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“Where are our Dead?” Changing views of death and the afterlife in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scottish Presbyterianism

Stewart J. Brown

Introduction

In a short book, *Death Cannot Sever*, published in 1932, the Skye-born Church of Scotland minister of St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, and a former Moderator of the General Assembly, Norman Maclean, claimed that the Scottish Presbyterian Churches were losing adherents because they were failing to address the most basic of human questions. ‘The Church’, he explained, ‘gives no answer to the questions: “Where are our dead? With what bodies do they come? Shall we know them? Should we pray for them?”’ Given the Churches’ silence on these questions, Maclean added, it was ‘no wonder pews become increasingly empty’.¹ The distinguished social historian of Scotland, Christopher Smout, highlighted this passage in his *A Century of the Scottish People* of 1986, as evidence of an increasingly uncertain theological voice in twentieth-century Scottish Presbyterianism.² There is much truth in this. During the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, many ministers of the national Church of Scotland and the other Presbyterian Churches ceased to proclaim the long-standing Reformed teachings about the afterlife, including the doctrines of the predestination of souls, the last judgement, eternal punishment for the reprobate, and eternal reward for the righteous. ‘Preachers do not, as they did fifty years ago’, observed Thomas Martin, Church of Scotland minister of the Barony church, Glasgow, in 1911, ‘press the doctrine of a future hell’ while they also ceased to speak of salvation as something occurring in an afterlife. As a result, Martin noted’, ‘the working man of today is beginning to ask boldly, “What can Christianity

¹ Norman Maclean, *Death Cannot Sever* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), 107-8.

² T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London: Collins, 1986), 195.

give me? What can the churches do for me?'"³ For many Scots, the whole notion of an afterlife was becoming, in the words of the St Andrew's professor of Divinity, George Galloway (writing in 1918), a 'faded superstition'.⁴

This chapter will explore the changing beliefs about the afterlife in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scottish Presbyterianism, especially the established Church of Scotland. The emphasis will be on changing attitudes among the clergy, as reflected in their published writings on individual personality after death. I will first consider the doctrines of death and the afterlife as presented in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which formed the subordinate standard of faith (subordinate to Scripture) in all the Scottish Presbyterian Churches during this period. While the Westminster doctrines were being increasingly questioned, they none the less remained the orthodox position in Scottish Presbyterianism, and they were embraced by large numbers of the ministers and lay adherents. I will then assess some of the factors contributing to the changing views of the afterlife. These included new emphases on social progress in this world, the spread of spiritualist beliefs, new approaches to research into the paranormal and new anthropological and historical studies of changing beliefs about death and immortality. Finally, I will discuss the work of three prominent twentieth-century Scottish Presbyterian ministers who endeavoured to address questions about the afterlife – Hugh Ross Mackintosh, Norman Maclean, and John Baillie. Two were professors of theology at New College and all three served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. These three were by no means unique in writing about the afterlife at this time, and a number of Scottish ministers contributed to the

³ Thomas Martin, 'Essay IX', in W. Forbes Gray, ed., *Non-Church-Going: Its Reasons and Remedies* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1911), 162-173, 173.

⁴ George Galloway, *The Idea of Immortality: Its Development and Value* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1919), 11.

literature, including Professor John Caird of the University of Glasgow, Professor James Denney of the United Free Church College, Glasgow, the Rev James Hannay Leckie, and Professor George Galloway of St Andrews University.⁵ Yet the three I have selected were especially influential within Scottish Presbyterianism.

Orthodox Presbyterian teachings on death and the afterlife

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, human souls had a separate existence from the physical body, and would continue to exist eternally. God had determined all events in the universe by His divine decrees, and this included the eternal fate of each individual soul. By His divine decrees, He had permitted the fall of humankind and the total depravity of human nature through sin. By His divine decrees, He also determined, or predestined, that some souls, those of the elect, would experience eternal bliss at their death, despite their sinful natures, through the sacrificial atonement of His son, Jesus Christ. The elect were saved by grace alone. Other souls were predestined to reject the sacrificial atonement of Christ and persevere in sin; at death, they would be cast off from God and suffer eternal torment.

There would be an appointed day of final judgement, when God's power, glory and justice would be made manifest. On this day, the Confession taught, 'all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls for ever'.⁶ 'All persons that have lived upon earth shall appear

⁵ John Caird, *The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, 2 vols (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1899), ii, 255-296; James Denney, *Factors of Faith in Immortality* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910); Joseph Hannay Leckie, *The World to Come and Final Destiny* (Edinburgh: T.& T.Clark, 1918); Galloway, *Idea of Immortality*.

⁶ Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), chap xxxii, para 2.

before the tribunal of Christ'. The righteous would 'go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord'. But the wicked, according to the Confession, 'shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord'.⁷ It was not made explicit what happened to the dead between the moment of their death and the appointed day of judgement; it seems the dead would slumber until that day. Nor did the Confession attempt to describe in any detail the eternal 'joy and refreshing' for the righteous, or the 'eternal torments' for the reprobate. But it was clear that after death each soul would go either to heaven or hell; there was no intermediate state or purgatory. Nor should there be any prayers for the dead; their predestined, eternal condition would be unchanging from the moment of their death and there was no possibility of altering that condition through petitions to the Lord. It was an austere faith, but also one that had its consolations for those who feared and trusted God's justice and grace.

The Westminster Directory, which defined worship in the Church of Scotland, specified that there should be no special religious services for the dead. The seventeenth-century authors of the Directory suspected that funeral services would promote the delusion that rites or prayers could influence the eternal fate of the deceased. According to the Directory, the dead body was to be moved from the place of death to the place of burial in a seemly manner. The minister might be present when the body was being moved and at the burial, but only to ensure proper decorum (especially if family and friends had been taking comfort in drink) and not to lead prayer or conduct worship. At the death of prominent public figures, ministers often preached special sermons with words of eulogy at Sunday worship, and these sermons were sometimes published. Ministers might also provide words of eulogy in Sunday worship

⁷ *Ibid.*, chap xxxiii, paras 1 & 2.

following the deaths of local people. But officially there were to be no funeral services as such.

Burial practices changed during the nineteenth century. Increasingly, ministers were asked to say some words of comfort and offer a prayer at the graveside for the mourners, and the custom developed of reading Scripture and leading prayers both at the home of the deceased and at the burial. But many mourners, aware of the funeral practices in non-Presbyterian churches, wanted more. With the liturgical reform movement that emerged from the mid-1860s in Scotland, led by the newly formed Church Service Society, there were calls for enhanced funeral services. In 1867, the Church Service Society published a suggested order of service for funerals, which some ministers adopted. Other ministers and congregations, however, resisted the innovations, and it was only after thirty years, in 1897, that the Church of Scotland gave official sanction to funeral services. The emphasis in these funeral services, however, was on providing consolation for the mourners and not on prayers for the dead.⁸

Changing Scottish Presbyterian attitudes towards death and the afterlife

From the early nineteenth century, new movements of thought were challenging the austere Reformed doctrines of the Westminster Confession concerning death and the afterlife. One of the most important of these was a growing emphasis on the potential of human life in this world. The nineteenth century for Britain was one of industrial innovation, imperial expansion and gradual social improvement; there was a growing sense that people would find fulfilment in service to others and contributing to social progress. Many embraced a ‘gospel of work’ – as celebrated in the writings of Thomas Carlyle. From the mid-nineteenth century,

⁸ Henry Sefton, ‘Occasions in the Reformed Church’, in Colin MacLean and Kenneth Veitch, eds, *Scottish Life and Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnography: Religion* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), 469-78, 476-8.

a small but influential secularist movement combined a rejection of belief in an afterlife with a celebration of lives devoted to social service. The secularists claimed a high moral ground, maintaining that the Christian teachings about this life as a preparation for the next were essentially self-seeking, because these teachings promoted the notion that people should do good mainly in order to receive an eternal reward. It was far more noble, insisted the secularists, for individuals to do good for its own sake and contribute to the progress of humanity without hope of personal reward in heaven. The agnostic Liberal journalist and politician, John Morley, expressed this ideal in an article on the late John Stuart Mill in the *Fortnightly Review* of 1874. Although he had not been a believer, Mill's life had been dedicated to showing how humanity 'may take its next step forward in the improvement of character and the amelioration of the common lot, and this not from love of God nor hope of recompense in a world to come'. 'Why do you not recognise', Morley asked of Mill's Christian critics, 'the loftiness and spirituality of those who make their heaven in the thought of wider light and purer happiness that in the immensity of the ages may be brought to new generations of men by long force of vision and endeavour?'⁹ Morley would later serve as an MP for the Scottish constituency of Montrose Burghs from 1896 to 1908. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a growing number of Scots viewed service to human progress in this world as the highest aspiration, while interest in the next world waned. 'In the thinking of civilised men', wrote the Presbyterian minister and biblical scholar, George Adam Smith, in 1901, 'there has been for years a steady ebb from the shores of another life'.¹⁰ 'The men and

⁹ John Morley, 'Mr Mill's Autobiography (1874)' in Peter Stansky ed., *Nineteenth-Century Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 157-8.

¹⁰ George Adam Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 209.

women who do the world's work', observed Professor Galloway of St Andrews University in 1919, 'are not much occupied with the thought of a future life'.¹¹

A second movement contributing to waning belief in the Reformed teachings on the afterlife was that of spiritualism. While efforts to communicate with the spirits of the dead are as old as humankind, spiritualism in its modern guise – with mediums, rappings, apparitions, séances, and darkened rooms – arrived in Britain from the United States in the early 1850s, and quickly spread. The British National Association of Spiritualists was formed in 1873, and was followed by other associations. Among the many spiritualist publications were the journals *Light*, which began publication in 1881, and *Two Worlds*, which began in 1887. For many, spiritualism was a religion, and it offered a distinctive view of the afterlife, characterised by a prolonging of human aspirations, effort and improvement. There were numerous works describing the next world – usually portrayed as a place of endless summer and happiness. For spiritualists, there was no final judgement and no need for Christ's atonement. The spirits of the dead might suffer in conscience in the afterlife for their misdeeds on earth, but they also experienced individual spiritual growth within the community of spirits. Those who had died in infancy matured in the next world. The spirits took an interest in the living and welcomed them when they crossed over.¹²

Scotland had a thriving spiritualist movement, with some twenty practicing mediums in Glasgow alone in 1880 – while Scotland produced one of the most celebrated nineteenth-century mediums in Daniel Douglas Home and one of the most prominent converts to

¹¹ Galloway, *Idea of Immortality*, 11.

¹² Georgina Byrne, "'Angels seen today": the theology of modern Spiritualism and its impact on Church of England clergy, 1852-1939', *Studies in Church History*, 45 (2009), 360-70.

spiritualism in Arthur Conan Doyle.¹³ The growing interest in spiritualism contributed to new, 'scientific' investigations of paranormal and psychic phenomena. Some, such as the English psychologist, Frederic Myers, sought evidence for the immortal soul in the depths of the human subliminal consciousness, as revealed in part through hypnosis. Myers became convinced that there was an afterlife and that it would be a place of continued growth, effort and improvement. 'The next life', he asserted, 'like this ...will find its best delight in the possibility of progress, not attainable without effort so strenuous as may well resemble pain'.¹⁴

Also contributing to the erosion of Reformed teachings on the afterlife were the historical approaches to beliefs in immortality associated with cultural anthropology, the study of ancient history and the higher criticism of the Bible. From the 1860s, the new discipline of anthropology had been developing fresh approaches to the study of early human cultures, including their religious beliefs. E.B. Tylor's seminal work, *Primitive Culture*, appeared in 1871, and included discussion of evolving beliefs in the afterlife. In 1911, the Scottish anthropologist James G. Frazer delivered a series of Gifford Lectures at St Andrews University, which were entitled 'The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead'. The lectures were then published in 1913 as the first volume of a three-volume study of beliefs in immortality among the peoples of the Pacific islands. Scholars of ancient history and of the Bible, moreover, were exploring the development of ideas of the afterlife in ancient Greece and ancient Israel, showing how notions of an afterlife characterised by fulfilment and moral reward emerged gradually from the sixth century BC. This growing

¹³ Steven J. Sutcliffe, 'Alternative beliefs and practices', in MacLean and Veitch, *Scottish Life and Society*, 313-31, 318.

¹⁴ F. W. H. Myers, *Science and the Future Life and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 49.

body of scholarship received a valuable summary in A. Seth Pringle-Pattison's Gifford Lectures of 1922 at Edinburgh on the 'Idea of Immortality'.¹⁵ According to this scholarship, most human societies held beliefs in an afterlife, including the existence of shadows, ghosts, spirits or souls, which continued after the dissolution of the body. Such beliefs expressed fundamental human fears and aspirations, and the beliefs changed over time. In short, these beliefs were, like culture itself, human constructs, with a history; they were not, or not necessarily, derived from divine revelation. In Scotland, meanwhile, from the 1870s folklorists were collecting, collating and publishing traditional beliefs about spirits, faeries, ghosts, and second-sight – beliefs which had pre-dated the coming of Christianity and which survived alongside the stark Reformed doctrines about all souls going to their predestined place in heaven or in hell.¹⁶

Theological developments were also contributing to the erosion of Reformed teachings on the afterlife. Since at least the 1820s, with the influential early writings of the Scottish Episcopalian lay theologian, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, there had been a growing questioning of the doctrine of predestination among Scottish Presbyterians. For Erskine it was simply not possible to reconcile the idea of God as loving father with the notion that God had predestined a portion of His children to everlasting torment. His ideas on the fatherhood of God were taken up by the Church of Scotland minister John McLeod Campbell, who though deposed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland in 1831, published his highly

¹⁵ A. Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of Immortality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 1-82.

¹⁶ Anne Ross, *The Folklore of the Scottish Highlands* (London: Batsford, 1976); Ronald Black ed. John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Underworld: Superstitions of the Highlands and the Islands and Witchcraft* [1900] and *Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* [1902] (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), 1-81.

influential *The Nature of the Atonement* in 1856, a work which was widely read by Presbyterians. Many Scottish Presbyterians of all three mainstream denominations read the work of these men and came to accept their portrayal of a God who desired the salvation of all humankind. There were by the later nineteenth century also increasing doubts about the doctrine of eternal punishment.¹⁷ As George Galloway, Professor of Divinity at St Andrews University, observed in his Baird Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1918, the modern mind conceived of punishment as intended to rehabilitate the offender, but ‘an endless punishment, which can have no educational value, is felt to be meaningless’. If the prospect of eternal punishment, Galloway added, had been intended to serve as a deterrent against evil doing, it does not seem to have been very effective.¹⁸ In 1879, the United Presbyterian Church had passed a Declaratory Act, altering the terms by which new ministers subscribed to the Westminster Confession. They now had only to declare that the Confession contained the essentials of the Faith, without having to define what they conceived those essentials to be. This enabled individual ministers who could not accept predestination or eternal punishment to subscribe to the Confession and be ordained. In 1892, the Free Church passed a similar Declaratory Act, and in 1910 the Church of Scotland also replaced subscription with a Declaratory Statement.¹⁹ These acts suggested that large numbers of Presbyterian ministers no longer believed in predestination or eternal punishment. But if so, what did they believe happened to the dead?

This question became more compelling amid the unprecedented loss of life during the Great War. Scotland suffered some 110,000 war dead, representing perhaps 10 per cent of Scottish

¹⁷ A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1983), 60-87.

¹⁸ Galloway, *Idea of Immortality*, 157.

¹⁹ Cheyne, *Transforming of the Kirk*, 60-85.

men between the ages of sixteen and fifty.²⁰ The clergy of the national Church of Scotland and other Scottish Presbyterian Churches – who had often themselves lost sons – struggled to provide pastoral care and comfort to the bereaved. As they did so, they were often confronted with question of what happened to the souls of the dead soldiers. Some ministers, inspired by the sacrifices being made by the soldiers for others, insisted that the dead combatants had demonstrated their blessedness and went straight to glory. Others, however, could not accept such a view, which seemed to imply a God of battles and salvation through death in combat. They knew that many soldiers and sailors were not churchgoers and showed no evidence of having accepted Christ's gospel. But did this mean that when the men died for their country, their souls were to suffer eternal torment? The idea was too terrible for many to contemplate.

In 1917, the Church of Scotland minister, Norman Maclean, and the United Free Church minister, J.P.R. Sclater, published a book entitled *God and the Soldier*, consisting of a series of addresses they gave to soldiers at the Western Front. In the work, they argued that at death, souls did not go immediately to heaven or hell, but rather proceeded to an intermediate state, in which they could grow spiritually and morally, and be prepared to enter the presence of God. 'Love', they insisted, 'does not shut doors', and God's love would not banish 'erring lads, struck down by a German bullet, eternally from the divine presence'.²¹ They further maintained that the great lesson of the war was that 'there is something in all of us that can respond to God', which implied that all souls would enter the intermediate state and eventually proceed to heaven.²² But this seemed to revive the Catholic teaching of purgatory and combine it with a doctrine of universal salvation. This was too much for more orthodox

²⁰ Smout, *Scottish People*, 267.

²¹ Norman Maclean and J.P.R. Sclater, *God and the Soldier* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), 188.

²² *Ibid.*, 197.

Reformed ministers and elders, and one presbytery in the Western Isles debated bringing Maclean before the Church courts on charges of heresy.²³ That it could not agree to do so reflected both a commitment to maintaining unity during the Great War and also the growing uncertainty within the Presbyterian Churches as a whole concerning the Westminster doctrines on judgement and the afterlife.

Three Presbyterian Authors on the Afterlife: (1) H.R.Mackintosh

In late 1915, over a year into the Great War, the distinguished Scottish Presbyterian theologian, Hugh Ross Mackintosh (1870-1936), published a book entitled *Immortality and the Future: The Christian Doctrine of Eternal Life*. Mackintosh had been Professor of Divinity at the United Free Church College (New College) in Edinburgh since 1904, and he would have felt a particular responsibility to offer theological reflection on immortality for a nation mourning so many deaths. He was in his mid-forties when he wrote the work, and had served for several years in the pastoral ministry before his appointment as professor. As a student, he had been profoundly influenced by German liberal Protestantism and during the 1890s he had studied at Freiburg, Halle, and Marburg. Later, in 1932, Mackintosh would serve as Moderator of the General Assembly of the reunited Church of Scotland.

Mackintosh devoted the first half of *Immortality and the Future* to an historical/anthropological account of the changing human conceptions of an afterlife, from early beliefs in spirits hovering near the place of burial, through the belief systems of ancient Egypt, Homeric Greece, ancient India, and ancient Hebrew culture, and then to the teachings

²³ James L. MacLeod, ““Greater love hath no man than this”: Scotland’s conflicting religious responses to death in the Great War’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 81 (2002), 70-96, 83-8.

of the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, the Church Fathers, the medieval Church and the Reformation. He reflected positively on the growing anthropological and historical literature about the changing beliefs in an afterlife, including the perspectives drawn from the higher criticism of Scripture. His account suggested that humanity desperately sought assurance of immortality, but that all its attempts to envisage the afterlife had been vague and unsatisfactory.

In the second half of the book, Mackintosh attempted what he termed ‘a reconstructive statement’. He began with a critique of the secularist position that individuals would find fulfilment in contributing to the continuing progress of humanity. Against this view, he observed that all the physical evidence pointed to the eventual end of life on earth and the destruction of the planet. According to modern science, he observed, in time the sun would burn out, the solar system implode, ‘mankind will be blotted off the face of the universe’, and all the secularist dreams of human progress would be as nothing.²⁴ In contrast, Christianity offered the prospect of an afterlife within a ‘new transcendent order’ entirely separate from the vicissitudes of the material universe. He then endeavoured to describe this afterlife. In doing so, he departed from the orthodoxy of the Westminster Confession in subtle ways. He maintained that in an afterlife, the former bodies would not be resurrected; rather, souls would receive entirely different bodies, ‘more delicate and noble, better able to minister to or reveal the soul’.²⁵ On the issue of prayers for the dead, he insisted that the Church should leave it as an open question: for whether or not prayers helped the dead was more a matter for

²⁴ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Immortality and the Future: The Christian Doctrine of Eternal Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 121.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

the heart rather than of dogma. In this realm of ‘the most private and spiritual feeling’, individuals should be free to decide for themselves.²⁶

Turning to the question of the eternal fates of the reprobate, or those who died in ‘hostility to God’, he maintained that there were three possibilities. The first was ‘universal restoration’, or the belief that evil acts committed in this life would not alienate the sinner from God forever and that after a certain period in an intermediate state, all souls would accept God’s grace and be admitted to heaven. The second was ‘conditional immortality’, or the belief that only those who had accepted Christ would achieve immortality, while the souls of the reprobate would suffer annihilation at the moment of death or in a judgement pronounced shortly after death. The third was the prospect of ‘eternal punishment’, by which God would afflict the reprobate with unending suffering – a doctrine that few could now accept.

Mackintosh observed that ‘if at this moment a frank and confidential plebiscite of the English-speaking ministry were taken, the likelihood is that a considerable majority would adhere to Universalism’ – that is, the eventual universal restoration of all souls to God’s family in heaven.²⁷ After confessing himself to be unconvinced about universal restoration, Mackintosh then proceeded to a lengthy treatment of the idea of conditional immortality, which he portrayed as ‘praiseworthy’ for its rejection of eternal punishment, but in other respects profoundly objectionable, as it made immortality an ‘acquired characteristic’ for superior souls, and introduced a form of spiritual Darwinism, or the prospect of the ‘survival of the fittest’ among souls.²⁸ He also observed that conditional immortality would consign most non-Western peoples, those who had never heard of the Gospel of Jesus, to annihilation.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

In the end, he rejected conditional immortality as unscriptural. That left him with eternal punishment for the reprobate, which had ample Scriptural support, but which he could not accept, as it contradicted what he viewed as the higher teachings of divine love. At this point, he dropped the thorny subject of the reprobate, and proceeded to a description of the heavenly state. He insisted that in heaven the blessed would retain their personalities, renew their earthly friendships and connections, and form a society. Interestingly, rather like Frederick Myers, he believed that the blessed would continue to work and strive towards ‘unending progress’ in the kingdom of God. ‘In a word’, he concluded of the blessed state, ‘it will be a life of change, of progress, or movement’.²⁹

(2) Norman Maclean

A second prominent Presbyterian minister who laboured to reconceptualise the afterlife was Norman Maclean (1869-1952), minister of St Cuthbert’s, Edinburgh from 1915 to 1937. Born on the Isle of Skye, Maclean was educated at the Universities of St Andrews and Edinburgh, and served as a parish minister on Skye, in Inverness-shire, in Colinton, Edinburgh, and the Park Church, Glasgow, before becoming minister of St Cuthbert’s. He had become intensely interested in the subject of the dead when, as a minister at Colinton in about 1907, he and the elders had considered plans for building a new church on a site at some distance from the historic churchyard. After considerable, emotive discussion, they decided to build the new church on the old site, so as to ensure ‘that the dead in their resting graves were not deprived of the psalm of life wafted over them’.³⁰ As we have seen, Maclean co-authored a controversial book, *God and the Soldier*, during the Great War, in which he argued for an intermediate state in which the souls of the departed would be prepared for heaven, and he

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁰ Norman Maclean, *The Years of Fulfilment* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 88-90.

encouraged prayers for the dead. His wife had died after a long illness only a few weeks before he became Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1927. As he struggled to come to terms with her death, he resumed his writing on the afterlife, publishing *The Future Life* in late 1927 and *Death Cannot Sever* in 1932. Maclean was a fluent and engaging author, who wrote a popular column for many years in *The Scotsman*. He read widely in philosophical, anthropological and spiritualist writings on the afterlife; and he was especially influenced by Frederic Myers's claims to have found evidence in the subliminal consciousness for the survival of personality after death.

Maclean rejected the teaching of the Westminster Confession that all souls would be consigned to heaven or hell from the moment of death. Along with Mackintosh and, as we have seen, many others in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scottish Presbyterianism, he could not reconcile the notion of eternal punishment with belief in a loving God; indeed, he was scathing in his condemnation of hellfire preaching by the 'grim preachers of degenerate Calvinism'.³¹ Instead, he had come to believe that there was an intermediate state, which he portrayed as the 'hell' of traditional Christian doctrine, in which souls of those who had rejected God in life were gradually prepared to enter heaven. He insisted that God continued to love and inspire the souls in hell, and seek to draw them into the heavenly family. There was evidence for this, he maintained, in Christ's descent into hell to preach to the souls there.³² 'Everywhere', he insisted, 'even in hell, God seeks his children'.³³ Once they reached heaven, souls would continue to experience spiritual growth. Just as in the natural world, where providence acted through gradual processes of geological formation and biological evolution, stretching over millions of years, so in the spiritual world

³¹ Maclean, *Death Cannot Sever*, 57.

³² *Ibid.*, 62-3.

³³ Morman Maclean, *The Future Life* (London: James Clarke, 1927), 116.

there would also be gradual processes of growth: ‘The processes by which God works here are inevitably the processes by which He works in the life beyond’.³⁴ In the next world, personalities would recognise one another, ‘family life will be resumed’ and souls would commune with ‘the great and honoured dead’ who had enriched their culture, and shaped their personalities, in the temporal world.³⁵

He further maintained that there was continuous communication between the living and the dead. The dead, he insisted, were a ‘cloud of witnesses’ who watched over the affairs of the living. They ‘continue to remember the past and those whom they left behind; if this were not so, immortality would be meaningless’.³⁶ Souls in the afterlife continually prayed for the living. They also communicated directly with the living; ‘they flash thought, inspiration, and courage upon the hearts of the living’.³⁷ Many phenomena, Maclean insisted, that were described as psychic or paranormal were in truth interventions from the souls of the dead seeking to help or inspire the living. Indeed, he insisted, the Church should recognise that researchers into psychic phenomena were her allies. ‘The Bible’, he argued, ‘is the record of the unveiling of the unseen world’. It is ‘the most psychical of all books’.³⁸ It was full of what was now described as psychic phenomena, including visions through dreams, clairvoyance, the hearing of voices, levitation, automatic writing and materialised spirits. And such phenomena continued to be observed by spiritualists and psychical researchers, because the dead continued to commune with the living. Similarly, Maclean maintained, the living should pray for the dead, whose souls, whether in the intermediate state or in heaven, would be

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁶ Maclean, *Death Cannot Sever*, 67.

³⁷ Maclean, *Future Life*, 51.

³⁸ Maclean, *Death Cannot Sever*, 13, 113.

comforted and aided through such prayers. While he acknowledged that the Westminster Confession taught there should be no prayers for the dead, he denied that the Westminster Confession had settled such matters in perpetuity. ‘Christianity’, he asserted, ‘is based on the fact that there is a highway between this world and the world unseen’.³⁹ Maclean had indeed moved far from the eschatology of the Westminster Confession. Yet he served as a Moderator of the General Assembly and was never formally charged with heresy in the Church courts; this no doubt reflected a growing Scottish Presbyterian openness to new thinking about the afterlife in the 1920s and 1930s.

(3) John Baillie

A third prominent Presbyterian writer on the afterlife was John Baillie (1886-1960), one of the most renowned Scottish theologians of the twentieth century. Baillie was born in Ross-shire, and educated at the Universities of Edinburgh, Jena and Marburg. During the war, he served for four years with the YMCA in France, providing pastoral care to the soldiers at the Western Front. After the war, he accepted an academic appointment in the United States, where he taught for fifteen years, latterly at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, before returning to succeed Mackintosh as Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh in 1934. That same year, he published *And the Life Everlasting*, a lucid and balanced exploration of the issue of eternal life, which was based on the Ayer Lectures that he had delivered at the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in upper New York State.

He opened the book by acknowledging that modern Western societies no longer took much interest in the question of eternal life. There had been a shift of focus during the past half century ‘from the future to the present life’. In the modern world of material progress and

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

scientific rationalism, thinking about an afterlife was increasingly viewed as morbid and unhealthy. Many could no longer see the point of eternal life and asked ‘Is immortality desirable?’⁴⁰ He observed that contemporary sermons rarely referred to eternal life ‘with anything like the old ardent love and impatient longing’; even the impact of the Great War had not changed the trend away from longings after immortality.⁴¹ After providing a lengthy anthropological and historical account of the development, then the decline, of notions of immortality in the West, Baillie proceeded to offer his own reflections on the nature of the life everlasting. He began with musings about the nature of time. Eternal life, he argued, would not simply be an unending prolonging of temporal existence, which he acknowledged might not be desirable. Rather, he insisted, God’s eternity was not unending duration, but was something entirely different from time as we know it. While the real nature of eternal life must remain a mystery to our finite minds, he maintained that some individuals – mystics and artists – received a foretaste of eternal life when they experienced occasional flashes of inspiration, with fleeting, profound and unified perceptions of the inter-related whole of existence, rather than simply observing a succession of events.⁴²

Baillie then turned to the question of whether the ‘heavenly state’ would be one of rest or of activity. He opted for activity and a heavenly gospel of work. It would be wrong, he asserted, to conceive of heaven as ‘a vast holiday, or the endless long vacation’. Souls in heaven would receive new bodies, and there would be plenty of work for them to do, with a healthy alternation between work and rest. There would be services to perform for others, adventures to be had and works of art to create. The difference between work on earth and work in heaven, he continued, was that in heaven there would be no development or progress, for all

⁴⁰ John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 221-24.

creative endeavours would be equally inspired. For example, in heaven a great painter might produce an infinite number of paintings, but each one would be a masterpiece and there would be no improvement.⁴³ Finally, he turned to the question of whether the life everlasting would be for all, or only for some. Baillie considered the three possibilities for those who had not accepted the Gospel during their earthly lives – eternal punishment, conditional immortality, or universal restoration. He rejected eternal punishment, arguing that it was essentially a human invention. Hell, he observed, ‘bears the taint of having been worked out in terms of what its proponents felt to be the deserts of their neighbours, or rather of their enemies’.⁴⁴ He rejected conditional immortality, as he could not believe that the loving God would annihilate a soul that had even a trace of the divine image, and Baillie believed that every soul retained some trace of the divine. He then accepted, but in a hesitating manner, the doctrine of universal restoration, by which all souls would eventually enter the heavenly state – but he also suggested that there would be an intermediate state of preparation and testing, before souls would at last ‘realize their true destiny and enter into the society of the blessed’.⁴⁵ Baillie did not take up the question of prayers for the dead, nor did he argue that there was communication between the living and the dead. Of the ‘psychical research’ into such communications, the evidence was, he insisted, difficult to evaluate and tainted by much obvious fraud.

Conclusion

These three Presbyterian ministers, Mackintosh, Maclean and Baillie – who all closed their careers as respected leaders of the established Church of Scotland – had moved far from the orthodox teachings of the Westminster Confession on death and the afterlife. In their

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 239, 245.

accounts of the afterlife, none of them referred to predestination. All three rejected eternal punishment, and at least two, Maclean and Baillie, accepted, or came close to accepting, universal salvation – with an intermediate, preparatory state for souls not yet ready to enter heaven, an intermediate state which looked very like the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Their embracing of belief in this intermediate state may well have been a result of the war, and the experience of seeing so many thousands of young men cut down before they had the opportunity to grow and mature in faith. Macintosh accepted the possible efficacy of prayers for the dead, while Maclean went further and actively promoted prayers for the dead. Indeed, Maclean believed there was continuous communication between the living and the dead. Baillie was non-committal about such communications. None of the three accepted the Westminster Confession's teaching that the dead would be raised up in the 'selfsame bodies'; rather, they all maintained that the souls would receive different bodies. All envisaged an afterlife as characterised by effort and activity, rather than repose. All three were influenced by spiritualism and psychical research, as well as by anthropological and historical studies of changing beliefs in immortality. Indeed, their accounts seemed to draw their evidence more from these sources, and from moral reflections, than from Scripture.

It is difficult to say to what extent these three Presbyterian ministers were representative of the larger mind of the Church of Scotland. What can be said is that the three ended their careers as immensely influential figures in Scotland's religious establishment. Mackintosh and Baillie were two of the most important Scottish theologians of the twentieth century, helping at New College, Edinburgh, to educate hundreds of ministers of the Church of Scotland. Maclean was an influential preacher, journalist and author, who combined a Highland spirituality with extensive reading in spiritualism, psychic research and anthropology. All three served as Moderators of the General Assembly of the Church of

Scotland. It is thus probable that they were articulating views about death and the afterlife that were shared by many in the pews and the wider society. That said, their responses to the enduring question of ‘where are our dead?’, were also tentative and uncertain – and, given our human condition, perhaps necessarily so.

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