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Profile: Gordon Wakefield

FRANCES YOUNG

I must acknowledge my own sense of privilege in this position. I will not be disingenuous, nor falsely modest, and say, 'Who am I to be here, so unworthy, so fallible?' I will not profess an inadequacy I do not feel. This, so it would seem, is where I have been led all these years . . . I was born for this; but I have reason to be humble because of those weaknesses of my nature which have so often diverted me from my providential way; and because there must have been many others, equally called of God, who have not come to their Queen's at last . . . There is no room for self-satisfaction, much less for boasting. I shall not survive in this task apart from your prayers to invoke the restraining and encouraging, the humbling and empowering mercies of God.

Such were some of the opening sentences of the lecture given by Gordon Wakefield, when installed as Principal of The Queen's College. They provide an excellent 'text' for his profile, betraying as they do his own sense of what his life has been about, while exposing the characteristics which have for some made him difficult to deal with, for others made him seem like a holy man, *simul iustus et peccator*.

Sitting next to me at the lecture was the Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology from the University – we were both members of the Council of the College, present for this 'inaugural' occasion. I retain a lasting impression of the sceptical remark he muttered at the end, something to the effect that claims to personal providence are the beginning of madness. Here were two Gordons, both from Cheshire, both liturgiologists, but I doubt if they ever quite understood each other. Gordon Davies edited the SCM *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, Gordon Wakefield the companion volume on *Spirituality*: where the former moved from the architectural setting of worship to its sociology, the latter's concern has been with its interiority. Davies was a public school Anglican, impatient of piety, a believer in creative conflict, while Wakefield is stately, almost a little remote in demeanour and somewhat diffident, above conflict and able to affirm all sides, a devout nonconformist – in the eyes of some more Anglican than the Anglicans, despite a quality which is indefinably yet distinctly Methodist.

The Principalship of Queen's was undoubtedly the crown and fulfilment of everything Gordon Wakefield had done and stood for. He'd been a tireless ecumenist – none other could have proved such an acceptable first Methodist Principal of the then ten year old ecumenical ministerial training college formed by the amalgamation of the Anglican Queen's and the Methodist Handsworth. Methodism made this man of humble origins – neither he nor his parents could possibly have foreseen that he would be awarded a Lambeth DD by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a mark of esteem but also a sign of regard and friendship, for rumour has it that Gordon Wakefield helped Robert Runcie with sermons from time to time. He delights in knowing important people and loves

preaching in Cathedrals – when asked he listed Canterbury, Westminster Abbey, Durham, Birmingham, Manchester, Lichfield, Worcester, Gloucester, Wells, Bristol, Coventry, Ely, Norwich, Wakefield and Chester as the *loci* of sermons or lectures. I'm told that Gordon spoke once of travelling in the guards' van of the establishment train. People remember his way with words.

The ailing school phobic boy from Crewe can be forgiven for a little innocent pride and a tendency to name-drop – for these traits are incarnated in a kind of amazed humility. Life for the young Wakefield was not without its early disappointments. He was born on January 15th, 1921, to Ernest and Lucy Wakefield, aged 44 and 40. They had been married for fourteen years before this only child arrived. They had both left school on the day they reached the age of 12. Ernest was an unskilled metal machinist in the Railway Works; Lucy supplemented the income by keeping house for a Methodist school teacher, Miss Alice Day. It was a very Methodist home. Gordon's mother was a class leader, his father a society steward and trustee. They were open to music and literature – during her pregnancy Lucy read Milton, which might explain Gordon's love of poetry. But his rather sedentary life, filled with avid reading, owes most to a childhood of indifferent health, including rheumatic fever. It was perhaps understandable that this only son of aging parents should have been protected; he was delicate and carefully nurtured, missing from school for long periods.

In 1931 he won a scholarship to Crewe County Secondary School. He confesses that the years in the Sixth Form were two of the happiest in his life. His best subjects were always English and History. He won a Hulme Hall Exhibition in History to Manchester University, but, despite a small legacy, could not afford to take it up. It was 1939, but the war afforded no alternative route to some kind of success: medically rejected for service, he did various jobs, including that of an investigating officer at the Assistance Board. With one breath he speaks of this job as 'good experience' and of having 'a wretched war'.

But meanwhile there was progress in his Methodist life. As he put it in the lecture, he'd been led

from a somewhat unnatural and precocious childhood and a call to preach which came so early that Anglicans would have been horrified, and the Church today disapproving.

At 16 his preaching began and in 1940 he was accepted for the Methodist ministry. No-one was admitted for training during the war, however. On his own initiative, he undertook a Philosophy course at Manchester University, but after failing Intermediate Greek did not complete the degree. He thinks he should have taken Latin. One senses that he rather cherishes the fact that technically he could still return and complete! But at the time there must have been discouragement.

In 1944 he was sent as a precollegiate probationer to Edgware. He was in charge of a growing suburban church, and for a year also of a mission hall. Then in 1946 he went to Wesley House, Cambridge. He sees Cambridge as marking out his destiny, though rather typically confesses that he did not do as well as he ought. Despite this, Flew clearly recognised his potential, for rather to his surprise Gordon found later he had been singled out as a future theological college tutor. One begins to understand why he felt as he did when quite

unexpectedly the Queen's Principalship fell into his lap – but of that more later. Meanwhile he went into circuit.

He was accompanied by his young wife Beryl. He had met her in Edgware, and she was one of the reasons he pined for Edgware in Cambridge, perhaps one of the reasons he did not do so well. She was only 19 when they married in 1949, and was plunged into being a Methodist minister's wife – one circuit found her 'the perfect exemplar' in the role. Gordon's love for Beryl acknowledges deep dependence. Beryl has been the key person in the homemaking that gave Gordon a context from which he could develop as a minister and theologian. Between 1952 and 1961 the family was to expand to six as first Adrian, then Helen, Pamela and Penny joined the household. He regrets now that during the crucial early years busyness prevented his attention to his family being all it might have been, and presently he enjoys seven grandchildren with ages ranging from 17 years to 17 months. Beryl contributed shrewdness, and Gordon knows he owes a great debt to her loyalty.

They went to Gordon's first circuit appointment in Woodstock. 'Country ministry', he says, 'was outside my experience.' After Woodstock he served five years in Stockport, four at Gosforth, two at Bristol, before Methodism called him to a different kind of ministry. These years in circuit prior to 1963 are now in the distant past, and it is typical of Gordon that he claims little: of Edgware, his first experience of ministry, he comments 'I probably did as well or badly as at any time.' There must always have been some who found him beyond their understanding, but congregations of very ordinary people have gone on inviting him back. Three things are clear: he was always concerned about the quality of worship, and particularly about creating a sense of reverence; he was early involved in local ecumenical activities – the Council of Churches in Gosforth began 'in my time'; and people have remembered the quality of his pastoral care. He may not have packed the pews or stemmed the postwar drift away from church, but he was a faithful minister, and a loved one. Gordon is above all a listener, unbelievably patient with people who need to talk, and any who have heard him preach can readily believe that he is most truly himself in the pulpit. He remains convinced that circuit ministry is what it's all about.

But his first years in circuit were also the years that enabled him to grow beyond his academic disappointments and his scholarship to begin to flower. Woodstock is not a million miles from Oxford, another place that Gordon came to love. He read for a B.Litt., writing on Puritan devotion, a speciality which became the subject of his Fernley-Hartley lecture in 1957. He notes that he was the youngest lecturer to date, and one senses that it was an important moment of recognition and affirmation for one whose academic potential had never quite been realised. Epworth Press published the book form of the lecture that same year (*Puritan Devotion*), and it has become a minor classic, still referred to in subsequent literature. Gordon takes a quiet delight at each mention in a footnote.

From 1963 to 1971, Gordon was Connexional Editor, residing at Harpenden. He was catapulted into a job for which he felt he had no training, faced with piles of manuscripts to read and vet. He confesses that the job had worries and he was guilty of some misjudgements, but he was happy. The situation opened up his horizons, giving him contact with a whole range of life he would not otherwise have known, especially the literary and theological world. He worked alongside John Bowden at SCM Press and Noel Davey at

SPCK. He was now well placed to develop his liturgical and ecumenical interests, and to continue writing himself. The titles listed for 1965, 1966, 1969, and 1971 are typical of the range of interests that reappear in Gordon's work.

Yet it may be that Gordon's most important contribution lay not in his public attributable output, but in his long involvement behind the scenes in commissions, groups and committees that transformed Methodist worship in the '70's and co-ordinated liturgical revisions ecumenically. In 1957 he was a member of the Conference Worship Commission, he had a large share in the 1975 Service Book, and he belonged to the Joint Liturgical Group from 1966 to 1994. Many people to whom Gordon is quite unknown have learned to worship through the Sunday Service and have heard the Bible read and preached according to the lectionary produced by JLG. The hidden contribution has been enormous, and even if it proves ephemeral as new revisions and lectionaries replace those that Gordon helped forge, that is no detriment. The denomination would have been trapped in a time-warp if people like Gordon had not been prepared to risk their friendships with older colleagues like Gordon Rupp by sticking out for change.

In 1971 Gordon was made Chairman of the Manchester District. The next eight years seem to have been unexpectedly difficult. Gordon confesses that, though he had never tried to promote himself, he had thought that the job of Chairman would suit him best, but he was wrong. Ninety per cent of his time was spent dealing with 3% of the people for whom he had responsibility, and clearly he hated the business of ministerial discipline. He faced an immense number of charges – to do with sex, drink, debt, misbehaviour of one sort and another. Looking back he realises he should have had a support group, and that he didn't use his colleagues as he should have – he was too much of a loner. Maybe there were also levels of sin or failure in others he could not face up to, aware as he is of his own shortcomings. Reports suggest that, though unwilling at times to take firm lines, he has perhaps underestimated the good effect of his pastoral gifts.

It was after his arrival at Queen's that there appeared what might seem the most improbable of Gordon's publications. The fact that he undertook the work while still in Manchester is a testimony to his personal loyalties and to his sympathies. *Crucifixion-Resurrection* was a work conceived in the 1930s. In the mind of Sir Edwyn Hoskyns it was a sequel to *The Riddle of the New Testament*. More than one synopsis of the work and some chapters were drafted while his collaborator Noel Davey was in Cambridge with him, but after Hoskyns' sudden death in 1937 one thing after another prevented Davey bringing a project to fruition to which he felt a deep commitment. It was still not done when he himself died in 1973.

Gordon had known Davey while Connexional Editor, but it was not just friendship that motivated him. He had not, of course, been taught by Hoskyns but he felt much in the Hoskyns tradition, which lived on in Cambridge into the postwar years. In writing his life of Flew, he had found that Hoskyns impinged. He knew that C. K. Barrett had become a New Testament scholar because of Hoskyns' lectures and Davey's supervisions: Barrett had been 'intoxicated' by Davey, who 'had the great gift of exciting one'. Gordon himself would claim to be liberal in theology and politics, but sees Hoskyns as the one who liberated a generation from the weaker side of liberalism. All of this contributed to his determination to do what he could to publish the material left behind on Davey's

demise. He himself supplied introductory biographies and assessments of the two authors, as well as editing the material into something that makes readable sense. I still remember the excitement of reading it when it came out.

In Manchester, then, his scholarly work continued to be pursued against a background of difficulties. Gordon feels he was not loved as Chairman. Certainly it was generally accepted that administration was not his *métier*, but I'm told he chaired Synod well, with dignity and firmness, that he gave just the right support to the first women candidates to be ordained, that he fostered a spirituality group in the District, and was successful in conveying a sense of the beauty of worship. He thinks he hasn't the kind of personality that strikes fire in people and a Chairman needs to be more of an extrovert. But those who've heard him preach have observed a passionate streak that erupts over issues that move him. Rather touchingly he notes that membership did increase in the District during those years, for the one great disappointment he will admit to is the decline of mainstream Christianity, and of the Methodist church in particular – the sense that the ministries of his contemporaries have not succeeded, that all the exciting liturgical work in which he has been involved has not achieved anything in terms of mission.

Wasn't failure to achieve Anglican-Methodist Unity a big disappointment, I wondered? In reply he admitted to being something of a pessimist who never really believed the Anglican-Methodist conversations would succeed. So he was not disappointed. He had always expected to be. It had not been in God's good time. Yet Gordon always revelled in ecumenism. Queen's was founded as an ecumenical ministerial training college when hopes were high that unity would come, and Queen's was to be Gordon's escape from Manchester. In 1979 he was to go there as Liturgy tutor, and in the event he was appointed Principal as he was arriving. Somehow his scholarly bent and his ecumenical commitment were coming together, and is it any wonder he felt he was finding his destiny?

Gordon still speaks of Queen's as the summit to which everything else had led. He had been an ecumenist since boyhood. His family had Catholic friends, and he was nurtured by the prayer book and radio religion, which made him aware of other churches and their worship. He loved the Chapel at Queen's very much indeed, its breadth, the varieties of worship possible in that context. In the lecture with which we began he spelt out a vision for Queen's. He's not sure he would have said the same things when he left. Yet tutors who served under him affirm the importance of the way he held out a vision which transcended the day-to-day problems and tensions, even if it were 'highly romanticised'. One speaks of Gordon embodying Queen's, of Queen's under Gordon being more than just a place, of its being a community despite constant fractures, of Gordon believing in Queen's so that they were all drawn into his vision, even if only to react against it. Another spoke of coming for interview and hearing Gordon preach on forgiveness, of being captivated by it and wanting to become part of Queen's. He saw Gordon's secret as Principal in terms of the creation of a myth: it was to be a place of learning and godliness, and somehow it was.

Queen's under Gordon was explicitly and particularly dedicated to ministerial formation. As Principal, one tutor said, he accepted that he had to adjust to some things he was unsympathetic to, such as Psychology and Sociology in Pastoral studies; he saw that these things had to be part of a modern theological college package. Another spoke of Gordon enabling them to see that Queen's had its own style and character and dignity – it was not a lesser place

than the University, and its college course was not inferior to the University Diploma – just different. Gordon himself identifies the challenges of the job as threefold. First he had to face the fact that colleges were no longer full of young men setting out on life's journey. Most 'students' were older candidates, many married, making a new start. Their problems and difficulties called for him to make adjustments. Secondly, *Faith in the City* reinforced the challenges of the Birmingham context, which he had already to some extent faced in Manchester. Thirdly, he struggled with the need to teach the tradition while looking to the future and to current changes in society. From the vantage point of an outside observer, I sensed that he was always sitting across a kind of chasm between the academic, to which he was himself committed, and the more pragmatic and political interests of certain younger colleagues. Somehow he held it together.

Part of that 'somehow' seems to have been a capacity to be 'all things to all men'. People speak of his immense kindness and of his pastoral concern for students, but also of the frustration felt when he seemed to listen and agree, but then did something different. His tendency to indiscretions made everyone feel they were in his confidence. They all loved him, because everyone was made to feel they were valued. He was generous in his praise, and trusted his colleagues. No-one was a nuisance: students, their families, their troubles, were taken with utmost seriousness and compassion, if sometimes unwisdom.

Gordon acknowledges he was criticised for not being confrontational enough. It has been suggested that it was impossible to quarrel with him because of his skill in using self-deprecation to disarm his critic. Certainly Gordon himself admits to a hatred of conflict, going back to his childhood, to parental quarrels which frightened him excessively and made him anxious to avoid angry disputes. Repression explains, perhaps, the occasional sudden and surprising outbreaks of passion, and his subsequent remorse. He also accepts that he has always been somewhat fearful of life. His colleagues sensed that he was driven by anxiety, that there was great self-doubt and a low self-image. He could be weak in the face of determined opposition and with impossible students – he was fearful of 'student power'. Yet there was never any doubt who was Principal: people recognised his gifts of mind and enjoyed his company, especially his conviviality over a glass of wine. He was witty and a great raconteur.

Gordon at Queen's was recognised as immensely hardworking, conscientious and disciplined, though not robust in health. His publications continued, despite the pressures. The *Dictionary of Spirituality* appeared in 1983. He had only two years to do it and regards it as a rushed job, forced as he was to write too much of it himself because others let him down. In the following years appeared *Kindly Light* and *The Liturgy of St. John*, both typical of Gordon's interests and style, and arising out of his perennial invitations to provide lectures, meditations and retreats. He had long been a supporter of the Methodist Retreat Group, as well as the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship and the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In retirement since 1987 Gordon has lived in Lichfield at the invitation of the bishop who chaired the Council of Queen's College during his years as Principal. There he has become a significant figure at the Cathedral, while keeping up connections with the Methodist circuit. He spent a year as Chaplain at Westminster College, Oxford, and maintained the link from 1989-92 as Director of the Alister Hardy Centre for Research into Religious Experience

based there. Until recently he travelled all over the country conducting retreats, lecturing and preaching.

An Anglican enthusing over Holy Week meditations given by Gordon in his Cathedral described Gordon as a Catholic Methodist with a sacramental spirituality – as a ‘mystic’. Unasked Gordon himself stated that he was not a mystic. Mysticism is, of course, one of the hardest things to define. In *Puritan Devotion*, Gordon himself wrote

If . . . we define mysticism as ‘the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and ultimate consciousness of the Divine Presence, . . . religion in its most acute and living stage’, it might just be possible to count the Puritans as mystics. But [if we define it as] the absorption of the personality, the Puritans are categorically outside the company of mystics. And even [the first definition] would have to be revised in order to make the Puritans conform, for the Puritans’ ‘immediate awareness’ is never – if the paradox be allowed – unmediated, and the divine Presence which they seek is that savingly revealed in Christ, and shared with His people, in the body of Christ.

Thus Gordon provides a self-description. The means of grace, the traditions of the church’s praying, entirely shape his devotion and mediate the Presence. He claims no voices or visions, yet has a personal sense of God. In fact his vocation is rooted in the sense of God and a call to lead people into the divine Presence. Hence his preoccupation with worship and liturgy.

But quoting his characterisation of the Puritans in order to understand him is more significant than might appear at first. He sees his work as primarily that of an interpreter. He acknowledges that he identifies with the people he reads or reads about, he feels in contact with them, he is possessed with their outlook. It is the depth and range of his identification with the spiritual masters of all Christian traditions and centuries which has shaped him. Is he just a chameleon, then, changing colour with the book he picks up? Does he depend on others to give him a sense of his own identity, to fill up his spiritual being which would be empty were it not for all those treasures he has borrowed from?

To answer such a question would take a philosophical treatise on the ‘self’. One person I talked with, when asked to say what makes Gordon tick, refused on principle: you cannot do that for anyone, he protested, because there is an irreducible mystery about another person. Some recent analysis would suggest that it is impossible to strip away layers, as of an onion, to reach the essential self – the self is made up of the layers, of the many characters we have identified with in the literature we have read. Gordon, almost more than anyone else, is not to be pigeon-holed. There is an elusiveness which suggests depth and offers us a wealth of snippets, anecdotes, sayings, quotations, allusions, picked up from his vast literary and theological resources. But above all what he said about the Puritan is true of him: ‘the recapitulation of the Bible history in the believer’s experience made God real.’

Gordon is ‘God-driven’, as one conversation-partner put it. He says himself that he has never been able to escape the offer and demands of God, though aware of the challenges to belief and the need for intellectual honesty. He’s been conscious of God’s presence even in doubts and questions, and despite God’s absence has felt that he has never been deserted by God. He wants to be

remembered as 'a human being who loved God'. But it is the God mediated to him through the Christian scriptures and the Church's tradition, not the product of some esoteric religious experience. As Director of the Alister Hardy Centre for Research into Religious Experience, he found accounts of religious experience detached from churches very vague, and typically felt the whole enterprise needed theological grounding. So what about Gordon's theology? What assessment can we make of the writings he has produced and is continuing to produce? Is his fear that he belongs to the 'Second Eleven' justified?

When it comes to cricket Gordon is a spectator not a player. One gathers he is a very keen and knowledgeable spectator, one who writes about it, converses about it, and in his retirement is a faithful member of a local cricket club, there every Saturday. Apart from his voracious reading, it is his one hobby. Similarly there is a sense in which Gordon is not a player-theologian but an acute observer of the game, fascinated by those who are players, a biographer rather than an abstract thinker – another of his hidden activities is writing obituaries. He is immensely knowledgeable, but in some ways eclectic – perhaps that contributed to his strength as Principal, for he belonged to no party, had no predetermined system.

So humanity is what fascinates one known for work on spirituality – History and English were always his best subjects. Yet it is humanity responding to God which preoccupies him, and he has an uncanny knack of recognising what is significant. *Crucifixion-Resurrection* may in the end be his most significant publication, and his willingness to use his own time and gifts to disseminate the work of others the key to his work. He saw Hoskyns' originality and wanted to make it known. He saw the demand of the moment – to renew the liturgical life of the church – and the Methodist Sunday Service is an anonymous committee product. The self-effacing nature of his theological contribution would imply that, despite his touching self-consciousness, those who think he is a holy man may not be wide of the mark. For even holy men are human.

Published works

- 1957 *Puritan Devotion. Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety*, London: Epworth.
- 1965 *Lent with John Wesley*, London: Mowbrays.
Unity at the Local Level (with Hetley Price), London: Mowbrays.
- 1966 *Methodist Devotion*, London: Epworth
- 1969 *On the Edge of the Mystery. Studies in Holy Communion*, London: Epworth
- 1971 *Robert Newton Flew*, London: Epworth
- 1976 *Fire of Love – extracts from John Wesley*, London: DLT.
- 1981 *Crucifixion-Resurrection. The Pattern of the Theology and Ethics of the New Testament*, by E. C. Hoskyns and Noel Davey, ed. with introduction by GSW, London: SPCK.
- 1983 *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (ed.), London: SCM Press.
- 1984 *Kindly Light*, London: Epworth.
- 1985 *The Liturgy of St. John*, London: Epworth.
- 1993 *Bunyan the Christian*, London: Harper Collins.

In addition, a multitude of articles and sermons in journals such as the *Expository Times* and the *Preachers' Quarterly*; contributions to symposia, dictionaries and companions; essays for publications of the Joint Liturgical Group; BRF notes and a monthly sermon for the *Methodist Recorder*; numerous reviews for the *Epworth review*, *Theology* and the *Scottish Journal of Theology*; and hidden anonymous contributions to the work of committees, commissions, etc.