

The Glasgow Church in Times of Sedition and Subversion

At the turn of the century two hundred years ago Lowland Scotland was enjoying a period of relatively peaceful change. Because of the short lives that people lived in those days, the events of forty years before, the Jacobite rebellions and their immediate aftermath in the forcible pacification and Anglicisation of the Highlands were mostly fuzzy, distant memories of their childhood. Certainly Bonny Prince Charlie had paraded his troops on Glasgow Green but the lowland city was predominantly Whig supporting anyway. We can see now that the Hanovarian monarchy, the government and the landowning Whig aristocracy were firmly in control, although at the time they feared that they were not. Lord Dundas, the principle agent of parliament and crown in Scotland, was not persecuting any group in particular but he had an army of spies. The early Industrial Revolution was in progress but it was not producing yet the acute social problems that were to come. The cottage-based weavers were only gradually giving up their independence and moving into big mills where they worked to relentless, boring and stultifying timetables under the eyes of their bosses. Only the colliers, who were fairly well organised in what today would be the equivalent of trade unions, could be a serious source of labour trouble.

There were, of course, a few labour troubles and local revolts over the increasingly harsh demands of the masters but these were small local affairs which were usually settled by the judiciary who were almost wholly drawn from the landowning classes and so quite often came out in favour of the peasantry and the workers against the masters and the merchants.

Throughout most of the Lowlands, the Church of Scotland still had a strong grip on the private lives of most individuals. It was not quite as strong as under an overtly police state, like Mao's China or Stalin's Russia but in rural and small-town Scotland ordinary men and women could not transgress, even to the extent of failing to maintain family worship, without being informed upon to the local elders and arraigned before the kirk session courts. Burns and his friends, only a decade or two before, famously sat upon the stool of repentance. Most ministers could be relied upon to support law and order and the status quo.

Of course, after seventeen eighty nine the French Revolution was in full cry and, from seventeen ninety three, the government was at war with France. The writings of Thomas Paine on 'The Rights of Man' were known to the landowning aristocracy and to a section of the intellectual middle class of masters and merchants among whom were a few radicals such as the groups calling themselves Friends of Liberty in both Edinburgh and Glasgow, but the ideas never widely caught fire.

That is not to say that the government was not nervous of sedition and insurrection, nor that the Church of Scotland was not vigilant about heresy. Only a century before, in sixteen nineteen seven, Thomas Aikenhead had been executed in Edinburgh

despite his recantations and pleas for mercy. An adolescent, excitedly exploring new ideas and discussing too widely, he seems to have been lovably but naively trusting of his fellow theological students many of whom testified against him. It is not clear that any specifically Unitarian or Socinian ideas were central to his heresies, which seem to have been many, but L Baker Short in his book, 'Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism' claims him as the first Scottish Unitarian Martyr. (I Quote)

“The blood of the martyrs,” it has been said, “is the seed of the church.” And the pioneering blood of Thomas Aikenhead was at least part of the later Scottish Unitarianism. He is indeed the Scottish Unitarian martyr, claimed by all subsequent Unitarian writers, and remembered by all of them. I believe he did not die in vain. For such was the shock of his execution and death, that the government never afterwards dared to execute another person for his religious heresies, although the cruel laws long remained unrepealed. It is well, then, that we should remember this youth of eighteen who died for the religious freedom which is ours today – and never forget the sacrifices, even of blood and of life, which won for us the free faith which we now freely enjoy.”

This seems to me a little over the top. But I take seriously his claim that the strong reaction from Aitkenhead's execution may have protected some Scottish Unitarians from further persecution.

The same Baker Short in his book “Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism” gives the date of the foundation of the Glasgow Church as 1791. There must be some doubt about this. The professors of theology in the University of Glasgow had been well known for most of the Eighteenth Century for their liberalism bordering on unorthodoxy. According to Baker Short, the first indication of the existence in Glasgow of any group of Unitarians who worshipped together in a public hall was around 1787 when a wealthy businessman, James Wardrop was associated with them. Thomas Fyshe Palmer, the Unitarian dissident who was deported to Australia in 1794 almost certainly preached to them. But that group quarrelled and split so it was from a group of Baptists which defected in 1806 and held Universalist-Unitarian services in Glasgow that Baker Short thinks the Constitution was produced and through that constitution we can firmly date the formal the foundation of the Glasgow Church in 1810.

This Thomas Fyshe Palmer who probably preached to the Glasgow Unitarians achieved notoriety early in Scotland as a dissident and we may rightly speculate that his activities drew the attention of Dundas's agents to the Glasgow Unitarian Church as it was forming. He was born well off, went to Eton and Cambridge and looked well to becoming an academic divine as a fellow in the University of Cambridge. But somewhere along the road a love of truth moved him into the study of the higher criticism of the New Testament and that led to Unitarianism. He was especially associated with the first Unitarian religious society in Scotland in Montrose and with the Dundee Unitarian church.

Fyshe Palmer's public crisis came when he edited, printed and circulated a publication written by a member of his congregation which was deemed seditious by the establishment. He was tried at Perth, found guilty and in 1793 sent to the galleys and deported to Botany Bay in Australia. No doubt there were echoes from Scottish history in the minds of his pursuers, echoes of the execution of Thomas Aikenhead almost one hundred years before, a man who also had denied the trinity.

By the time of the foundation of the Glasgow church and for some time before and after it, we can be fairly sure that the vigilant authorities of Scotland had become quite watchful of those wrongheaded people with Unitarian views and especially of any assemblies of them in churches. As late as 1817 the Reverend Neil Douglas, minister of the Universalist church in Glasgow which later merged with this church, was put on trial for sedition.

Around that time religion was seen as a bulwark against sedition, both as an opiate of the people and as an orthodox

supporter of authority. Baker Short in his writing in the late nineteen fifties about the trial of Thomas Fyshe Palmer puts it thus: "the reactionary British Government was becoming increasingly alarmed at the political agitation. It persuaded itself that unless it took strong action at once, violent revolution and a reign of terror would break out in Britain as in France. Government fears were even stronger in Scotland than in England. In order to crush this agitation among working men its educated leaders must be removed." And again significantly, "The fact that a man was a Unitarian with strange beliefs, in these days made people all the more ready to believe that he also a wicked revolutionary, especially as English Unitarians were well known for their support of the French Revolution in its early days."

So at the time of the official constitutional establishment of the Glasgow Unitarian Church, in 1810, the government was indeed nervous of sedition and insurrection. I would speculate with some confidence that there would be government spies, probably among the congregation, at the adoption of that constitution. Lord Dundas was well known to have an army of them.

Harry Wylie, our oldest living member at 100, tells me on the phone that the 1853 church on St Vincent Street, well remembered by many of us, was deliberately built with front windows framed in stone but filled in with stone too and with small horizontal slit windows more than forty feet up just below the roof – all to withstand possible attack. This may sound a little incredible but it has to be seen in the historical context that the ideals of the French Revolution led on to major further revolutions across Europe in 1830 and again in 1848. It is not often realised that people were dying at the barricades while the Glasgow church was building.

My ancestor, Andrew Hosie, merchant of the city of Glasgow who owned coal mines and mills and sent ships to trade with the Netherlands had himself painted in oil at

the time of the French Revolution and his portrait hangs in my house. I sometimes wonder if he was a Glaswegian Unitarian. Fanciful stuff!

Now let us fast forward at least another hundred years to the mid-1950s. Soviet military power loomed over Western Europe. Spies were being discovered in the heart of the establishment, in the palace (Anthony Blunt) and in the Foreign Office (Burgess and McLean). Britain was recovering slowly from a war which had bled her white. From 1950 onwards when I began to read the serious press I was exposed to a relentless barrage of propaganda against the Soviet system (the Scotsman and the Telegraph were the worst). This was backed up by refugees from Eastern Europe one of whom was deployed as a Junior Assistant to my minister father. From him we heard first hand some of what was going on. I had read Victor Kravchenko's "I Chose Freedom" and was appalled at his first-hand experiences of Stalin's purges. Stalin was dead by 1953 but the Soviet system rolled on as what seemed to some to be a monolithic juggernaut of rigid conformity but to others as the main hope of freedom from capitalist oppression and untrammelled individual greed, some of which, ironically we are seeing at last exposed today. The fear of Communism had led to a witch hunt in the USA encapsulated much later in the phrase describing 'reds under the bed' and resulting in the flight of Charlie Chaplin among others to Switzerland and in the ruination and disgrace of many prominent American intellectuals. Senator McCarthy had made a towering political reputation in the so called exposition of leftist 'fellow travellers', nowadays called liberals. Spies and spy-hunters could be anywhere.

Once again the right kind of religion was seen as a bulwark against sedition and authority in support of the orthodox. How unfortunate, then that the Glasgow Church, clearly not 'the right kind of religion' once again, one hundred years later, fell under suspicion.

The Reverend Alex Reid had been known as a Christian Communist even when he was appointed in 1948. Many of the founders and thinkers of the early socialist parties in Britain had been committed Christians and had seen their politics as an expression in action of the values and principles taught by Jesus.

So it was no strange phenomenon to find a minister with pronounced leftist views. In those days the Soviets used to launch what they called 'peace offensives' (a beautiful phrase redolent of paradox and irony, like a Christian 'forgiveness offensive'). The political aim of these 'Peace Offensives' as seen by those on the right of British politics was to weaken the resolve to fight and so soften up the enemy. So when it became known that he had become Chairman of the Scottish branch of the World Peace Movement called the Scottish Peace Committee. In November 1950 the Committee of Management of GUC asked Mr Reid to resign his position of Chairman of the Scottish Peace Committee. Apparently he did but resumed it later. George Paxton tells us that he never wore his dog collar except

when he was speaking at public meetings on peace and that this greatly angered many members of this congregation.

In January 1954 the Management Committee asked Rev Alex Reid to resign and he refused to do so. Consequently a congregational meeting was held the following March presided over by a man from the Unitarian General Assembly Council but no decision could be made because there was controversy, no doubt bitter, over who had the right to vote.

The problem, apart from a general vagueness about what the criteria of membership actually were, seems to have been that Rev Reid's supporters were suspected by the remainder of wanting to take over the church premises for their value as a meeting place, or even as a drill hall, for the peace offensive. This can be seen in perspective as a case of the exercise of a political tactic, later labelled 'entryism' used elsewhere by the Communist Party and better known much later in the 1980's when the Internationalist Marxist Group, a Trotskyist organisation almost succeeded in taking over the Scottish Labour Party and penetrated major local organisations using what were called, by the press 'militants' until Neil Kinnock declared war on them and had them expelled from the Parliamentary Labour Party.

But to return to the 1950's, finally, on 31st March 1954, at the end of a marathon meeting of the Committee of Management, chaired in its final hour by Harry Wylie, the total membership was unanimously agreed at 125, with only Rev Alex Reid dissenting. The number of applications rejected came to 43, about 26% of the total claiming membership, a seriously important minority. Following that, at a meeting convened by the current President of the GA, Rev Alex Reid was told to demit office, and, crucially, new rules were adopted governing application for membership which required the applicant to wait for six months before being accepted and to pay a basic annual subscription.

Of course the press treated events in own profit-making way. In April several newspapers carried reports of Reverend Alex Reid's dismissal – the Express, the Record and the Dispatch all of which reported with remarkable sobriety.

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH

SERVICE ON SUNDAY 8th July 2012

Readings

Daily Express Monday 19th April 1954

Headed 'PEACE COUNCIL MINISTER WON'T QUIT CHURCH, HE SAYS 'ITS PURE MCCARTHYISM

With a picture of the notice board outside the Glasgow Unitarian Church captioned 'The name of the minister – the Rev Alexander Reid has been taken off'.

A 'Church Committee Member' said yesterday that the minister's resignation had been on purely domestic grounds. It has nothing to do with politics or with the Peace Movement'. But Mr Reid said last night 'It is not a domestic matter at all. It is pure McCarthyism. It is political persecution – a heresy hunt.' Later he also said 'I have been interested in politics all my life...I was one of the few members of Pat McCormick's Peace Army of the late 1920s. All my activities for the past five years have been in connection with the World Peace Movement.'

Daily Record 19th April 1954

Headed SACKED PEACE MINISTER STAYS AT HOME: THEY DID NOT SHOW FREEDOM

He said: 'I have spoken for peace in Berlin, France and Scandinavia. The Unitarians stand for intellectual freedom. They did not behave like it. My dismissal was pure McCarthyism.' Asked if he was a Communist, he did not reply.

London Times, no date

HEADED: PEACE GROUP "SHOCKED"

The Scottish Peace Committee were "shocked" to learn of the dismissal of their chairman, the Rev Alexander Reid from his ministry in the Glasgow Unitarian Church. The decision to dismiss Mr Reid has been announced at a time when the leaders of the churches are calling on all Christians to consider the moral implications of hydrogen and atomic warfare. Yet no minister in Scotland has done more in the past seven years to warn his fellow countrymen of the dangers, moral and physical, of atomic strategy.

Manchester Guardian, 30th April 1954 – Letter from Alex Reid

The responsibility for my dismissal lies with the committee (majority) of this church who, nevertheless have made it clear (1) that nothing personal was held against me (2) my acceptance as a preacher or public speaker was not in question (3) my other fundamental duties were carried out to their general satisfaction, in fact, were frequently commented on in the highest terms.

Peace making has neither been a popular nor a prudent activity in recent years. For the good name of the religion I profess, and for the sake of our common humanity, I dared not withhold that measure of leadership which lay in my power to give. I have always felt that primary responsibility for such leadership lies with organised religion.

After a Scottish Peace Congress in June 1953 at which the chief speaker was Dr Synge of Aberdeen, Nobel Prize winner, a letter was sent to our church committee and to the discredit of their professed loyalty to Unitarian principles of freedom in religion, this letter was discussed at length, and from that occasion stems the whole miserable process which ended in my dismissal.

In a letter dated February 5th 1954, the President of the Scottish Unitarian Association warned the Glasgow Church that my dismissal “would have wide repercussions throughout our other churches. Mr Reid has his faults, as indeed we all have, but they are much outweighed by his very positive virtues, and he is well liked throughout the denomination in Scotland. I would ask you to be very careful not to let any hint of McCarthyism enter into your actions.” Unfortunately this warning was not heeded, and my dismissal is the last of many acts of intolerance experienced in over 23 years in the service of a movement which owed its very existence to the fight for freedom in religion. May there be a revival of its former glory!”

Mr Crabtree, President of the General Assembly UK, responded in another published letter that month. He said: “...the question of “intellectual freedom” was not a major issue. During his ministry of about seven years at Glasgow Mr Reid has enjoyed a degree of such freedom far beyond what would, I think, have been extended to him in any other body.”

George Paxton writes in the summary he supplied to me of the papers still accessible to the church:

“Following the meeting of 11 April an action of Interdict was raised by those who supported Mr Reid. There were two categories of Pursuers: those who had claims of membership rejected (5) and those who were accepted as members (23 including 3 members of the Committee of Management two of whom had resigned, and J L Duncan who was still on the Committee of Management).” So, I conclude, the Committee of Management was not at all united. George Paxton continues, “Interim Interdict was sought by the Pursuers who were granted it on 15 May 1954. James

Yuill had written to the Rev John Kielty, Secretary of the Unitarian General Assembly, on 15 April stating that Reid's defenders were mostly newish members, e.g. an influx of 31 applicants between April and December 1953, a time which also coincided with the alterations to the church building to create a hall. [*Perhaps implying that the hall would be useful for public meetings by Reid's supporters, a reason for the infiltration that has been passed down by word of mouth. GDP*] An AGM of Business Members was held on 16 May 1954 at which the Secretary and Treasurer were re-elected. The Committee elected R Turnbull as Chairman in place of J L Duncan. There was a small number of changes among ordinary members." QC's opinion was sought and the case for the church against the minister and his supporters was heard in Sheriff Court and found in favour of the church on 28th November with costs to the church. Even so the church finances needed help for expenses not covered by the court from the SUA, the GA and from the McQuaker Trustees.

I have a personal emotional interest in this kind of story because only three years later in 1957, as a student in St Andrews, I had a disturbing experience of just how free our British society was. At the end of the Junior Honours year I was being congratulated by the Professor of Political Economy when he asked me what I intended to do in the forthcoming vacation. Innocently, I told him that there was a Youth Festival in Moscow which was heavily subsidised and that, if I could just earn £40 for the deposit, I would go to see what it felt like to live under a planned economy. He drew himself up and pronounced with grave emphasis that if I did that I would never get a job in the Higher Civil Service. That caused me to ask an Assistant Lecturer with whom I was slightly friendly what was going on? He completely shocked me by telling me that in the previous year he had been required to report on my political views because I had elected to lead the seminar on Karl Marx. As it happened, in my student arrogance and innocence, I had been very critical of Marx as an economist and only lukewarm about him as a sociologist, excellent for his time but not so relevant to the present. But worse was to come. When I returned home I told my father and he was alarmed and said he would ask his friend, Willie Merrilees, then Chief Constable of the Lothians and Peebles, about this intention of mine. Merrilees told my father that if I went to Moscow, a file would be opened on me and that when war broke out with the USSR, I would be among the

first in jail. As it happened, I failed to save the £40 (not without trying!) but years later in 1966 in Khrushchov's time I drove a car through East Berlin and Poland to Moscow to an International Congress of Psychologists. Much later in the nineteen seventies, back in Moscow and Leningrad, I learned that a file had been opened on me over there because I had discussed the failings of Soviet Agricultural Policy with an Intourist Guide. During my time as an academic, we shared a building with the economists, political scientists, and sociologists and I was told by several colleagues that there was at least one member of faculty who reported on the political views of us all, staff and students. So much for the open society!

Karl Popper was the philosopher and Political Scientist who wrote the book 'The Open Society and Its Enemies' which was widely acclaimed and founded a whole dynasty within and outwith LSE. He argued that the wholly open society was an impossible dream because it would always, because of its very freedoms, be open to penetration and capture by ideologies and groups which intended to close down its freedoms.

So was the open freethinking Glasgow Unitarian Church menaced by government spies? Or rather was it menaced by the Communist Party? Or did it over react and fail to maintain its own values? I leave it to you to decide.

More importantly, where is the next threat to our freedom likely to come from, or has it already arrived?

We believe in a spirituality which, because it is so open, is always in danger of being overwhelmed by forces which are less ultimately liberal. But that vulnerability need not lead to us abandoning our ethos grounded firmly in the present, which moves beyond sacred books set in stone, which responds to the spirit of the age in time and place, which looks not so much to the past as to the future.

Our form of shared spirituality is descended from our Protestant Christian ancestors and we believe in the principles and values taught, we believe, by the Jesus of History, not by him alone but by many others both historically and today. But although we respect our past but we are not bound by it.

Iain Brown July 2012