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Review Article

Christianity and Science at Dalhousie and King's College

Dr. Howard L. Bronson, Physicist. By Ernest Heighton. Halifax: privately printed, 1990. Pp. 558. \$44.00.

Sammy The Prince. By Leonard F. Hatfield. Hantsport: Lancelot, 1990. Pp. 177. \$9.95.

Quite recently an internationally renowned physicist resigned his Cambridge professorship to take Anglican orders. This action caused a certain stir, at least in England, as it was unprecedented in this century for such a prominent scientist to turn to the priesthood.¹ Since the middle of the nineteenth century priests have become marginal, as scientists have risen to heights of esteem. The churches have been in continuous decline, despite their attempts to accommodate themselves to the scientific triumph. As early as 1884 Bishop Frederick Temple asserted in his Bampton lectures on "The Relations Between Religion and Science," that "we cannot find that Science, in teaching Evolution, has yet asserted anything that is inconsistent with Revelation, unless we assume that Revelation was intended not to teach spiritual truth only, but physical truth also" (qtd. Young 26). Friedrich Nietzsche was more perceptive than Temple in seeing that the claims of religion and science could not be so easily reconciled, arguing that the science which had arisen out of the Christian desire to understand the created order must destroy the very dogma which had given it birth. Christianity was, to Nietzsche, in the greatest and most delicious of historical ironies, its own gravedigger (Nietzsche 159-61). The year before Temple's Bampton lectures, Nietzsche published the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Zarathustra descended from his mountain cave to proclaim the death of God.

The insecurity generated by the tension between Christianity and natural science during the later nineteenth century was very much in evidence in North America as well as Europe. In 1884, a young agriculturalist named Henry Burton Sharman attended a revival meeting in Stratford, Ontario. He had studied veterinary science at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, and as a result of his exposure to scientific method there had become an agnostic. The revivalist, H.T. Crossley, met the challenge of science head-on. He argued that the statements of Jesus were as capable of scientific proof as any laboratory experiment. The inspiration he received on that evening gave Sharman a vocation. He returned to university, eventually receiving a Ph.D. in New Testament studies in 1906 from the University of Chicago. His research there and his intellectual energies for the rest of his life were given to the task of demonstrating Crossley's proposition. Doubt would be met by a rigorous examination of the "records" of the life of Jesus to determine His true teaching, unobscured by tradition, doctrine or denominational bias. Basically, Sharman's method was to examine the Synoptic Gospels, the "records", compare them, and, through a process of questioning, determine what Jesus really said. This being made clear, individuals would have available to them an infallible guide to life. Sharman's approach was designed to appeal to Protestants brought up in the fundamentalist tradition, whose faith was threatened by the experience of education, particularly in science. He offered a new look at the Gospels, undertaken in an empirical spirit without preconceptions of any sort, whether personal, philosophical or doctrinal.

Sharman's teaching, combining as it did nineteenth-century scientific method with a liberation from theological niceties, had a considerable influence in Canadian universities, particularly during the inter-war period. He offered "Jesus as Teacher", stripped of encumbrances such as the Trinity, the Resurrection, the Virgin birth, etc. In the confusions of twentieth-century life Jesus became a guide and role model. Sharman made Christianity practical and it is hardly surprising that he had close associations with the Y.M.C.A. He was a key figure in the founding of the Student Christian Movement of Canada; study groups making use of his various books were widespread in Canada, the United States and overseas.²

One of the most important and long-lived of these study groups was that at Dalhousie. It was founded by Howard L. Bronson, professor of physics from 1910 to 1946, and conducted by him from the time of his arrival in Halifax until 1966. Bronson was a New Englander. He came to Canada in

1904, after taking a PhD at Yale, to do postdoctoral work at McGill with Ernest Rutherford. Although he could have remained at McGill, at the centre of important developments in his field, he opted instead to take up a position at Dalhousie. Ernest Heighton's biography of Bronson makes clear that Bronson was a very effective teacher who trained a number of distinguished physicists. He also provides an interesting account of the Dalhousie milieu within which Bronson worked and does full justice to his devotion to the "Iota Sigma" study groups which he led throughout his adult life. These appealed particularly to scientists. In 1948 Bronson wrote to Sharman, with whom he maintained close contact until the latter's death in 1953, ". . . I have had in my groups a rather large proportion of scientific students of considerable ability including some 20 members of our academic staff . . ." (236). Two years later he stated to another correspondent, ". . . I have had 75% of my graduate students and permanent members of the Phys. staff in my groups, and this has been very rewarding from several angles, especially as far as personal relations in the Department were concerned" (238). In a further letter written in 1961 Bronson asserted that ". . . five of the six Deans at Dalhousie and the Heads of the Physics, Chemistry, and Biology Departments have studied the records with me. Also two research professors in medicine are now leading such groups with their medical students" (230).

Dr. Heighton's biography provides the reader with much useful information, but leaves unanswered a number of important questions, such as, for example, whether Bronson's commitment to studying the "records" had an effect upon his own research, upon the development of physics at Dalhousie, and, given the number of his Iota Sigma students who rose to important positions, upon the University generally.

Bronson approached the study of physics and the "records" from the same position. In his own words, "If the methods, the techniques of proceeding are the right ones, the results will be the right ones even if one does not know in advance what they will be" (319). But how does one know whether techniques are "the right ones" with no knowledge of where one wants to go? Alice received good advice on this point from the Cheshire Cat:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"—so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."
(55)

Bronson's belief in inducing, without any "underlying assumption," conclusions from the "evidence," was clearly a hopelessly naive approach to any historical text, let alone those as ambiguous and historically removed from modern thinking as the Synoptic Gospels. Indeed, as an approach to scientific study generally, Bronson's thinking was a product of nineteenth-century empiricism; it took no account of the importance of the hypothesis in scientific activity, presupposing as it did a complete separation between subject and object that no scientist (or non-scientist) would think possible today.³

It is significant that one of Bronson's most distinguished pupils (and a member of Iota Sigma classes) has stated that he learned little about post-Newtonian physics while at Dalhousie. His studies at an American graduate school came as a revelation (Axelrod 99-101). Is it possible that Bronson's religion made it difficult for him to think through the implications of the new physics not only for his own discipline but for his lifelong commitment to the "records"? There is no indication that Bronson's teaching prevented his students from achieving success in their careers as physicists; nevertheless, the question remains as to what effect the unusual connection between natural science and Bible study at Dalhousie had upon the intellectual life of the University in the first half of this century. Heighton has done an enormous amount of work and assembled much material, not only in his biography but in the collection of documents he has donated to the Dalhousie University Archives; his researches will help to make possible a better understanding of Dalhousie during Bronson's era.

The search for "Jesus as Teacher" was doomed to failure because of its manifest intellectual inadequacies. A more enduring response to the decline in traditional Christian belief was the emergence of a Christianity focussed upon the humanitarian aspects of Christ's teaching. Like the Sharmanite pursuit of "Jesus as Teacher," this meant a turning away from the transcendental and eschatological aspects of the Christian tradition; the goal, however, has been to build the new Jerusalem on earth. In the case of the Church of England, it was asserted as early as 1897 at the Lambeth

Conference that "a Christian community as a whole is responsible for the character of its own economic and social order" (Roper 270).

In this process of reorienting Christianity towards social goals, sociology, one of the numerous progeny of nineteenth-century scientific method, has played an important role. It is not surprising that the key figure in these developments as they influenced the Anglican Church in Nova Scotia was both a sociologist and a clergyman, Samuel Henry Prince. Prince served as a professor of sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Science at Dalhousie and King's from 1924 to 1955 as well as teaching in the King's Divinity School.

He saw social science as a means to human betterment and played a key role in improving the deplorably low level of social services in Nova Scotia during the first half of the twentieth century, whether in housing, mental health, education of the mentally handicapped, prison conditions or social welfare. He was also instrumental in the founding of the Maritime School of Social Work in 1941. Prince combined these extra-university activities with a heavy teaching load as well as intensive participation in the life of the Anglican Church.

Prince understood clearly, as a trained social investigator, that the work of private philanthropic agencies could not be a substitute for public activity in meeting social needs. Nevertheless, in an address given on the occasion of his retirement as Chairman of the Nova Scotia Diocesan Council for Social Service, he expressed his belief that the churches still had a role although a changed one:

We have come to re-assess the Church's task as not so much the administration of philanthropy and the running of institutions and social enterprises, but rather in intelligent cooperation with community organizations equipped with trained social personnel. At the same time it becomes the Church's responsibility to warm and to soften the harsher aspects of economic and social change and to ensure that social agencies are animated by Christian principles, are preserving the human touch, and are immune from the criticism that they represent: "Organized charity, scrimped and iced/In the name of a cautious, statistical Christ." (Hatfield 129)

Leonard F. Hatfield, Prince's first graduate student in sociology and a former Bishop of Nova Scotia, has written a biography which conveys his subject's decency and humanity as well as his extraordinary range of public activities. Although he establishes Prince's importance as a force for social

change in Nova Scotia, he does not provide a sufficient context within which the reader can understand his contributions to the community, the Anglican church and academia. Little idea is given of Prince's inner life, or the development of his thought. For example, Bishop Hatfield provides scant information about Prince's six years in New York, where he was first a graduate student in sociology at Columbia, and, after the completion of his Ph.D., a part-time lecturer. Apart from being given the name of his supervisor, the reader receives no insight either into the influences to which he was exposed at one of the great centres of American sociology, or his response to them. Bishop Hatfield points out that Prince's dissertation on the Halifax explosion was published by Columbia University and is recognized today as a pioneering study in the sociology of disasters. He fails, however, to mention that Prince did no further scholarly work of importance during the rest of his life. Presumably he sacrificed such endeavors to his work as a social reformer. One wonders whether this was an easy or as natural a choice as *Sammy The Prince* makes it seem.

Prince's activities after returning to Nova Scotia touched upon many aspects of the life of the province and must have involved many difficulties. Bishop Hatfield makes no attempt to look at these labors in any larger context; the difficulties are only hinted at, but not explored. The book's inadequacy is well illustrated by Bishop Hatfield's treatment of Prince's work as a professor at Dalhousie and King's. In the case of King's, the question of his role as an evangelical in a college with tractarian leanings is passed over in silence. It would be interesting, for example, to know Prince's position on the strife over Divinity instruction that agitated King's in the 1920s, especially as his close friend Archdeacon W. J. Armitage was one of the protagonists.⁴ Bishop Hatfield says nothing at all about Prince's role in the Faculty of Arts and Science at Dalhousie and Kings. It is unfortunate that the biography of an academic associated with two universities for over thirty years provides so little insight into his work at either one of them. It is unfortunate, too, that one of Prince's major achievements, the creation of the Maritime School of Social Work, is dispatched in eight pages.

In *Sammy The Prince* a stainless character moves from one achievement to another, impeded here and there by the occasional problem. Such a treatment may be uplifting, and true to a certain tradition of Victorian clerical biography, but is inadequate to a person who must have been more complex and interesting than Bishop Hatfield makes him. Piety, though a

virtue in the clergy, is dangerous to biography. It is to be hoped that in time a better life of Prince will be written than this exercise in eulogy. The book lacks footnotes, a bibliography and an index.

NOTES

1. J. C. Polkinghorne, FRS, Professor of Mathematical Physics, 1968-79. After theological study at Westcott House, he served in the parochial ministry before becoming Dean and Chaplain of Trinity Hall in 1986. He became President of Queens' College, Cambridge in 1989.
2. See, for example, H. B. Sharman, *Jesus as Teacher* (New York: Harper, 1935). This, like his other books, went through a number of printings.
3. See, for example, P. B. Medawar's essay on "Hypothesis and Imagination," in *The Art of the Soluble* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 147-73.
4. See Henry Roper and James W. Clark, "Religion and Intellectual Freedom on the Dalhousie Campus: The Case of Norman J. Symons," *Dalhousie Review*, 69 (1989-90), 183-84, for a brief discussion of the situation at King's during the late 1920s.

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