criticism of the Thomist view that we can proceed logically from Nature to God by the use of speculative reason, and thirdly the denial that in this context "argument" is valid at all. The opponents of Moderatism at the beginning of the 19th century toyed with all three views, and the argument is by no means closed yet.

Nevertheless in 1805 these issues were given a public airing, and opinions about them began to crystallise. Leslie's private religious outlook is unknown, and it would be fruitless and indecent to pry into it. What does matter is the principle invoked by his defenders. As we have seen A. M. Thomson and W. L. Brown argued that no two persons can conceivably have the same grounds for their religious belief. Faith is a subjective state ; and if a man rejects all the arguments taught in the Schools and still has faith, who dare call him an atheist? The Moderate appeal to "sober reason and sound argument" was repelled as an impertinence.

The seed of much theological discussion was contained in Leslie's Case—quite enough to keep the Kirk busy throughout the century that was opening up before it. Moreover, as I have tried to indicate in the first half of this paper, the Moderate Party sustained a severe defeat in the realm of church politics. Its leaders were displayed in a highly unflattering light which was not entirely due to the more skilful propaganda of their opponents. Both sides were guilty of quite a lot of prevarication, but the Moderates in Edinburgh added to their downfall by mismanagement and incompetence. The defeat was of course only temporary, and the party



continued to predominate in the Assembly and in the Church as a whole for many decades. Nevertheless the public image of the Moderates as an immoveable "Establishment" was destroyed in 1805, and its leaders were compelled to come down into the arena to fight with the wild beasts in person, (as one of them regrettably put it). Under Principal Robertson and his immediate successors the alliance between the Moderate party and successive governments had counted for much, since it assured them of the support of all who had a vested interest in law, order and the "powers that be". In 1805 this too was imperilled and to a certain extent demolished.

Thus whether we look at Leslie's Case from the point of view of theology or of politics, it seems to possess considerable significance. By concentrating upon the latter, historians have, I think, failed to do justice to the former. By taking the theological implications of the Case into consideration I hope I have managed to show that some of the paradoxes in the behaviour of both parties, which have so puzzled historians, are more apparent than real.