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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

WILLIAM PERKINS AND THE ORIGINS OF REFORMED CASUISTRY

by IAN BREWARD

DR. IAN BREWARD, Professor of Church History in Knox Theological Hall, Dunedin, and in the Faculty of Theology of the University of Otago, completed a course of research on William Perkins at the University of Manchester a few years ago under the direction of Professor Gordon Rupp. At the conclusion of his course the Editor, as Dean of the Manchester Faculty of Theology, presented him for the degree of Ph.D.; it is a pleasure now to present him to readers of *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*.

CASUISTRY is out of theological fashion in Protestant churches. It is regarded as a legalistic perversion of the Gospel ethic and the insights of the Reformers. Consequently the Protestant casuistry of the seventeenth century gets a bad press. Karl Barth is typical when he suggests that tendencies to legalism within Reformed churches had reached such a pitch by the end of the sixteenth century that one William Perkins "was willing and able to write a book *De casibus conscientiae* in which he gave a systematic account of the correct individual decisions enjoined upon the Christian".¹ Martin Schmidt discussed Perkins' theology of conscience in an article entitled "Bibilizismus und natürliche Theologie in der Gewissenslehre des englischen Puritanismus", published in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* during 1951. He also suggested that Perkins' works reveal a considerable move away from the Reformers towards what was later to be called Pietism. This article attempts to explore some of the reasons for the change.

The Reformers rejected many of the presuppositions and most of the mediaeval practice of pastoral care. Priestly mediation of grace, compulsory confession and penance, prescribed by canon law, or suggested by casuists, was replaced by a Biblically-based direction of conscience, and an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Conscience was a constant and only a bad conscience was obedient to men rather than God. William Tyndale sketched the implications with characteristic vigour. Men no longer had to run to priests for advice and say,

¹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3/4 (Edinburgh, 1961), p. 8.

Sir, I pray you, what say ye to this case and to that; and is not this lawful, and may not I so do, and so, well enough? Ask thine own conscience, what thou mayest or oughtest to do. Wouldest thou men did so with thee? Then do it. . . . In all cases, examine thy conscience and ask her what is to be done, in all doubts between thy neighbour and thee; and she will teach thee, except thou be more filthy than a swine.²

Such confrontation with conscience could be demoralizing as well as liberating. Many were unable to live at that spiritual level and continued their old patterns, while the scrupulous often found the burden of individual decision before God too much and turned to men for additional guidance beyond that provided by Word and their own conscience. All the Reformers conducted a voluminous pastoral correspondence. Such letters were read by many beside their original recipients, because of the pastoral good sense they contained. Within a few years of Luther's death a selection of his letters was published for general edification.³ Study of such correspondence reveals that certain principles were followed, notably the direction of men's thoughts away from themselves to the God they wished to serve. Judicious use of Scripture reinforced theological insight and sanctified common sense. Issues were clarified rather than decisions made, because the Reformers believed that God was the only Lord of conscience, and had no desire to impose a new legalism.

An extension of this particular pastoral advice can be found in discussions of moral problems that occurred in their biblical expositions and theological works. Peter Martyr, for instance, discussed the lawfulness of flight from persecution and William Tyndale translated a little work of Johannes Oecolampadius on the question of flight from the plague.⁴ No one felt that this was incompatible with the bases of Reformation theology and loyalty to Scripture. A good conscience needed to be informed. Such advice formed part of that instruction of conscience which prompted the writing of so many catechisms during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The early hope that the gospel would create its own forms and vanquish its foes had proved to be unrealistic. Bishop Jewel had said,

Let them give the Gospel free passage: let the truth of Jesus Christ give his clear light, . . . and then shall they forthwith see how all

² W. Tyndale, *Expositions and notes on sundry portions of the Holy Scriptures* (Cambridge, 1849), pp. 118-119.

³ T. G. Tappert, *Luther's letters of spiritual counsel* (London, 1954), p. 22.

⁴ P. Martyr, *The commonplaces* (London, 1583), 2: 13: 38-43.

these shadows straight will vanish and pass away at the light of the Gospel.⁵

In fact the shadows proved to be very substantial realities that threatened the life of the Reformation churches throughout Europe. By the end of the sixteenth century it had become clear that reformation was a task of the greatest magnitude, even in a small city-state like Geneva. Expand the task into an area the size of Saxony, or seek to change a nation, as in England, and the problems became near overwhelming. One acute observer saw that merely to contend for the great principles of the Gospel, and to ignore the seemingly unimportant and prosaic details of instruction and administration, meant "a famine of godliness hath followed in many places, and out of that famine a grievous spiritual plague".⁶ Nothing had adequately replaced confession for the majority who lacked the self-awareness needed for scrupulous self-examination.

William Ames perhaps exaggerated the gravity of the English situation at the turn of the century, but similar care for detail was virtually forced on all the Reformers. Not only did they have to concern themselves with the provision of schools and universities and the instruction of the young in the principles and ethics of the Christian faith, they had also to organize the churches which emerged once it became clear that reform and communion with Rome were incompatible. Liberation from Roman bondage was not enough. Sectarian extremists drew the most alarming consequences from the doctrines of Christian freedom, the priesthood of all believers, the authority of the Bible and the prevailing eschatology. Lutherans and Calvinists alike saw it was imperative to safeguard and consolidate existing gains, not see them dissipated by individualism or the vagaries of secular rulers. The result was the *Kirchenordnungen* of the German cities and principalities, the *Ordonnances* of Calvin and books like *De regno Christi* written by Bucer to guide the course of the English Reformation. In the Reformed churches this consolidation was linked with the third use of the Law and the insistence that sanctification followed justification. While the contrast between Lutheran and Reformed emphases must not be overdrawn, it is broadly true to say that Reformed theologians and churchmen were more interested in the relation of theology and ethics than their Lutheran counterparts who placed little emphasis on the Law as a Christian norm. The work of Thomas Venatorius on ethics found no Lutheran imitator.

⁵ J. Jewel, *Works—Apology* (Cambridge, 1845-50), p. 68.

⁶ W. Ames, *Conscience, with the power and cases thereof* (1639), To the reader.

It was Lambert Daneau of Geneva who produced a work called *Ethices Christianae* in 1577, and it was in a Reformed environment that William Perkins (1558-1602) wrote the first handbook of Protestant casuistry at the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁷

There were additional factors in the English situation which encouraged this development. Economic and social changes combined to produce considerable mobility between classes, to weaken the bonds of rural society, as well as to encourage the emergence of a literate and status-conscious 'middle class'. Printers had an excellent market for improving literature and even a cursory study of Tudor writing reveals a strongly moralistic tone, which reflects the uncertainties of a rapidly changing society.⁸ Grammar school education was classical in content, and teachers made considerable use of the morally edifying sections of ancient writers. Humanist ideals were closely linked with stress on right behaviour and in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge Aristotle's philosophy and ethics remained part of the curriculum of every student. Even those who followed the philosophical and logical simplifications of Peter Ramus did not eschew a strong ethical interest. Had not even Ramus taught that, "*Theologia est doctrina bene vivendi*"?⁹ Earlier Reformers like Peter Martyr had lectured on Aristotle's *Ethics* without any sense of incongruity. There was simply no equivalent to him and they preferred to Christianize Aristotle rather than ignore him.¹⁰ In this environment it is not surprising to find Francis Bacon complaining in 1589 about the lack of exact spiritual instruction corresponding to the innumerable books telling one how to be a gentleman. Many English preachers did not "draw their directions down *ad casus conscientiae*, that a man may be warranted in his particular actions whether they be lawful or not".¹¹ Henry Holland, writing as late as 1601, agreed. Luther, Tossanus, Rhegius, had excellent forms of consolation for troubled consciences and many English pastors had ministered to afflicted consciences with some success. Yet Holland felt "we rather guess uncertainly to apply good remedies, and speeches

⁷ W. Köhler, *Dogmengeschichte*, 2 vols. (Zurich, 1951), 2: 133; P. De Felice, *Lambert Daneau* (Paris, 1881), pp. 172-85.

⁸ L. B. Wright, *Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1935), gives an admirable survey. Cf. R. Kelso, *The doctrine of the English gentleman* (Urbana, 1929), for one aspect.

⁹ P. Ramus, *Commentariorum de religione Christiana* (Frankfurt, 1576), Lib. IV, 6.

¹⁰ Martyr, *op. cit.*, *Life*, sig. Qq iib.

¹¹ Quoted by W. E. Houghton, *The formation of Thomas Fuller's Holy and Profane State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), p. 72.

unto the sick, than know how to proceed by any certain rule of art and well grounded practice".¹² This was particularly serious to those with Puritan leanings, because they had particularly sensitive, even over-developed, consciences, which thought of Christian life in terms of perfect obedience to the Law. Such piety became increasingly widespread in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign, though it had much earlier antecedents.¹³

To add to the problem, there was the manifest inadequacy of existing church government to deal with pastoral and disciplinary problems in a manner which did justice to the pastoral and theological insights of the Reformers. The ecclesiastical courts of the mediaeval period had survived almost unchanged. They were usually inefficient, occasionally corrupt and almost always frustrating, particularly to laity entangled in the toils of their matrimonial and probate jurisdiction. Such matters made it almost impossible for the courts to attend to spiritual problems with any degree of consistency, expedition or regularity. Episcopal and archidiaconal visitations were more effective, but tended to concentrate on externals and often had to rely on the High Commission to implement their findings or punish the delinquent.¹⁴ It is no wonder that sensitive English churchmen looked enviously at the discipline and order of other reformed churches where local discipline was exercised by pastors and elders, not by remote courts. The Marian exiles corresponded copiously with their continental hosts and mentors, but by 1570 these links were decreasing in importance and discontent with the established ecclesiastical order bubbled up in the Puritan movement led by Thomas Cartwright.

The Puritans attacked the establishment on two fronts—in Parliament and in the church. They believed that reform of polity was essential if more satisfactory standards of preaching and pastoral care were to be achieved. While Parliament debated and the Queen and Bishops stalled, a limited measure of unofficial reform was attempted through the classical movement.¹⁵ Groups

¹² R. Greenham, *The Workes* (London, 1601), To the reader.

¹³ Cf. J. Bradford, *Writings*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1848-53), 2. xxix; M. M. Knappen, *Two Elizabethan Puritan diaries* (Chicago, 1933); F. E. Stoeffler, *Rise of Evangelical pietism* (Leiden, 1966).

¹⁴ R. Peters, *Oculus episcopi* (Manchester, 1963), discusses the Arch-deaconry of St. Albans; C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism* (London, 1964), pp. 219ff., gives an entertaining and important account of their working.

¹⁵ P. Collinson, *The Puritan Classical movement* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London University, 1957), is indispensable for the whole period. [Published in 1967 under the title *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* by Jonathan Cape and the University of California Press.]

of ministers would meet for mutual edification and discussion of how to advance the Gospel in their area. Fortunately the minute-book of one such group has survived—that of the Dedham *Classis*.¹⁶ This reveals that attempts were made to exert some sort of discipline, though these were only as effective as the sanctions of conscience and advice. Through the organizing ability of John Field these local groups were linked on a county and national basis and as such posed a very serious threat to the existing government of the church, the more so because some of the leading men in the classical movement were unequivocally Presbyterian in their sympathies. The death of Field in 1588, the success of Archbishop Whitgift and Bishop Bancroft in crushing the classical movement and the failure of the parliamentary protest placed many Puritans in a quandary. Some of the more extreme proponents of reform like Francis Johnson went into exile and separatism. Others, who had associated with the classical movement because of the possibilities of pastoral reform which it offered, decided that there was still a place for them within the Church of England so long as they could preach and teach the essentials of the gospel.

Much of the support for the classical movement had come from those like Richard Greenham, Richard Rogers and William Perkins who had not subscribed to the *Discipline*, but were passionately concerned with the improvement of pastoral and ministerial standards. Greenham was famous for his skill with afflicted consciences. In addition divinity students lived with him to gain practical experience of pastoral work.¹⁷ Such activity was perfectly legal and offered a way of revolutionary reform that need not attract the unwelcome attention of nervous ecclesiastical authorities anxious to crush anything savouring of Puritan subversion. This pastoral side of the classical movement appeared clearly in the Dedham *Classis* which spent considerable time in the discussion of cases of conscience, or as we would say 'pastoral problems'.¹⁸ It was this side of Puritan reforming instincts that, above all else, provided the environment from which Reformed casuistry was to emerge in systematic form through the work of William Perkins. Many other English clergy engaged in the direction of conscience which Perkins was to systematize.¹⁹ Even if the English conscience was more sensitive than its Continental counterpart, it was comforted and directed by methods and principles which had been well-tryed

¹⁶ Edited by R. G. Usher, *The Presbyterian movement in the reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1908).

¹⁷ Rylands MS 524 gives an account of Greenham.

¹⁸ Usher, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 31, 48, 71.

and stemmed from the practice and writings of Luther, Calvin, Bucer and Martyr.²⁰

One final factor which perhaps helped to crystallize casuistry from fluid Puritan practice was the criticism of Roman Catholic writers. Richard Rogers defended the production of his voluminous *Seven treatises* in 1603 by mentioning that "the Papists cast in our teeth, that we have nothing set out for the certain and daily direction of a Christian".²¹ Though desire for such daily direction may appear to be a lamentable confession of immaturity, a study of the cases tried by ecclesiastical courts and the occasional outbursts by parish ministers about the ignorance of their flock suggests that considerable attention needed to be paid to the needs of weaker brethren if the Reformation was to be embodied in every level of society.²² Thomas Hill, writing in 1600, believed that this was one of the great advantages of being a Roman Catholic.

And besides all this there are taught *Cases of conscience* in which is set down, what is sin, and what is not: the differences of sins, which great, which lesser, etc., which is a most fruitful and profitable kind of knowledge, and therefore is much studied and practised by Catholic priests, and divines, who teach the people thereby to rule, to order their lives and actions. Neither doth the Protestant meddle with these matters of conscience, but freighteth his ship only with faith, and never beateth his brain about sins, for he thinketh none to be imputed to such predestinated, as they all ween themselves to be, which causeth the people their followers to be utterly ignorant of the nature, differences, and quality of sins, and consequently nothing fearful, or stayed by any conscience to commit the same.²³

Perkins was the key figure in the rally of Puritan forces that took place in the last decade of Elizabeth's reign. His writings replaced those of Calvin and Beza at the top of the religious best-seller lists and from his strategic position in Cambridge he influenced countless young men destined for the ministry of the Church of England. He was typical of the moderate Puritanism that was mainly interested in pastoral renewal of the Church of England. Though he had brushed with the University authorities

¹⁹ T. Wilcox, *Large letters* (1589); S. Clarke, *Marrow of ecclesiastical historie* (London, 1654), p. 840, mentions Nowell, Dean of St. Paul's; R. Bolton, *An instruction for the right comforting of afflicted consciences* (London, 1635), p. 227, on Greenham.

²⁰ J. D. Benoit, *Calvin, directeur d'âmes* (Strasbourg, 1947), discusses Calvin. J. Courvoisier, *La notion d'église chez Bucer* (Paris, 1933), pp. 97-117, discusses Bucer's pastoral ideals.

²¹ R. Rogers, *Seven treatises* (London, 1603), Preface, sig. Avia.

²² J. S. Purvis, *Tudor parish documents* (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 194-201.

²³ T. Hill, *A quatron of reasons* (Antwerp, 1600), p. 79.

over ceremonies in his younger days, and preferred the freedom of a Lectureship at Great St. Andrews to the conformity imposed by a parish, he never questioned that the Church of England was anything other than "a true and holy form of serving God".²⁴ He believed that in disputes about polity it was the Papist who profited, and that once truth was confessed, "we must set ourselves to build the church".²⁵ He therefore refused to subscribe to the *Discipline* drawn up by Travers and concentrated on edification rather than the interminable sketching of ecclesiastical blueprints.²⁶ This attitude was related to his insistence that ministers had to do with the spiritual regiment and the matters of conscience, faith, Word and Sacraments that belonged to it. Their task was to rule by counsel and persuasion. It was the magistrate's task to punish evildoers and administer the temporal regiment.²⁷ If the magistrate was not fulfilling his duties, the church and ministry must wait until God moved his heart. In the interim there was no excuse for neglecting the tasks that lay to hand. The care and direction of individual's consciences, preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments gave ample scope for the work of the ministry, even if the church lacked "thrones of ecclesiastical jurisdiction for the reprehending and punishing of all those sins which a civil court reacheth not unto".²⁸ Such teaching was a clear departure from the earlier Puritan insistence that discipline was a mark of the church.²⁹ It reflects the changed circumstances of the Puritan party and was an attempt to salvage individual pastoral care when national reform had proved impossible and undesirable. This was both the movement's strength and weakness. The authorities could be bypassed, but the only authority of this pastoral care was its appeal to the conscience of its subjects. Despite the fact that Puritans like Perkins abhorred individualism, this method of meeting the situation eventually contributed substantially to the development of a sect-mentality, because it could only work amongst those who agreed to be bound by it. This tendency was reinforced by the disintegration of the old type of community based on locality

²⁴ W. Perkins, *The Workes* (London, 1626-31), 3.389. There is no modern and complete study of Perkins. J. J. Van Baarsel, *William Perkins* (The Hague, 1912), and H. C. Porter, *Reformation and reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1958), are the most satisfactory published treatments.

²⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, 2.324.

²⁶ T. Fuller, *Church history of Britain*, 3 vols. (London, 1837), 3.9. 121.

²⁷ Perkins, *Workes*, 3.536-538.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.458; 3.293.

²⁹ W. H. Freere and C. E. Douglas, *Puritan manifestoes* (London, 1907), p. 9; S. J. Knox, *Walter Travers* (London, 1962), p. 115.

and status, and its replacement by a society based on voluntary association.

Such then were the background factors which contributed to Perkins' interest in resolving cases of conscience. The components of his theology also turned his interests in that direction. He shared in that re-definition of grace and predestination which sharpened the problem of how one knew if one was elect. What for Calvin had been a matter to be treated with considerable reserve became a pastoral commonplace in the writings of scholars like Perkins who sought to popularize Calvinism for the common people. He set himself the task of solving the question of election by defining how much grace sufficed to save a man, and advised in great detail how this grace could be recognized. In works like *A graine of musterd seede*, or *A treatise tending unto a declaration whether a man be in the estate of grace or in the estate of damnation*, Perkins analysed the soul to point out the sparks of grace that God intended to be blown into the flame of assurance, at times coming perilously close to saying that salvation could be willed. Assurance did not exclude remnants of doubt, but Perkins almost implied it was the Christian's right, rather than a gift.

Perkins had a tremendous reputation as a doctor of conscience which led people from all over the country to consult him, presumably on Sundays, which he devoted to resolution of cases of conscience.³⁰ In addition he had a passion for making abstruse doctrines live in the lives of ordinary people. He believed that, "theology is the science of living blessedly for ever".³¹ His extraordinarily wide-ranging theological activity was all directed to this end, so that his theology is quite rightly called practical theology. Consequently cases of conscience (or in modern terms 'problems of practical Christian living') occur in almost all his works, whether he is discussing the nature of the ministry, refuting Roman errors, or seeking to guide the walk and conversation of ordinary believers.³²

The final interest that turned his thoughts in the direction of a Reformed casuistry was his concern that the Church of England should be both Catholic and Reformed. Almost all his works contain oblique or explicit references to the errors of Rome, as well as positive exposition and analysis of Biblical and Reformed truth. He warned constantly of the danger of reverting to Rome through uncritical use of reason and human writings, particularly those

³⁰ Perkins, *Workes*, 3 (Jude, To the reader).

³¹ *Ibid.*, I. II.

³² *Ibid.*, I. 440 ff.; I. 605.

of the schoolmen. Perkins knew that there were many matters which could only be read of in the schoolmen, and used them frequently himself, but was anxious that immature students were not led astray by their sophistries. Towards the end of his life he wrote a work entitled *Problema de Romanae fidei ementito catholicismo*, in which he set out methods of patristic interpretation that would enable students to sift scholastic wheat from chaff. His *Cases of conscience* were probably produced for the same reason—to refute the errors of Roman casuistry and use its valuable aspects for the strengthening of the Reformed faith so that it could be truly Catholic in its scope and depth. It is most important to bear this background in mind when the significance of Perkins' *Cases of conscience* is finally assessed. They are the systematization of a life-long pastoral practice and reflect both Reformed traditions of pastoral care and the peculiar problems of the Church of England. Ames mentions that

this part of prophecy hath hitherto been less practised in the schools of the prophets, because our captains were necessarily enforced to fight always in the front against the enemies to defend the faith, and to purge the floor of the church; so that they could not plant and water the fields and vineyards as they desired.³³

Perkins not only planted and watered. His casuistry was yet another weapon against Rome, which had seen a notable revival of moral theology because of the Tridentine reforms and re-awakened interest in Aquinas. The enormously learned and subtle commentaries of Domingo Banez, Dominic Soto and Bartolomeo Medina on those parts of the *Summa Theologica* which dealt with moral theology exerted a profound influence on later Roman Catholic pastoral theology. Unfortunately they did nothing to overcome the division that had developed between casuistry and the other branches of theology during the mediæval period. Popularizations of their huge tomes, such as Gregory Sayrus' *Flores decisionum*, made matters worse by omitting their qualifications. The result was that Roman Catholic moral theology and casuistry took little account of living theology and ethics, was often over-subtle and was gravely encumbered with notions that were derived from jurisprudence and canon law.³⁴ Perkins attacked Roman case-divinity because it bound men's consciences where God loosed them, and *vice versa*.³⁵

³³ Ames, *op. cit.*, To the reader.

³⁴ B. Häring and L. Vereecke, "La théologie morale de St. Thomas" in *Nouvelle revue théologique*, 1955.

³⁵ Perkins, *Workes*, I. 530.

Despite its traditional title, *Cases of conscience*, Perkins' book had little in common with contemporary Roman Catholic treatments with a similar label. It reflected a complete change of theological direction; away from questions about sacramental grace and its transmission, to the pastoral problems of justification. Certainly there are links with and dependence on mediaeval theologians. The same could be said about Reformation theology in general, for it was not so much a new creation as a fresh mixture of old ingredients. One of the most obvious links is Perkins' attempt to relate moral and pastoral theology with systematic theology. Instead of using a Thomist basis, he began with Reformed theology. From this foundation he sought to relate what had already been done in a fragmentary way to consciously developed theological and ethical principles. He laid no claim to finality. "I will only (as it were) walk by the banks of it, and propound the heads of doctrine, that thereby I may occasion others, to consider and handle the same more at large."³⁶

His discussion of two other matters that were intimately related to his final synthesis illustrates very clearly the manner in which he modified both Catholic and Reformation theology. Effective care of conscience depended on having a clear idea of the nature of conscience. Previous Reformers had not discussed the notion systematically and in detail, although two brief treatments existed in English.³⁷ Perkins took a modified Thomist position, teaching that conscience was in the understanding not in the affections, "a part of the understanding in all reasonable creatures, determining of their particular actions either with them or against them".³⁸ Instead of using the mediaeval distinction between *synteresis* and *syneidesis*, he adopted Martyr's terminology of *theoretical* and *practical* understanding, the former of which gave an understanding of natural law, the latter then applying this to individual decisions.³⁹ Schmidt is mistaken when he suggests that Perkins here provided the basis (hitherto lacking) for a natural theology. Perkins was quite explicit in his departure from mediaeval theologians. They had taught that *synteresis* was not corrupted by the Fall and thus provided the basis for a natural theology. Perkins adopted the Reformed position and taught that conscience only had sufficient

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.2.

³⁷ J. Woolton, *Of the conscience* (London, 1576); A. Hume, *Ane treatise of conscience* (Edinburgh, 1594).

³⁸ T. Aquinas, *Summa theologica* (London, 1920-25), I,q 79. a 13. ad 1-3.

³⁹ Martyr, *op. cit.*, 3. 5. 8.

knowledge of God to render man inexcusable.⁴⁰ Consequently he rejected the contention of Aquinas that conscience was equivalent to knowledge or judgement. It was a supernatural faculty, the vice-regent of God and superior to reason, though without the enlightenment of God its reasoning was unreliable and its conclusions faulty.⁴¹ Mediaeval distinctions between the various types of conscience were therefore irrelevant. Conscience was either good or bad. If Perkins spoke of a good conscience never leading astray, it was not because he believed it was an autonomous guide, in which we can see modern subjectivism announcing itself as Schmidt claims. A good conscience was obtained only by regeneration and kept by implicit obedience to the Word of God written in Scripture. "Whatsoever we enterprise or take in hand, we must first search whether God give us liberty in conscience, and warrant to do it. For if we do otherwise conscience is bound presently to charge us of sin before God."⁴²

Perkins' final modification of mediaeval teaching on conscience followed from the last quotation. Only God could bind conscience. Human law, either secular or ecclesiastical, was binding only insofar as it agreed with the Word of God. The power of human authorities was external and was to be obeyed for the sake of order only in matters indifferent.⁴³ This insistence on the liberty of conscience did not mean licence. It was intended to protect conscience from a clutter of non-essentials that hampered its ability to see vital issues clearly. The change of emphasis and direction is clear, and the source of this is plainly Reformation theology. Yet there were differences from the teaching of the Reformers. Perkins wrote far more about conscience and its problems and placed more emphasis on the getting and keeping of a good conscience than other sixteenth-century Reformed theologians. It is a difficult question to decide how much this is due to Perkins' concern with the pathology of conscience and how much due to a shift in theological emphasis—towards anthropocentrism.

The self-seeking that could be given reign by ignoring the Godward reference in Perkins' teaching on the liberty of conscience was further kept in check by his teachings on equity. This had only been briefly discussed by his predecessors. Luther and Calvin linked it with natural ethics, Martyr introduced it where there

⁴⁰ Schmidt, *op. cit.*, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 1951, p. 217; Perkins, *Workes*, 3.173.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.462; 1.517.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.519.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.529-31.

was no law. Wolfgang Musculus connected it with the gift of the Spirit, but did not develop the idea.⁴⁴ Perkins adapted the teaching of Aquinas who had related equity to the inadequacies of positive law. However, instead of deriving equity from the superiority of natural over positive law, Perkins based it on the priority of the Scriptures over all human law, and related this in turn to the redemptive action of God.⁴⁵ Equity was defined as "a rare and excellent virtue, whereby men use a true mean, and an equal moderation in all their affairs . . . for the maintaining of justice and the preservation of peace".⁴⁶ It did not only apply in the temporal regiment, but also in all men's words and deeds. This was because it reflected the love of God to men, "The more that a Christian is rooted in true love, the more infirmities he will pass by."⁴⁷ Salvation itself "depends upon the practice of this duty, yet not as a cause, but as a sign, or an effect of salvation".⁴⁸ This extension of equity's meaning highlights the increasing importance Reformed theologians placed on good works as a testimony to salvation. Perkins left no theological stone unturned to drive home the relationship between faith and action, but always attempted to maintain the priority of faith.

These modifications in mediaeval concepts suggest that Kirk is mistaken when he claims Reformed casuistry was based on mediaeval models and largely indebted to mediaeval authorities.⁴⁹ Perkins' Protestant heritage and environment decisively shaped the *Cases of conscience*. Careful examination of this work demonstrates substantial differences from mediaeval and Roman Catholic moral theology and casuistry. While he admitted that in the Church of Rome "a man may hear many things concerning moral virtues handled soundly," Ames summed up well when he suggested that the situation in which Perkins found himself demanded that "other things be taught, and the same things, after another manner".⁵⁰

Comparison of Perkins' book with mediaeval and contemporary

⁴⁴ Köhler, *op. cit.*, 2. 192; J. Calvin, *Institutes* (Edinburgh, 1843), 4.20.16; Martyr, *op. cit.*, 4. 14. I; W. Musculus, *Commonplaces* (London, 1562), 117b-118a.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *op. cit.* I. II. q 80, ad 5; q 96, a 6 ad 3; Perkins, *Workes*, 2. 441.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. 436.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. 442.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2. 446.

⁴⁹ K. Kirk, *Conscience and its problems* (London, 1948), p. 202; cf. G. L. Mosse, *The Holy pretence* (Oxford, 1957), p. 46, for a parallel to contemporary Roman Catholic casuistry.

⁵⁰ Ames, *op. cit.*, To the reader.

Roman Catholic treatments illustrates the fundamental changes that had taken place. A fifteenth century *Penitentiale* now in Pembroke College, Cambridge, once owned by Lancelot Andrewes, discussed penance, confession, satisfaction, the seven deadly sins, theological and cardinal virtues, the substance and accidents of sin, irregularity, the sacraments and matrimonial problems.⁵¹ Azor's massive *Institutionem moralis* which appeared in 1600 can be said to mark the beginnings of modern Roman Catholic moral theology. It treated human actions, conscience and its problems, affections, habits, virtues, original justice, sin and the deadly sins, law, priesthood, worship, precepts of the church and concluded with an exhaustive account of sin based upon the Decalogue which was far more legalistic and technical than anything found in Perkins. Certainly Perkins discussed the nature of sin and confession, the validity of the sacraments, the validity of oaths and the problems of marriage, but these were not central to his treatment. He was basically concerned with justification, not sacramental grace, and therefore wrote on matters which never appeared in Roman Catholic handbooks on cases of conscience.

Perkins' *Cases of conscience* was divided into three parts. The first discussed the nature of sin, what a man must do to be saved and how assurance was gained and kept, because a good conscience was the basis of the Christian life seen from the human point of view. In the second section he set out the information which would ensure that conscience was rightly informed. This has no parallel in Roman Catholic casuistry. He established the existence of God, the divinity of Christ and the authority of Scripture before he went on to consider how God was to be worshipped. Only with these issues clarified did Perkins then turn to discuss ethics and virtue, which were based on revelation from first to last, not on natural virtue. Unfortunately this section is not complete. Possibly Perkins died or else his editors were unable to establish a satisfactory text, and so left the reader ignorant of what Perkins intended to say about man's duties in family, commonwealth and church.

Perkins did not aim to produce a vast Protestant *Summa* which covered in exhausting detail every conceivable sin that a minister could meet in his pastoral work before discussing the canonical treatment required. It was written with a far wider audience in view and with a far more positive purpose in mind. Because Perkins believed in the priesthood of all believers and regarded resort

⁵¹ Pembroke College MSS c 49.

to a minister as but one of the means to obtain and keep a good conscience, his *Cases of conscience* was intended as a popular manual on the rules of spiritual good health. It was written in the vernacular, was brief and set out in a manner which even a simple person could understand. The contrast with contemporary Roman Catholic treatments is obvious. They were technical handbooks which dealt explicitly with problems and paid little attention to anything else. Nor did Perkins show any interest in canon law, despite the fact that it was still the legal standard of the Church of England's ecclesiastical courts. There are few references to other human authorities and a constant concern to safeguard and strengthen the theocentric basis of conscience by constant reference to the Bible.

Perkins produced a compass, not a map, and sought to bring men face to face with God, rightly prepared and equipped to carry out his commands in such a way as did justice to their duty to themselves, God and their fellow men. He realized the complexity of serious moral decision and hoped to make this genuinely responsible and free. Therefore he would have nothing to do with the Roman Catholic notion of implicit faith, through which men obeyed the church and obviated the need for personal, responsible and costly decision. Anyone seeking cut-and-dried answers to moral problems would leave Perkins more confused than enlightened, because Perkins' whole aim was different. His task, he believed, was to liberate conscience from sinful misunderstanding and partial insight. To do this he laid down certain principles and solved certain test cases. In the last resort, however, these were illustrations. They still needed individual application and presupposed some degree of ethical and spiritual maturity in the reader—a weakness when many lacked the religious experience Perkins believed to be normative.

This method followed from the foundation of Perkins' casuistry—the prophetic ministry of Christ which had to do with truth, and the exposure of men's situation before God. "As Christ hath this power to execute and perform such a duty, so he hath committed the dispensation thereof to the ministers of the Gospel."⁵² Ministerial authority was Christ's authority only insofar as they obeyed his commands. Cure of souls was therefore based on the Scriptures, since it was Scripture alone that nourished faith in Christ, and adequately and correctly guided conscience. "All actions that please God, must be done in *faith*; and therefore all actions that

⁵² Perkins, *Workes*, 2. 2.

please God, must have some ground and direction in the *Word of God*, without which Word of God there can be no faith."⁵³ Casuistry and exegesis were thus intimately related, whereas in Roman Catholic manuals Scripture was rarely mentioned.

A right understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel was fundamental to a proper relation between Scripture and conscience. Pastors had to know how to apply the Law (or the Word as judgement) with sufficient rigour to bring men to a proper humility, yet without driving men to despair. Conversely they must have the discernment to apply the comforts of the Gospel at the correct time and not cover the wounds of sin with the ointments of grace until they were sure that repentance was adequate enough to lead to saving faith.⁵⁴ Perkins had the reputation of being a skilful physician of the soul able to mix the law and the gospel in such proportions as brought men face to face with God's judgement and grace. Problems could also arise when divine commands clashed. Men had to learn how to relate accurately the general to the particular. In such cases, Perkins insisted that commandments from the First table of the Decalogue (1-4) took precedence. Obedience to God came before obedience to men.⁵⁵ Where service to God and service to neighbour seemed to conflict, human needs came first. If a neighbour's house caught fire at the time of Divine Service one fought the fire, because service to God was expressed in service to neighbour. In many cases there was no explicit guidance given by Scripture, but legitimate deductions from the good book were as binding on conscience as the words of Scripture. Where an issue remained doubtful, he taught that it was safer to abstain. This could lead to over-strictness, but granted Perkins' theology of conscience he could hardly have said otherwise, for "whatsoever a man doth, whereof he is not certainly persuaded in judgement and conscience out of God's Word, what the thing may be done, *it is sin*".⁵⁶ Whatever else the Puritan was he was possessed by an unforgettable sense of constant moral responsibility which never let him relax ethically.

This approach had dangers and limitations. When ever the concept of law is introduced into ethics there is a danger of legalism, especially when faith is inherited, even if the law is the Bible, and the priority of grace emphasised. A written guide can easily become a lawbook. Richard Hooker sharply criticized the absurd

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.28; cf. Martyr, *op. cit.*, 3.5.9.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Workes*, 2. 666-667; E. F. Kevan, *The grace of law* (London, 1964), gives a thorough discussion.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1. 520.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. 12.

biblical literalism of some Puritans and there is no doubt that later Protestant casuistry at times fell into the pit of legalism and the authoritarianism which was a feature of that society. However, before Perkins is criticized for a similar error, two factors need to be considered. Much modern criticism of seventeenth-century casuistry stems from an individualistic approach to ethics that has never faced, as he did, the problem of socially embodying the Christian faith, for the simple reason that most churches have become sects in an increasingly secularized society. Secondly, his casuistry gave an important place to prudence and to moderation. Prudence was the virtue which he regarded as principal. It was intimately related to moderation.

If we cannot do the good things that we desire, in that exquisite manner that we would, we must content ourselves with the mean; and in things which are good, and to be done, it is the safest course to satisfy ourselves in doing the less, lest in venturing to do the more, which cannot be, we grow to the extremity and so fail or offend in our action.⁵⁷

This moderation was not a tedious and joyless Puritan conformity. The duties of one's calling, circumstances of time and place, care for the needs of others and the demands of Christian freedom all need to be taken into account. He insisted that "one man's particular example must not be a rule of direction to all". Thus in the use of meat and drink one did not use them for mere necessity, "but also freely and liberally for Christian delight and pleasure".⁵⁸ When these qualifications are taken into account, Perkins' casuistry clearly has a good deal of flexibility. It ran more danger of being applied in an individualistic manner than in a legalistic one, and was by no means the fall from Reformed theological grace that its name might lead readers to believe.

It was an amalgam of systematic theology, Biblical exegesis, Puritan psychology, moral theology and practical divinity. This aspect of Perkins' work, more than any other, demonstrates his sensitivity to the needs of his day. He provided an ethical guide for the experiential type of Reformation piety and prevented it from degenerating into sentimentalism. *Cases of conscience* went through at least thirteen separate English editions and six separate Continental ones. Even more important was the number of successors this work spawned throughout Europe.⁵⁹ His extensive

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. 116.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2. 132; 2. 131.

⁵⁹ T. Wood, *English casuistical divinity* (London, 1952), and H. R. McAdoo, *The structure of Caroline moral theology* (London, 1949), discuss developments in England. There appear to be no comparable works for Continental Protestant casuistry.

pastoral experience, deep evangelical concern, solid grounding in Reformation theology and understanding of the weaknesses of past and contemporary casuistry and moral theology largely saved him from legalism or rigorism, without undercutting the seriousness and personal nature of moral decision. He saw that Christian maturity was not easily gained, that many would not attain it and that practical divinity had to take not account the needs of all, strong or weak. His Reformed casuistry attempted to provide a structure which combined counsel and direction for the weak with instruction to ensure the right use of Christian liberty by the strong and to keep this before his readers as their ultimate aim. If we acquit him of the charges of legalism and subjectivism and see the essential continuity of his casuistry with the pastoral aims and practice of the Reformers, it must nonetheless be pointed out that he left Reformed moral theology with its components differently arranged. Though he kept his balance and an evangelical ethic, not all his successors did. His tendencies to introspection and systematization could become masters rather than servants of pastoral care, particularly as Reformed exegesis, theology and ecclesiastical life tended to harden into a system, rather than provide a flexible method of solving spiritual and moral problems.

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