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Alan Richardson's Biblical Theology, 'Faith Principle' and Attempts to Protect Public Faith¹

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century liberalism within the Church of England together with the opposition of Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical wings of the church created a confusing and volatile religious environment for many of its adherents. In the twentieth-century English modernism, adding scientific naturalism to the mix, rejected Christian creedal assertions which were seen as mere dogmatism. As the century progressed many Anglican scholar-clerics began the struggle to find a theological *via media* which accepted liberalism's use of the historico-critical approach to the Bible but not the rejection of Anglican creedal affirmations. Alan Richardson was one of these and this article will examine his neo-orthodox development of a faith principal which rejected the modernist dichotomy between theology, science and history that he believed was undermining public faith.

Keywords: Alan Richardson, biblical theology, faith principle, interpretation of history, neo-orthodoxy, revelation, scientific naturalism

Introduction

In the first quarter of the twentieth century the Church of England was beset with both theological and ecclesial difficulties. Liberal Protestantism, English Modernism, Anglo-Catholicism and Evangelicalism all claimed adherents within Anglicanism and modern biblical criticism divided those who held firm to creedal traditions from those who rejected them.³ Orthodox Church leaders often resorted to disciplining or dismissing clergy for expounding liberal and modernist views which rejected creeds and miracles and in 1922 the Convocation of Canterbury

¹This article utilizes some parts of my research carried out for my doctoral thesis, 'Alan Richardson: Reappraising the Life and Work of a Twentieth-century Christian Theologian, Cleric and Educator', University of Nottingham, 2020.

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³See, for an example, W. Sanday, *Bishop Gore's Challenge to Criticism: A Reply to the Bishop of Oxford's Open Letter on the Basis of Anglican Fellowship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1914).



found it necessary to pass a Resolution reaffirming the historic facts contained in the creeds.⁴ These competing views, particularly of the historical truth of Scripture, often expounded by clerics and theologians alike, were having a detrimental effect on the religious conscience of many people. In 1937 the Bishop of Salford had suggested that it was no longer possible to take for granted that in England you were talking to a Christian.⁵ As the second quarter of the century began, recently ordained Anglican clerics like Alan Richardson, Michael Ramsey, Alec Vidler and Austin Farrer, having set foot in one or another of these competing camps, had become disillusioned with them and were now attempting to establish a firm theological paradigm for themselves. In that journey they joined clerics who had set off a few years earlier such as William Temple, Wilfred Knox and O.C. Quick.

Alan Richardson's Theological Development

Alan Richardson was born in 1905 in Wigan and in 1923 he entered Liverpool University to study for a BA in philosophy. Richardson's exposure to liberal thought began here with his life-long involvement with the Student Christian Movement (SCM), which at that time was a non-denominational movement with a liberal theological position. In 1927 he entered Ridley Hall, Cambridge as an ordinand in the Church of England and was ordained deacon of St Saviour's Church in Liverpool and then priest the following year. Liberal theology was again presented to him as newly ordained Anglican clergy in Liverpool were required to attend weekly training classes at the Cathedral and the tutor responsible for that training was the liberal theologian Charles Raven, a residentiary canon of the Cathedral. During those classes Richardson was joined by Michael Ramsey as both newly ordained men 'sat at the feet of Dr Charles Raven',⁶ although both would later reject his liberal theology, Ramsey for a central Anglo-Catholicism and Richardson for an equally central neo-orthodoxy based on his biblical theology. In 1943 Richardson, as editor of the SCM magazine *The Student Movement*, had so moved it from its earlier liberal position to that of a neo-orthodoxy that Raven, a lifelong supporter of the SCM, withdrew his support for the movement.⁷

Liberalism has waxed and waned within religious thought generally and even the very term liberal is contested and notoriously difficult to define.⁸ In his excellent survey of the defining points of liberal theology throughout the ages of the Church, Ian Bradley draws upon a number of contemporary scholarly definitions which all contain similar characteristics: a receptiveness to contemporary science, arts and humanities; a willingness to apply the canons of historiography in the

⁴A.M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple: The Development of Anglican Theology between Lux Mundi and the Second World War* (London: Longmans, 1960), pp. 72-73.

⁵Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), p. 125.

⁶Michael Ramsey, 'After Liberalism: Reflections on Four Decades', in Ronald H. Preston (ed.), *Theology and Change: Essays in Memory of Alan Richardson* (London: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 1-10 (1).

⁷F.W. Dillistone, *Charles Raven: Naturalist, Historian, Theologian* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), p. 288.

⁸Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olsen, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: IL: Paternoster Press, 1992), p. 51. See also Alasdair I.C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1980), p. 32.

hermeneutic task of interpreting Scripture; promoting the ethical implications of Christianity as a way of life and a moral vision to be practised; an acceptance of the authority of individual reason and experience; and a desire to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people.⁹ Alan Richardson's early theology certainly embraced the first three of these characteristics but he did not believe in the authority of individual reason and experience as necessary for faith or to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people. Richardson often used the phrase 'spirit of the age' as a generic and pejorative term to describe the many early twentieth-century forms of the growing secularized view that science had made religion redundant, a view he vehemently denied. Like many Anglican clerics of his time Richardson had been 'brought up in the old-fashioned liberal school' but by the mid-1930s he had come to believe that 'liberal Protestants preached what is clearly a reduced Christianity in the name of biblical scholarship', in which many of the dogmatic assertions of the Church were being 'passed over as being merely the first century encumbrances with which the original gospel was disfigured'.¹⁰

In 1931 Richardson was especially exposed to liberal modernism when he was appointed Chaplain of Ripon Hall, Oxford whose principal, H.D.A. Major, was a prominent member of the Modern Churchmen's Union and the editor of its journal *Modern Churchman*. Ripon at this time was a college which many saw as 'a breeding ground of English Modernism',¹¹ with Major as the leading apostle of it.¹² Some, such as Stephenson, have assumed that anyone who, like Richardson, spent time at Ripon Hall while Major was the principal, must be classed as liberal, although he erroneously defines Richardson as a 'student' of Ripon Hall, not its chaplain.¹³ However, while Chaplain of Ripon Hall Richardson began theological training at Exeter College, Oxford and in 1933 was awarded a BA with first class honours followed by an MA in 1937. It is reasonable to suggest that Richardson's studies at Exeter College had begun to separate out his liberal and orthodox views as following the award of his BA he left Ripon Hall and took up a post as tutor in theology at Jesus College, Oxford. However it is clear that he was only awaiting an appropriate church position to become available and later in 1934 he was appointed as Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambo, a very rural parish in Northumberland and it was there that he wrote his first three books.

Richardson's Early Corpus

The Redemption of Modernism was written when Richardson had been an ordained cleric for just five years yet it contains a powerful polemic against institutional religion, particularly Anglicanism and its leaders. The book betrays his fear of a

⁹Ian Bradley, *Grace, Order, Openness and Diversity: Reclaiming Liberal Theology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 1-3.

¹⁰Alan Richardson, *The Redemption of Modernism* (London: Skeffington, 1935), pp. 39-40.

¹¹Alan M.G. Stephenson, *The Rise and Decline of English Modernism: The Hulsean Lectures 1979-80* (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 10.

¹²A.M.G. Stephenson and Marc Brodie, 'Major, Henry Dewsbury Alves (1871-1961), Theologian', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34839>

¹³Stephenson, *The Rise and Decline*, p. 109.

national slide into unbelief that would continue to haunt him throughout his life, a fear that ensured that much of his writing would be of a populist style. Richardson suggested that most people were now completely uninterested in the church, its activities and its professionals because church members and leaders were unwilling to live as Christians in the world or in any way different from the 'decent minded but irreligious citizen'.¹⁴ This, he argued, was the result of the liberalism which began in the previous century and held sway until the First World War.

Richardson's developing biblical theology led him towards a central neo-orthodoxy which accepted the utility of modern biblical criticism, understood the need to semantically modernize ancient creedal and doctrinal concepts without changing their meaning, and supported Christian faith based on their truth. This formed the core of his populist theology written and broadcast for a public who he feared the church was losing to the scientific world view. Richardson's first three books all involve his personal reaction to the theological disquiet created by liberal modernist theology's misuse of biblical criticism in its attacks on scriptural affirmations and the developing belief that scientific advances were making Christian faith irrelevant. Despite that disquiet his *via media* methodology did not simply reject modernism out of hand. Rather he wished to retain its desire to utilize modern scientific enquiry to engage with Christianity while maintaining a doctrinal orthodoxy which he believed was supported by history. *The Redemption of Modernism* makes clear his movement away from liberalism while acknowledging his debt to his modernist tutors. Doubtless with Raven, Major and friends within the SCM such as Oliver Tompkins in mind he wrote:

It is unpleasant to have to criticise the convictions of those from whom one has learnt much, and to whom one has incurred a debt which can never be repaid. If, therefore, in our comments upon the older English Modernism in the following pages the note of criticism seems to sound more loudly than the note of appreciation, that is due to the desire to see clearly where we stand rather than to the failure to appreciate what we owe to the older liberals.¹⁵

Richardson's rebuttal of the modernist idea that the critical study of Scripture must be accompanied by religious negativity and rejection of doctrines was central to his biblical theology in 1935. He saw liberal Protestantism as one example – Gnosticism and Deism were others even earlier – of a false modernism which sought to harmonize classical religion (by which it is assumed he meant orthodoxy) with the 'spirit of the age', that is, new Divine revelations of truth found not in Scripture but in modern science, philosophy and morality.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism had viewed man as self-sufficiently capable of obtaining salvation via the free scope of his natural impulses and so the classic doctrine of man as inescapably fallen and requiring the redemption of Divine Grace had been dismissed. Later he saw this error as a natural development of the rejection of the dichotomy between sacred and profane history in which reason and rationality removed any

¹⁴Richardson, *Redemption*, p. 62.

¹⁵Richardson, *Redemption*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁶Richardson, *Redemption*, p. 57.

concept of a sacred history, leaving only the profane. This was exemplified by Lessing's famous dictum that if no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths, creating the unleapable 'ugly broad ditch' between history and rational belief.¹⁷

The Redemption of Modernism demonstrates that Richardson's theology was moving rapidly away from liberal Protestantism and English Modernism towards a neo-orthodoxy. He had never seen the authority of the Bible in concepts of an infallible, unchallengeable structure. His willingness to utilize philosophical reflection while adhering to an apologetic which held that the Christian faith was based on events in history, was the accepted norm of his biblical theology and would be reflected in many of his later works.¹⁸ His was not a lone voice as the publication two years earlier of *The Development of Modern Catholicism* demonstrates.¹⁹ That monograph sought a similar synthesis between liberal modernism and conservatism in English theology. This complemented Richardson's desire to forge a synthesis between modernism's misuse of biblical criticism to deny creedal affirmations and conservatism's ideological and semantic retention of them. Both therefore attempted something similar to that of the *Lux Mundi* authors in the 1880s.

Richardson's second book was again written to rebut the more extreme ideas of modernism, such as those emanating from the Girton Conference, denying historicity to much of the New Testament. The first five words of *Creeds in the Making* make Richardson's key theological point: 'Christianity is a historical religion'.²⁰ He argues that theology must pay full attention to the history of the faith it is investigating by examining its facts from a contemporary perspective. Each generation must undertake that task but by the 1930s this was being overlooked because of the modern domination of science. Richardson argued contra radical modernism, that it was a waste of time to debate the mode of the resurrection, whether it was physical or spiritual, when proponents of both views believed the fact of its occurrence. 'The mode of the resurrection is not so important a question as that of the fact of the resurrection.'²¹ While Richardson was Chaplain at Ripon Hall, Major had published his own work on the creeds in which he made clear his personal rejection of them in their current form as scientifically unacceptable, pointing out that his faith had undergone a modern transformation while the creeds had not. Such modernist views prompted *Creeds in the Making* as a short and uncomplicated guide to the development of Christian doctrine for a

¹⁷Alan Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane: The Bampton Lectures for 1962* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 28.

¹⁸See, for example, *The Gospels in the Making: An Introduction to the Recent Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1938), pp. 159-78; *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1941), pp. 131-35; *Christian Apologetics* (New York: Harper and Row/London: SCM Press, 1947), pp. 104-109, 202; *Science, History and Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 41-43; *The Bible in the Age of Science: The Edward Cadbury Lectures 1961* (London: SCM Press, 1961), pp. 67-76; *History Sacred and Profane*, pp. 156-59, 254-58.

¹⁹Wilfred L. Knox and Alec Vidler, *The Development of Modern Catholicism* (London: Philip Allan, 1933).

²⁰Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making* (London: SCM Press, 1935), p. 7. See also Richardson, *Redemption*, p. 68; *The Gospels*, pp. 161-64.

²¹Richardson, *Creeds*, pp. 23-24.

populist readership. Reviewing the numerous heresies and contra arguments leading to the development of the Chalcedonian formularies he accepted that their semantic reinterpretation was long overdue, but added a note of caution:

[We] must always be on our guard not to read new meanings of a doubtful kind into the old formularies, for this would be to put new wine into the old bottles, and the consequences would be unfortunate. But, as Dr. Inge has somewhere said, there is no Scriptural injunction against putting the old wine into new bottles, and this is the task to which we must address ourselves to-day, if we wish to commend the historical Christian religion to our contemporaries.²²

However, Richardson's biblical theology would not countenance old wine being forced into new bottles which had no room for the historical assertions of the gospels. That modernist attitude to the gospels had been displayed two decades earlier by Hastings Rashdall, who has been labelled as 'the real head and tail of Anglican modernism in 1900 and for many years to come',²³ and 'a giant of modernism'.²⁴

I think it should very distinctly be realized that the truth and value of the Christian Ethic does not depend upon the fact of its having been taught by Jesus himself – still less upon its having been taught by Jesus exclusively. If it could be shown that the sayings which we have been in the habit of regarding as most characteristic of the historical Jesus were in reality none of His, if it could be shown that there never was an historical Jesus or that we know nothing to speak of about His teaching, the truth and the value attributed to our Lord in the Gospels would not be one whit diminished.²⁵

Rashdall represents the more extreme form of modernist theology which Richardson's third book, *The Gospels in the Making* (1938), was aimed at refuting. Ever conscious of the confusion of many people of faith which it had brought about, he ignores the academy and surveys contemporary critical study of the Bible 'in such a way that the reader who has no preliminary technical knowledge of New Testament criticism may be brought to understand the principal points which are now engaging the attention of scholars'.²⁶ Again presenting his arguments in a populist style Richardson analyses the development of the gospel tradition especially in its early oral stages and the developing crystallization of the tradition as now found in the Synoptic Gospels. Although this demonstrates Richardson's biblical theology and developing neo-orthodoxy he does not hold to a historical

²²Richardson, *Creeeds*, pp. 94-95.

²³Roger Lloyd, *The Church of England in the Twentieth-Century*, Volume 1 (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1946), p. 80.

²⁴Stephenson, *The Rise and Decline*, p. 10.

²⁵Hastings Rashdall, *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), pp. 274-75.

²⁶Richardson, *The Gospels*, p. 5.

dogmatism such as that rejected by the German theology of Troeltsch and Harnack.²⁷ Neither does he suggest that the gospels are works of scientific historical research but instead locates their value in a hermeneutic of faith.

The understanding of the historical events of the life of the Lord, regarded from a purely scientific and critical standpoint, is a long way removed from Christian belief; and it is obvious that we can use history only to awaken faith, not to create it. Faith cannot be taught as history can be taught; the preaching of the Gospel of Christ is historical only in so far as it is the historical record – that is in the gospels – that the soul can best be brought into living encounter with the figure of Christ. The Four Canonical Gospels were in fact written for this very purpose: to bring the soul into contact with the historical figure of Christ, and so awaken faith in him.²⁸

Richardson feared that the arguments of scientific naturalism and the rejection of creedal affirmations by liberal modernism were eating away the bedrock of Christian faith among the general public, particularly the younger generation. That fear lay behind his next vocational decision.

Biblical Theology and the Faith Principle

In 1938 Richardson left Cambo to become the Study Secretary of the SCM, giving him a prominent voice in the Christian education of thousands of university and college students, many of whom were perplexed by the dichotomy between liberal, modernist and orthodox theologies. Richardson's biblical theology was to be utilized, in a populist style, to strengthen and support the sometimes fragile faith of young SCM members. Like all biblical theologians Richardson placed great stress on the historicity of the Bible texts. For him, biblical theology was the true view of the nature and substance of theology as opposed to theology considered as an empirical science, a view which had developed from Schleiermacher's concept of religious experience as the starting point of theology. Biblical theology is equally at variance with theology conceived as a part of metaphysics. Theology based on metaphysical theorizing is incompatible with the scriptural view of revelation as scientific and metaphysical theologies fail to take seriously that which the Bible does: history, on which Christian theology stands or falls, the concept of God's revelation in history.²⁹ However, Richardson sets history as revealed in Scripture over against the 'historicism' of Ritschl, Reimarus, Wrede and Schweitzer, who believed history to be profane in the sense that it is simply the facts themselves which are history and

²⁷See, for example, Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology' in *Religion in History: Ernst Troeltsch* (trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense; Edinburgh: Clark, 1991), pp. 11-32 (20) and Wilhelm Pauck, *Harnack and Troeltsch: Two Historical Theologians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp. 26-27.

²⁸Richardson, *The Gospels*, p. 175; *Miracle-Stories*, pp. 124-25.

²⁹Alan Richardson, 'The Nature of the Biblical Theology', *Theology* 39.231 (September 1939), pp. 166-76 (166-68).

thus available to straightforwardly scientific historical investigation without reference to the theological layering with which the original authors overlaid them.³⁰

This view (sometimes known as 'historicism') cannot account for the failure of many wise and good men to make the right 'value judgement' concerning the Person of Jesus Christ. It cannot explain why it is impossible to demonstrate to a good Hindu the superiority of the Christian religion. It cannot tell us why what was obvious to Peter or Zacchaeus or Paul was not equally apparent to John the Baptist or Pilate or Gamaliel . . . The historical facts cannot themselves be the revelation or the teaching of history would be the essence of evangelization.³¹

Richardson's early biblical theology in relation to the issue of history and Christianity was a profound and central core to his thinking as he encountered the ideas of continental theologians such as Troeltsch, Harnack and Bultmann. However, unlike such as these who saw the gospel authors as only preachers and missionaries not historians or biographers, Richardson argues that the history of the Church shows that such rejections enabled heresies such as Docetism, Gnosticism or Subjectivism to flourish. He states as a fact – but true to his populist style does not support it with reference or evidence, too often a failing of his writing – that investigators without a faith tend to deny that it is possible to obtain historical knowledge about Jesus, while those of faith usually argue that we can know him well. Both therefore make biased judgments based on their preconceptions. Yet this only highlights the real problem of history, which is that Christians and non-Christians not only disagree in their interpretation of the facts they also disagree about what are or are not facts. However, in historiography fact and interpretation cannot be sharply divided. The gospel authors handed down a sequence of events witnessed 'through the spectacles (or medium of interpretation)' of those authors, and modern biblical criticism had demonstrated the impossibility of straining out the simple facts of history from the interpretation which has brought the story to the reader.³² Discarding one is to discard the other, leaving us aligned with those critics who suggest the impossibility of knowing anything about the historical figure, Jesus. Here, in 1940, lies the kernel of Richardson's biblical theology, formed to countermand the arguments of modernism and scientific naturalism: the revelation in Scripture can only be discerned with a hermeneutic principle of divinely provided faith and that applies to both the original author and to the subsequent reader.

Richardson agreed with O.C. Quick that the ambiguity of the word 'revelation' meaning either *revelatio*, the act of revealing, or *revelatum*, that which is revealed, allows a fatal confusion in the Barthian view of revelation: the assumption that because the revealing act of revelation belongs to God, not man, the reality thus

³⁰For helpful discussion of the many and varied meanings of historicism see Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck, 'The Meaning of 'Historicism'', *The American Historical Review* 59.3 (April 1954), pp. 568-77.

³¹Richardson, 'The Nature', p. 169.

³²Alan Richardson, 'Biblical Theology and the Modern Mood', *Theology* 40.238 (April 1940), pp. 244-52 (250).

revealed cannot be nor become, the object of human thought or be accepted as truth by human rational or philosophical judgments. Richardson, also contra Barth, adds that the *revelatum* 'must be capable of rational and philosophical criticism just as it must be capable of expression (however imperfectly) by human beings in human language'.³³ Rejecting the idea that the *revelatum* is a series of propositional truths such as God is love he accepts that it must be expressed in such propositional form. However, the critical point is that the *revelatum* is not given to humanity in a series of propositions and neither is it a systematic doctrine, nor a metaphysic nor even a historical event or events viewable by anyone, nor a mystical experience. He suggests that the biblical answer is that the *revelatum* is:

An historical event, or series of events, apprehended by faith as having a certain significance. In this definition the words 'apprehended by faith' are of crucial importance, because where faith is lacking, even when a large measure of intellectual understanding of the historical event and its alleged significance is present, revelation has not occurred, or, in other words no *revelatum* has been received.³⁴

This definition is crucial to understanding Richardson's theology and apology from this point on. His argument illustrates the deficiency of the other conceptions of theology that he has considered because they all omit the most crucial component of all – that of divinely bestowed faith enabling interpretation of the event. He continues; 'Faith is something which God gives, not something which man creates through any "will to believe" on his part. *Revelatum* is inseparable from *revelatio*, since no one can receive the former save through God's activity in the latter.'³⁵ It is this theological paradigm which causes Richardson to reject theologies of empirical scientific reasoning, metaphysical theorizing or some forms of historicism because they all lack the critical factor which his biblical theology contains: a faith given by God and not a human creation of a reasoned will to believe. He did not reject reason *per se* because biblical theology is a theology of the Word and words as a function of rational beings are meaningless without reason. Yet it is necessary to recognize that the object of Christian faith is different from other kinds of faith, as different as is the nature of that which arouses it in us.³⁶ This, which in his major apologetic work Richardson came to term 'a faith principle',³⁷ a divine revelation in events recorded in Scripture which have been apprehended by faith, is the core of a biblical theology which Richardson found critical to his thinking as he continued to push back against the tide of secularism sweeping England.

His biblical theological paradigm was by now fixed and while he was never regarded among the early leaders of that school such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, he was seen by many in Britain as a leading advocate of the biblical theology which became prominent there in the middle third of the twentieth

³³Richardson, 'The Nature', p. 171.

³⁴Richardson, 'The Nature', p. 172.

³⁵Richardson, 'The Nature', p. 172.

³⁶Richardson, 'The Nature', p. 173.

³⁷Richardson, *Apologetics*, pp. 35-39, 99-100, 104, 230-31, 235-36, 242-43.

century.³⁸ Additionally, his populist writing style meant that biblical theology was introduced not only to those in the pews whose faith had become challenged but also to many in schools and colleges who would otherwise have been ignorant of it. During the following three decades Richardson's writings, despite making little academic impact, were translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Finnish, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese and Korean.³⁹ Always maintaining the historical reliability of the Bible but rejecting ideas of plenary inspiration and infallibility he utilized the language of the biblical theology he championed and left behind the theological liberalism he had encountered as a student and the English Modernism he met at Ripon Hall and he soon had the opportunity to present it to other young Christians.

A Durham Canonry and Two Important Monologues

In 1943 Alan Richardson became the sixth Canon Residentiary of Durham Cathedral. He also became Chaplain of St Hild's women's teacher training college where he was able to implement his strong belief in women's role in the church and to encourage some to become teachers of religion in schools. Following a number of diocesan appointments he became effectively responsible for ensuring the provision of Christian education in both church and state schools in the diocese. In the background was the preparation of the 1944 Education Act and these conjoined factors of his roles and the Act's imminence became the focus of much of his work at Durham. He was convinced that the provision of good Christian instruction in schools was the antidote to the growing decline in religious adherence caused by the attacks of scientific naturalism. His lectures in both academic and public auditoria to educate the new teachers of religion which the Act's provisions required showed a desire to instil the importance of a faith supported by a strong emphasis on Christian doctrine into anyone contemplating becoming a teacher of religious – Christian – education. In a lecture to trainee teachers of religious instruction at Newcastle in 1944 he warned them that their own faith must be orthodox and any concept of teaching 'comparative religion', must be rejected: 'Buddhism is not a live option in Newcastle! It is either Christianity or Secularism – you can't avoid this decision.'⁴⁰ Additionally at this time – which was of course the central years of the Second World War – the BBC was still a major provider of religious

³⁸See, for example, Ronald Preston, 'Foreword', in *Theology and Change*, pp. vii-xii; In the same work see also Ramsey, 'After Liberalism', pp. 1-10; David Pailin, 'Lessing's Ditch Revisited: The Problem of Faith and History', pp. 78-99 (78); See also Wilfred J. Harrington, *The Path of Biblical Theology* (Dublin and London: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), pp. 160-69; John J. Navone, *History and Faith in the Thought of Alan Richardson* (London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 26, 103, 111; James K. Mead, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods and Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), pp. 89, 125-27; Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 67, 73; Robert J. Page, *New Directions in Anglican Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1967), pp. 55-57.

³⁹John Bowden, 'The Future Shape of Popular Theology', in *Theology and Change*, pp. 11-23 (11) and confirmed in a database search of WorldCat, 1 June 2020. https://www.worldcat.org/search?qt=worldcat_org_bks&q=Alan+Richardson&fq=dt%3Abk.

⁴⁰The University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections, King's Meadow Campus, Nottingham NG7 2NR, *Papers of Alan Richardson*. PAR 1/1/15, 100.

education for the general public and schools via the medium of radio broadcasting and Richardson became a regular creator and broadcaster of those programmes.

Between 1943 and 1953, while at Durham, he published four monographs, two edited volumes, five contributions to edited volumes, seven scholarly articles and at least nine book reviews. However, his writing continued to be less than academically rigorous as he was more and more concerned with nurturing and protecting the Christian faith of the general public rather than engaging the academy. A good example of this can be found in Richardson's 1947 monograph, *Christian Apologetics*. In the book's Preface, Richardson returns to his concern with the decline in religious adherence in contemporary Western society, stating that only by engaging with scientific methodology, rather than in the fields of metaphysics or epistemology, can the Christian apologist hope to engage the enquiring mind in the present age. To that end the book would be compelled to 'consider the relationship between the sciences (including theological science) and philosophy'.⁴¹

Despite his populist style Richardson clearly believed his book had academic merit as he submitted it to the Board of the Faculty of Theology of Oxford University as evidence for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Divinity. Richardson's theology had developed since the submission of his Bachelor of Divinity thesis at Oxford University in 1940 which, while being accepted, had been judged lacking in originality of ideas.⁴² On this occasion the examiners were unanimously of the opinion that *Christian Apologetics* more than satisfied the core requirement for the degree in making 'a substantial and original contribution to the study of apologetics',⁴³ although they were far from unanimous on the merits of Richardson's argument. Leonard Hodgson, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, was impressed by Richardson's originality and noted that he was never content to simply follow other people's ideas but constantly 'worried away at the matter in his own mind until he feels that he has seen round it and through it as clearly as he can'. Hodgson found this characteristic to be especially evident in Richardson's 'presentation of what he calls the "faith-principle" which is involved in all scientific and historical enquiry'.⁴⁴

Richardson's hierarchy of theological disciplines, in which the academy follows behind apologetics and teaching in affirming Christian faith, is manifest in this book. At the very beginning, despite its academic purpose, he found space to demonstrate his pedagogical and pastoral concern for his readers. In a book that is basically a guide to why the Christian faith remains of vital importance to everyone, he advises anyone who wished to receive a 'beginners introduction to the study of Christian apologetics' to ignore the preface setting out the aims of the book and begin their reading at Chapter 1, which provides an introduction to the subject of Christian apologetics as a whole.⁴⁵ That his readers' understanding was a real issue truly pursued by Richardson is made clear by the second, and

⁴¹Richardson, *Apologetics*, p. 8.

⁴²Exeter College Archives and Special Collections, Oxford OX1 2HE. FA 4/19/2/7: 'Report of the Examiners of the Board of the Faculty of Theology, Oxford University', dated 28 November 1940.

⁴³Oxford University Archives, Bodleian Library, Oxford OX1 3BG (hereafter OUA). *Papers of the Faculty Board of Theology*. FA 4/19/2/8, p. 1.

⁴⁴OUA, FA 4/19/2/8, p. 1.

⁴⁵Richardson, *Apologetics*, p. 7.

somewhat less appreciative, of the Oxford examiners, Professor L.W. Grensted, the then Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oriel College, Oxford and Canon of Liverpool Cathedral. In his somewhat uncomplimentary judgment, Grensted noted that the book's 'inspiration is in its opening section and that its short Preface is perhaps the most striking thing about it'.⁴⁶ Richardson had recognized that his preface assumed a certain level of knowledge of Christian apologetics and once more his pedagogic instinct refused to close off his theology to the academy or the church by ensuring that readers outside of those institutions were led carefully into his apologetic thinking in the preface by subsequent chapters. As Leonard Hodgson had noted, an important thread throughout this book is Richardson's insistence that Christian apologetics does not need to justify faith over against scientific reason because the data of scientific reason too can only be properly understood by employing a principle of selection, a value judgment which he terms 'the faith principle', the categories of interpretation supplied by faith.⁴⁷ Against this, Richardson totally rejects logical positivism and its exponent's dogmatic reliance on the 'verification principle'.⁴⁸ He argues that Anselm's Christian principle of *credo ut intelligam* is evidential of the fact that reason must be justified by faith, that is, in believing something which is neither self-evident nor equally demonstrable to every rational being. Richardson's rejection of arguments that make polar opposites of scientific reason and the Christian faith together with his belief in revelation as the object of biblical events viewed via a hermeneutic of divinely bestowed faith – the faith principle – is paradigmatic of the theology underpinning his attempts to support faith under attack from scientific naturalism.

While many of Richardson's writings contain explicit or implicit references to this theological paradigm it is doubtful that he has ever presented a more concise and full illustration of the key components of it as that which is found in *Science, History and Faith* (1950). In this monograph Richardson's polemic was against scientific naturalism, outdated concepts of the interpretation of history and also evangelical fundamentalism, all of which he saw as presenting a secularist threat to the Christian faith. However, this book is once more a 'populist' work that bases its theological arguments on doctrinal affirmations supported by Richardson's key point – that it is the historicity of the biblical presentation of historical events which is the basis of Christian faith, although a hermeneutic of divinely bestowed faith is required for full comprehension. Richardson does not state explicitly in this book who his readership is, but it is implicitly obvious that he writes for anyone whose faith is struggling in the face of modernity and, perhaps even more so, anyone seeking a Christian faith. He reassures those asking how they might know God, or anyone believing that a religious experience must be had in order to know God, that this means God has already found them and he presents his answer in personal and almost homiletic terms.

⁴⁶OUA, FA 4/19/2/8, p. 2.

⁴⁷Richardson, *Apologetics*, p. 36.

⁴⁸Richardson sets out his argument rejecting logical positivism in *Christian Belief and Modern Philosophy* (Doncaster: Doncaster Grammar School, 1956), pp. 5-9 and also *Science and Belief: Two Ways of Knowing* (London: SCM Press, 1957), pp. 26-30.

If you want to find God, if you are at all in earnest in your desire to know him, then take assurance that, to this extent at least, you have already found him and know him. Or rather, to speak more accurately, God has already found you, since it is he who has led you to desire him.⁴⁹

This sets a populist tone for the book that is always present even when he discusses theological arguments. Indeed, it is possible to see the book as a series of sermons, some points of which are presented theologically, some didactically and all apologetically. Richardson engages with issues that pit his views of theology as a scientific endeavour, and the methodologies of historical investigation, against the continental *Wissenschaft*-inspired theology of Ritschl, Troeltsch and Harnack. However, typical of Richardson's writing, none of them are referenced in this book, nor is Bultmann or any other theologian against whose views he appears to present his own. For example, he counsels his readers not to rely on religious feelings.

You must not try to measure the depth of your religious life by the intensity of your feelings when you listen to a good sermon or sing hymns . . . To try to find 'religious experience' through our feelings, and thus to seek to convince ourselves that God is 'there,' is the first false step on the road to frustration and scepticism.⁵⁰

This rejection of the spiritual concepts of religious experience is equally a rebuttal of the experiential theologies of Schleiermacher and Tillich, but again neither are referenced in the book. Likewise his tentative approval of some elements in the study of comparative religion contains no reference to the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* or its followers.⁵¹ The only occasions of referencing a modern scholar within the book are found in his discussion of the necessity of salvation for humanity when he quotes the opening words of his admired friend Reinhold Niebuhr's 1939 Gifford Lectures, 'Man has always been his most vexing problem',⁵² and also a single sentence from C.H. Dodd concerning the delayed *Parousia*.⁵³

Once more Richardson's writing is not aimed at the academy and exhibits no real academic rigour. Richardson writes to educate and inform what he sees as the mistaken agnostic views of many students of science subjects, especially the natural sciences, as well as those of the general public who share the perceptions of naturalism, that science and religion are incompatible and that the natural sciences are the only legitimate sciences. As the book's title suggests, he is at pains in it to discuss three things. First, he wishes to refute the idea that there is a single scientific method such as that pursued by physicists and mathematicians. This was the mistaken view of logical positivism which had 'attempted to impose as a standard of scientific procedure an ideal of logical form and empirical control which it claimed to derive

⁴⁹Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, p. 1.

⁵⁰Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, p. 5.

⁵¹Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, pp. 43-44.

⁵²Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, p. 145.

⁵³Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, p. 170.

from the natural sciences'.⁵⁴ Second, he wishes to demonstrate that each science has its own appropriate discipline and method. Christian theology is therefore equally as scientific in its methodology as the study of chemistry or biology but its methods are closer to the scientific methods of history than those of the natural sciences. His third aim, and that which sets him apart from continental historicism is apologetic in wishing to argue that the historic events described in the Bible, which are the source of Christian doctrine, remain veiled as revelation unless interpreted by and with a divinely gifted faith.⁵⁵ This methodology provides the response to his ongoing concern with the growing secularism of many parts of previously religious British society. Contemporary belief in the replacement of religion with popular science had by this time become the common enemy of his apologetic and the populist presentation of it and his rejection of the fallacies of naturalism and logical positivism have become the crux of many of his arguments. Richardson addressed the questions of historicism in the form of whether history can be considered a scientific endeavour and this allows him to make his argument for theology to be considered a science on a par with the natural sciences.⁵⁶ His evidence for a positive answer to these questions is drawn from his biblical theology, largely from doctrinal positions and the argument from miracle, and it is there that he parts company with the historicism of Troeltsch and Harnack which rejected both.

Professor of Christian Theology

In 1953 Alan Richardson was appointed as Professor of Christian Theology at Nottingham University. His predecessor John Marsh had been Chaplain to Congregational undergraduates at Mansfield College, Oxford and was later to become its principal⁵⁷ so the Department of Theology at Nottingham would have been less than a bastion of Anglicanism. Richardson quickly began to develop an Anglican ethos utilizing his particular gift of communication of theological issues to students whether ordinands or laypeople.⁵⁸ As perhaps one of the last examples of the generalist teachers of theology, Richardson taught first-year students the Gospel of Mark, third-year students Christian Doctrine, held regular seminars on the New Testament and decided that it would assist theology students to briefly study philosophers from Aristotle to modernity.⁵⁹ He was an innovative tutor who believed that third-year exams were pointless, preferring to allow students to write what today would be seen as a thesis on a subject of their choosing.

Richardson was keen to increase both the numerical intake of students generally and, particularly, to increase the number of female students. He was aware that the Education Act of 1944, which had so powerfully impacted his work at Durham, was steadily reducing the number of Church of England Schools from 9000 to 2000 and

⁵⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (trans. Francis McDonagh; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), p. 326.

⁵⁵Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, pp. 86-94.

⁵⁶Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, pp. 37-43.

⁵⁷Elaine Kaye, 'Obituary: The Rev Professor John Marsh', *The Independent*, 9 March 1994.

⁵⁸B.H. Tolley, *The History of the University of Nottingham Vol. 2* (Nottingham: Nottingham University Press, 2001), pp. 20-21.

⁵⁹Information from my personal interviews with some of Richardson's Nottingham theology students.

therefore state schools required more teachers of religion. However, there were few teachers either interested in or trained to teach the new agreed syllabus, resulting in the steady decline of the teaching of the Christian faith in schools. This situation added to his fear of a growing public religious malaise and Richardson believed the shortage could be reduced by more female students who, while obviously not able to be ordained at this time, could be trained in theology and become the teachers of religious education in schools.

Richardson was equally keen to teach theology to male students who were called to a clerical career. A retired Anglican canon – a student ordinand at Nottingham between 1961 and 1964 – remembered Richardson's advice to him on the important place of theology in his studies. During his interview with Richardson he told him that he wished to study English Literature but Richardson replied, 'No, we need clergy who are theologically trained.' While this may seem obvious today the interviewee also remembered that it was contrary to the advice he was given by Cuthbert Bardsley, Bishop of Coventry (1956–76), who in discussing his study plans told him, 'Clergy should study anything BUT theology, perhaps something like economics.'⁶⁰ That different type of ecclesial outlook from an evangelical bishop who didn't think theological training necessary for ordination⁶¹ had been a thorn in Richardson's side as early as 1935 when in his first book he rebuked the Church for its defective theology moulded by a social outlook tied to the class interests of its more powerful officials.⁶² Further, in 1948 Richardson had castigated the evangelical authors of *The New Bible Handbook*, 24 of whom were clerics, who he felt had ignored modern biblical criticism and presented a view of the Bible giving a straightforward choice between rationalism and plenary inspiration. He was exasperated by the possible effect on young and uncertain faith: 'we deplore their reaction as it affects the young and immature, whose minds are infected by their inhibitions before they have ever had the opportunity of hearing the solution of the problem as it is now given by our Biblical Theologians.'⁶³

As the 1960s progressed and public faith was further impacted by books such as *Honest to God* and *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding*, Richardson responded by calling for and editing polemical essays from his teaching staff at Nottingham. The result was *Four Anchors from the Stern*, a small book of just four essays refuting the attacks on neo-orthodoxy by those books and others. His own contribution once more utilized his populist style in attempts to reassure public faith from the attacks of the scientific age as exemplified in *Honest to God*.

Christian talk about God is totally different from popular talk about Martians; talk about Martians is based upon inference and is purely conjectural, whereas talk about God is based upon what has actually happened in history.

⁶⁰Personal discussion with the author on 10 April 2017, at the interviewee's home in Oxfordshire.

⁶¹Bishop Cuthbert Bardsley, http://www.dioceseofcoventry.org/images/document_library/UDR02130.pdf. See also Simon Barrington-Ward, 'Bardsley, Cuthbert Killick Norman (1907–1991), Bishop of Coventry', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004. <https://www.oxforddnb.com> (accessed 28 January 2022).

⁶²Richardson, *Redemption*, p. 73.

⁶³Alan Richardson, 'The I.V.F. "New Bible Handbook"', *Religion in Education* 16.1 (1948), pp. 11–12.

Our knowledge of God begins with God's disclosure of himself in real historical situations.⁶⁴

It is perhaps unsurprising that such populist rhetoric again attracted no academic interest. However, a *Church Times* reviewer found it would be of great help to the ordinary Christian which 'whilst not presupposing a reader's specialist knowledge assumes them to be of intelligence and education'.⁶⁵ There is little doubt that Richardson would have been delighted with that review as it describes well his populist style and desire.

Conclusion

Space precludes the exposition of further examples of Richardson's work in this important period of the ecclesial and theological ferment which he believed underlay the decline in public Christian faith. However, those cited in this article demonstrate that his neo-orthodox responses to that decline were consistent throughout the middle third of the twentieth century in their desire to protect public faith from the attacks of scientific modernity.

In defending the historical doctrines of the church against those who would modernize or liberalize them as a reaction to perceived public rejection of outmoded religious concepts, Richardson nevertheless rejected unthinking traditionalism and dogmatism. He saw a clear distinction between the faith which came by hearing the word of God, creating a personal attitude to him, and the second-hand faith which comes by hearsay, the *fides historica*, which he saw as dead faith. At the 1960s height of radical Christianity in Britain, and as biblical theology of the mid-century began to be criticized he wrote: 'Second-hand faith is something which has rubbed off on us from contact with parents, teachers and other influences in our formative years. We have accepted it uncritically, but have never really made it our own.'⁶⁶ The great danger of such faith was that when it becomes challenged by being personally introduced to scientific thinking, or learning of the verification principle, or hearing humanist radio broadcasts suggesting that modern cosmology has made religion redundant, then such a faith will struggle to answer the doubts these influences will create. Television debates of that time, he noted, often discussed the large-scale decline in religious belief as though it was a truism but he argued that it was 'not genuine Christian belief . . . which is declining [but] the *fides historica* of the unauthentic multitudes which is fading away'.⁶⁷ Modern theology had rejected metaphysical concepts of God as the first cause, anthropomorphic ideas of a grandfather in heaven and a three story universe presented by a Bible of plenary inspired divine oracles.

Thereby describing the contemporary revolution in religious thinking he indicated that he held some acceptance of the arguments of *Honest to God* when

⁶⁴Alan Richardson, 'God: Our Search or His?', in Alan Richardson (ed.) *Four Anchors from the Stern: Nottingham Reactions to Recent Cambridge Essays* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 5-14 (10-11).

⁶⁵*Church Times*, 25 October 1963, p. 5.

⁶⁶Alan Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 109.

⁶⁷Richardson, *Contemporary Debate*, 111.

he added, 'Not having to acknowledge beliefs which one does not hold, and not having to go to church because of social pressures, are perhaps two twentieth-century concessions to the indubitably Christian virtue of being honest to God.'⁶⁸ Thus, Richardson's populist presentation of his apologetic based upon his biblical theology encompassing a hermeneutic of the faith principal, while orthodox was certainly not the anti-scientific traditionalism of many neo-Catholics nor of conservative evangelicalism with its ongoing belief in the plenary inspiration of the Bible. Neither was it the liberalism of Christian radicalism which had aroused much public interest and unlike most of Richardson's work, occasionally motivated a response from the academy. His populist style, creedal conformity and adherence to a biblical theology despite its decline in academic acceptance prevent Richardson from being named in the first rank of Anglican theologians in the middle of the twentieth century. However, this article demonstrates that for the person in the pew, the faith challenged student, the seeker after God or the confused listener and television watcher, Alan Richardson's clear and understandable Christian apologetics show him to be a major exemplar of the public theologian.

⁶⁸Richardson, *Contemporary Debate*, p. 112.