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JOHN HALDANE

Scotland's Gift

Philosophy, Theology, and the Gifford Lectures

Abstract: Appreciation of the Scottish contribution to philosophy and theology is particularly marked in North America, especially among those in Reformed traditions, on account of the influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish thinkers. The Scottish view of the importance of intellectual reflection on fundamental questions concerning the nature of humanity and its place within the cosmos is represented also by the lecture series established by the bequest of Adam Lord Gifford. This essay explores the impact of the Scottish tradition and reviews the course of the Gifford Lectures, then reflects on their future.

The literary and intellectual traditions of Scotland, particularly in the modern period, are well known and much honored in North America, not least because of the considerable influence of Scottish (and Scots-Irish) thinkers on the development of political thought and educational practice there. Those thinkers were most often clergymen. The names of Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), James Oswald (1703–1793), Thomas Reid (1710–1796), David Fordyce (1711–1751), George Campbell (1719–1796), Adam Ferguson (1723–1815), John Witherspoon (1723–1794), and Alexander Gerard (1728–1795)—all Presbyterian ministers—come to mind, but they are only the most prominent in an imported Caledonian tradition that sought to combine rigorous philosophical thought and theologically informed Christian belief. It is often supposed that this tradition began in the eighteenth century and lasted not long into the nineteenth. Yet the Ayrshire born, and Glasgow and Edinburgh educated, philosopher James

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John Haldane is professor of philosophy at the University of St. Andrews and author of *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Religion* (2003) and *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and Philosophical* (2004). He was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 as a consultor to the Pontifical Council on Culture. A version of the opening lecture of his own Gifford series was published in *First Things*, November 2005, under the title "What Philosophy Can Do."

McCosh (1811–1894) took up his post as eleventh president of Princeton in 1868, a full century to the year after Witherspoon's appointment. In recalling his undergraduate studies at the University of Vermont (1875–1879), John Dewey observed that "teachers of philosophy were at that time, almost to a man, clergymen" given to the "Scotch Philosophy."[1]

The role of ex-Presbyterian Scots-Irish who had migrated to (and out of) other denominations is also significant, most especially perhaps Alexander Campbell (1788–1866). He followed his father Thomas to America in 1809 and engaged in a famous eight-day debate in 1836 with John B. Purcell, the Roman Catholic bishop of Cincinnati. Campbell founded the town of Bethany, West Virginia, and later (in 1840) the college there. It is from him and these foundations that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has its origin—and its continuing interest in Scottish philosophy.

American Roman Catholics in search of a Scottish patron might look to the Episcopalian convert Bishop George Hay (1729–1811). Trained in medicine at Edinburgh, he oversaw the publication of the first English-language Catholic Bible printed in Scotland. He wrote the extensively read and admired theological trilogy the *Sincere*, the *Devout*, and the *Pious Christian* (1781–1786). He also authored a philosophical work, *The Elements of Metaphysics*, the manuscript of which sits today, unedited, in the offices of the Scottish Catholic Archives in Edinburgh. Interestingly, the Elements shows the influence of the "common sense" philosophy of Thomas Reid, with whom Hay also shared a physician, Reid's cousin James Gregory.[2] Unlike Witherspoon, Campbell, and McCosh, Hay never traveled across the Atlantic, but his theological writings were known in America. Having already been imported in European editions, his work was first published in Philadelphia in 1831.

While Aberdeen, Glasgow, St. Andrews, and other parts of the country played important roles in the emergence of the Scottish Enlightenment and in its cultural succession, Edinburgh was its preeminent site. In 1771, three years after the founding of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* there, Tobias Smollett coined the phrase "hot bed of genius" to describe the city (in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*). The minister and pamphleteer Alexander Carlyle wrote of "how fine a time it was when we could collect [for supper in an Edinburgh tavern] David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Lord Elibank, and Drs. Blair and Jardine, on an hour's warning."[3] Certainly the long-standing and widely celebrated reputation of the city as a home to literary and philosophical practice helped the Scottish culture minister and others secure the designation of Edinburgh, in 2004, as UNESCO City of Literature.

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1. John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in *The American Hegelians*, ed. W. Goetzmann (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 380.

2. See Mark Goldie, "Common Sense Philosophy and Catholic Theology in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 302 (1992): 281–302.

3. Alexander Carlyle, *Autobiography of the Rev. Dr. Alexander Carlyle, Minister of Inveresk: Containing Memorials of the Men and Events of His Time* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1861), 274.

Books and ideas remain central to the life of the city, as to that of its western cousin Glasgow and to the culture of Scotland more generally. Religion continues to have an influence in Scotland, though its diminished role reflects the general weakening of the churches in Western Europe. Among the opening sessions of the 2005 Edinburgh International Book Festival, however, there was a symposium on the famous Gifford Lectures entitled *Science, Religion and Ethics*, followed by a conference at the University on *The Gifford Lectures: Retrospect and Prospect*. Both events were sponsored by the Templeton Foundation, recipients of whose prestigious prize have included Mother Teresa, Brother Roger of Taizé, Joseph Cardinal Suenens, Billy Graham, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Alister Hardy, Stanley Jaki, Lord Jakobovits, Michael Novak, Freeman Dyson, Holmes Rolston III, Charles Townes. One recent prize winner, John Polkinghorne, was among the speakers at the Gifford conference, as were three other former Gifford lecturers: Alexander Broadie, John Hedley Brooke, and the present writer.

Lord Gifford and His Lectures

The Gifford Lectures were established by the Scottish lawyer Lord Gifford for the stated purpose of "promoting, advancing, teaching and diffusing the study of 'Natural Theology' in the widest sense of the term—in other words, 'the Knowledge of God. . . the knowledge of His nature and attributes, [and] the knowledge of the relations which men and the whole universe bear to Him.'" In 1847, Adam Gifford attended a series of talks in Edinburgh by the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson—his presence there marking something of the developing desire of Americans to give back in kind to the Scots from whom they had acquired a taste for philosophical and religious ideas. These talks influenced Gifford's own thinking in the direction of metaphysics and transcendentalism, and they may have been an inspiration for his later decision to endow a lecture series in philosophy and religion.

The scale of his benefaction was enormous by the standards of the time: £80,000, equivalent to about $11,000,000 (US) today. Even so, Gifford appears to have envisaged the lectures in local terms, and he probably did not imagine that they would become the principal forum for intellectual reflection on natural theology.[4] The process of internationalization began early: In 1901 William James introduced his lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by referring to "a soil as sacred to the American imagination as that of Edinburgh." He added, "Let me say only that now that the current, here and at

4. In recognition of their historic and continuing contribution, the Templeton Foundation has also created an online archive of the Gifford Lectures that will carry texts, biographies, and other information. American author Larry Witham has written a history of the Giffords entitled *The Measure of God: Our Century-Long Struggle to Reconcile Science and Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

Aberdeen, has begun to run from west to east, I hope it may continue to do so. As years go by I hope that many of my countrymen may be asked to lecture in Scottish universities, changing places with Scotsmen lecturing in the States."[5]

The Gifford Lectures began in 1889 with three series of lectures by, respectively, the Hegelian philosopher James Stirling, the philologist Friedrich Muller, and the Scots-born literary figure Andrew Lang. Subsequent lecturers have included historians, scientists, and theologians; philosophers have dominated overall. It may be instructive, therefore, to consider how their preoccupations have changed over the past one hundred and twenty years. Setting out a list of philosophers and the themes of their Gifford lectures from the first (Stirling's *Philosophy and Theology*) to the very recent (Simon Blackburn's *Reason's Empire*, published as *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*), and grouping the lectures into four roughly quarter-centuries proceeding from the end of the nineteenth to the start of the twenty-first, a number of features reveal themselves.

For the first three-quarters, all lecturers were male, but beginning with Hannah Arendt in 1972, lecturing on *The Life of the Mind*, a series of women have contributed, including some of the most notable philosophers of the period: Iris Murdoch (1981–1982) lectured on *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*; Mary Hesse (1983–1984) on *The Construction of Reality*; Mary Midgley (1989–1990) on *Science and Salvation*; Mary Warnock (1991–1992) on *Imagination and Understanding*; Martha Nussbaum (1993–1994) on *Need and Recognition*; Onora O'Neill (2000–2001) on *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*; Lynne Baker (2001–2002) on *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding*; and Eleonore Stump (2003–3004) on *Wandering in the Darkness*. The trend to include American women academics continues with the 2006 series delivered in Edinburgh by the social theorist and theologian Jean Bethke Elshtain. Interestingly, her title, *Sovereign God, Sovereign State, Sovereign Self*, echoes that of a work by Murdoch: *The Sovereignty of the Self*. It may be significant that the women lecturers have tended to explore issues that situate traditional philosophical questions within a context of broader meaning or value, but it might be unwise to make too much of that since it may be a trend within recent philosophy more generally.

The most conspicuous absence on the female side is Elizabeth Anscombe. By far the most gifted and respected of Wittgenstein's students and his principal translator, Anscombe was arguably the most powerful philosophical mind of the twentieth century. She made few concessions to her audiences, was no friend of the main academic establishment, and was a highly orthodox Roman Catholic convert. It would be understandable if this robust combination limited her appeal for the various Gifford committees. My enquiries have not established whether she was ever invited, but there is some reason to think that, even if she had been, she would have declined the request. In the intro-

5. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), 4–5.

duction to *Ethics, Religion, and Politics*, the third volume of her *Collected Papers*, she writes, "In general, my interest in moral philosophy has been more in particular moral questions than in what is now called 'meta-ethics.' (The analogous thing is unrestrictedly true about philosophy of religion. . .)."[6] Subsequent to this, she wrote on issues in moral theology. Yet as with ethics, her interest was in particular issues, including sin and simony.[7]

If one looks beyond the gender of the lecturers and at the themes explored, a broader pattern would seem to appear. Earlier lecturers adopted grand themes in which some vast issue was yoked to the idea of deity or the religious dimension of life: William James (1900–1902) on *The Idea of Religious Experience*; Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison (1911–1913) on *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*; William Sorley (1913–1915) on *Moral Values and the Idea of God*; and Samuel Alexander (1916–1918) on *Space, Time and Deity*.

Next came strands of personal, cultural, or historical self-reflection, some suggesting degrees of doubt or anxiety: A. E. Taylor (1926–1928) on *The Faith of a Moralist*; John Dewey (1928–1929) on *The Quest for Certainty*; Étienne Gilson (1930–1932) on *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*; R. B. Perry (1946–1948) on *A Critique of Civilization*; Gabriel Marcel (1948–1950) on *The Mystery of Being*; John Wisdom (1948–1950) on *The Mystery of the Transcendental*; and H. J. Paton (1949–1950) on *The Modern Predicament*. No doubt, the effects and anticipations of world wars were influences in these lectures, but something more narrowly philosophical—namely, skepticism—can also be detected here.

In the next quarter (1950–1975), the self-reflection that had earlier thinkers linking the objects of their speculation to their own interests seemed to push thinkers back into preoccupation with thought and action and with the thinking-acting subject itself. In this vein, we have Brand Blanshard's (1951–1953) *Reason*; Michael Polanyi's (1951–1952) *Personal Knowledge*; John MacMurray's (1952–1954) *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*; C. A. Campbell's (1953–1955) *On Selfhood and Godhood*; George von Wright's (1958–1960) *The Varieties of Goodness*; H. B. Price's (1959–1961) *Belief*; and H. D. Lewis's (1966–1968) *The Elusive Mind* and *The Elusive Self*.

By the middle 1970s and on to the present, the gaze seems to have returned outward; sometimes "vertically" to the transcendent, though often "horizontally" to the community. Thus, we find Stephen Clark's (1981–1982) *The Love of Wisdom and the Love of God*; Richard Swinburne's (1982–1984) *The Evolution of the Soul*; Antony Flew's (1986–1987) *The Logic of Mortality*; Alvin

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6. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), viii.

7. Two volumes of Anscombe's papers on ethics and religion are being published in the series entitled St. Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs. The first is *Human Life, Action, and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, edited by M. Geach and L. Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005); the second volume is scheduled for publication in 2007.

Plantinga's (1987–1988) *Our Knowledge of God* and then *Science and Religion* (2005); Alasdair MacIntyre's (1987–1988) *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*; Hilary Putnam's (1990–1991) *Renewing Philosophy*; Michael Dummett's (1996–1997) *Thought and Reality*; Holmes Rolston III's (1997–1998) *Genes, Genesis and God*; Charles Taylor's (1998–99) *Living in a Secular Age*; Ralph McInerny's (1999–2000) *The Preambles of Faith*; Peter van Inwagen's (2003–2004) *The Problem of Evil*; and my (2005) *Mind, Soul, and Deity*.

I have omitted from the last half-century historical lectures examining the ideas of past figures and periods. The history of philosophy has grown in significance, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in part for reasons of professional crowding; with more people entering academic life, turning to the history of some topic doubles the opportunities for scholarship. I believe there is a deeper reason, however, for the growth of historical studies, and this connects with features of the recent period I would now like to comment upon.

Philosophy and the Future of the Gifford Lectures

When Lord Gifford conceived the idea of a lectureship "to promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology," the professional and educated middle classes in Britain were still generally religious and overwhelmingly Christian. Certainly, there had been challenges to Bible and creed from natural science, philosophy, and the historical method of biblical scholarship, but atheism remained a dangerous eccentricity, and avowed agnosticism was still rare. Among the intellectuals, however, things were different. While it was not yet supposed that the content of a statement could not extend beyond the possibility of its empirical verification, it was widely presumed that what could not be brought before actual or possible perception was at least problematic if not impossible. At the same time, the idea that scripture might be treated as historical testimony amounting to evidence was felt to be naive, and advances in natural science provided alternative hypotheses about the origins of human beings and of the material world more generally.

Religiously inclined philosophers presented two broad reactions to these developments. The first maintained the paradigm of knowledge as observation. It treated biblical narrative and religious discourse as forms of moral or spiritual commitment or aspiration. It did not reduce everything to science but left a space for feeling and acting in ways that, while they could not be rationally justified, nevertheless seemed to have value. The second reaction challenged empiricism itself, arguing for the holist view that everything is related to everything else in the manner of rationally linked ideas. This "idealist" alternative was certainly a contrast to empiricism, but insofar as the content of traditional religion was concerned, it tended once again to interpret it mythically or symbolically.

Idealism was attacked by Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore at Cambridge University and then by others in North America. A new realist temper began

to develop. So far as religion was concerned, this realism tended to be indifferent when not skeptical or actively hostile. Natural theology was marginalized, as intellectual believers tended to avoid confrontation with mainstream philosophy. It retreated instead to what I earlier termed personal, cultural, or historical self-reflection.

In the second half of the twentieth century, things began to change in a direction that Lord Gifford had hoped for, but the development came in stages. First, philosophers reconsidered their pictures of the thinking, acting subject. Various ideas about mind, action, and value common in modern thought from the time of Descartes and Locke were judged to be problematic. Their revisions aimed to produce ways of thinking more congenial to religious thought.

As it turned out, however, the rethinking of old philosophical ideas has led not so much to a new philosophy as to diversification of the practice of philosophy into different schools, methods, areas, and applications. When Lord Gifford conceived the lectureship, there was general agreement on the nature and value of academic philosophy. That has changed. For some academics and their followers, philosophy is a form of cultural critique principally directed toward subverting claims to knowledge. For others, it is a handmaid of natural science. For some, it is the place where claims for science as providing theories of everything can best be resisted. For another group, philosophy is a form of ethical reflection, tending at one end to disinterested clarification and at the other to policy making. For others still, it is an exercise of the literary imagination, even a kind of poetry.

It is this diversity that accounts for the range of themes and approaches pursued in recent Gifford lectures. In the earlier part of the last quarter, the diversity did not especially favor religious interests. That may be changing because of the development, in a world of specialization, of philosophy of religion as an expert-led field of enquiry. This could result in a concentration of future lectures around themes and approaches favored by the leading practitioners of this specialization. They could converge with the growing interest among reflective scientists in the possibility that biology and cosmology exhibit evidences of design.

It would be unfortunate, however, if the question of the place of religion in the larger scheme of things were left as a subject only for sociologists or historians. Perplexing as it may be to advocates of secularization, and notwithstanding predictions of the collapse of church membership in the West, the world is not becoming any less religious. Indeed, there are signs of a growth of religious interest among the educated younger generations. The question, therefore, is not whether interested people will keep up with philosophers as they pursue their professional interests, but whether philosophers will stay close to thinking and enquiring folk.

If they hope to do so, then they might profitably consider religious ideas about the nature, meaning, and conduct of human life as much as issues in speculative philosophy of religion and metaphysics. In the book derived from

his 2004 lectures, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn reveals a marked hostility to religion. Acknowledging Lord Gifford's religious commitment, he begs to differ: "I do not believe that the gods of human beings do much credit to their inventors and interpreters."[8] A different attitude might have resulted had Blackburn reflected on the (unacknowledged) source of his subtitle. *A Guide for the Perplexed* was originally the translated title of a work, *Moreh Nebuchim*, by the great twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) concerning the reconciliation of philosophy and religion.

The challenge facing those responsible for maintaining the Gifford series and carrying the original project through its second century is twofold. First, they have a responsibility to do what the benefactor intended: give attention to the traditional concerns of natural theology held in common between Maimonides and Aquinas. Second, they have a role as patrons of philosophy to encourage it to be accessible as well as rigorous. They also have to take seriously the fact that religion is an enduring mode of human experience, thought, action, and aspiration that, as Lord Gifford put it in his settlement, "if [the knowledge it provides] be real, lies at the foot of all well-being."

That sentiment is very much in keeping with the Scottish intellectual and cultural tradition that so impressed itself upon the American founders and that continues to animate much American thought and practice. It is also a form of words that might easily have been addressed across the table of an Edinburgh tavern by Dr. Carlyle to his companion David Hume. Hume's reply is easily imagined: "Aye sir, if it be real, then certainly so, but is not its very reality the purpose of our enquiry?" To which all might respond, "Indeed, it is; so let us be about the matter directly."

8. Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), x.