

Hallowed By Thy Name: The Sanctification of All in the Soteriology of P. T. Forsyth

Reviewed by André Muller, Southern Presbytery

“My debt of gratitude to you is not nominal, but a real thing”, the 19th century congregationalist preacher James Baldwin Brown wrote to Thomas Carlyle, recalling how the experience of reading the latter’s 1836 novel *Sartor Resartus* had led him to abandon his legal studies for the pulpit. “To the course of study and thought to which the meditations of that period have led me, I owe it that I am not a member of a purely worldly profession for which I was then educating”, Brown confessed, “but a preacher of the living Word, into the proclamation of which I can at any rate throw as much earnestness and life as I have in myself”. By all accounts, Brown – “the greatest Independent of our times”, Peter Taylor Forsyth would later declare – had a great deal of earnestness and life in him, making him a highly attractive figure to a young man whose own reputation for “ethical passion, spiritual insight, intellectual grasp, and personal piety” (to quote from Forsyth’s eulogy of his former pastor) would by the end of the century eclipse his own.

Having graduated with first-class honours in Classical Literature at the University of Aberdeen, where he was known for his proclivity to grandiloquence as much as for his remarkable intellectual capability (and where also he came under the influence of the Professor of Logic, and founder of the philosophy journal *Mind*, Alexander Bain), Forsyth had taken up William Robertson Smith’s suggestion that he should spend a semester in Göttingen listening to Albrecht Ritschl, who was then at the height of his influence.

As Goroncy shows in his marvellous study of Forsyth’s treatment of sanctification, he would never discard the most important lesson he had learnt from that theologian, namely, that “Positive Christianity... is Christianity which recognises the primacy of the moral in the shape of life, and of holy life”. Neither would he shake off his teacher’s deep suspicion of metaphysical speculation, which following Kant, both Ritschl and Forsyth treated as not only beyond our ken but as ultimately destructive of moral seriousness. A “metaphysic of things”, Forsyth would claim in an article published in 1914, is “merely shells of ruined towers that let heaven be seen through their cracks rather than their windows”. “God has given men feet not wings, and the order is fight not flight”, he would exclaim in a sermon on Psalm 55.6 and Jeremiah 9.2. “We reach heaven step by step, fighting all the way. What we need most of all for this life is the courage of the prosaic”.

There was little, however, that was prosaic about Forsyth’s prose, which contemporaries described as volcanic. One declared him the “Ibsen of British theology”, and he would later be called, no less felicitously, theology’s Browning. “What a mental energy he had!”, a friend and disciple would write to Forsyth’s daughter after his death. “There was something demonic in it”, which helped to explain the difficulty of a style which, like Brown’s, bore indelibly the marks of “the man himself and his passion”.

It is no disparagement of Forsyth’s theological genius to note the extent to which his moral imagination was shaped by a 19th century romantic tradition that can be traced back through Kant to Rousseau. Yet it is not the least virtue of Goroncy’s study that while he shows Forsyth drawing upon the neo-Kantianism of Ritschl and Wilhelm Windelbrand, the literature of Carlyle and Lord Tennyson, the music of Wagner, the Maurician tendencies of Brown, he also attends to the influence of quite different traditions.

Forsyth’s intellectual debts are difficult to identify because he hardly ever identifies them himself, but Goroncy is surely right to suggest that the 16th century reformer John Calvin, the 17th century puritan Thomas Goodwin, and the late 19th to early 20th century biblical scholar Adolf Schlatter all figure prominently in the background to his thought.

Perhaps the greatest influence of all on Forsyth’s moral and theological vision was scripture itself, which he studied assiduously and with the aid of the resources of higher criticism. A third of his considerable library was in German, and much of this consisted of commentaries on scripture. As with Windelbrand and Calvin, Ritschl and Goodwin, Forsyth keeps his debts to biblical scholarship

close to his chest, but the depth of his engagement with scripture can be seen indirectly – for example, in his claim that no one should talk about theology in public until they had mastered the New Testament. This was a tall order, but one that Forsyth had evidently met himself, since he often talked about theology in public, not least in the sad controversy with R. J. Campbell, during which he had to point out how theologically out of his depth Campbell was.

Forsyth was also an extraordinarily good preacher who spoke to people who knew what extraordinarily good preaching looked like and so had very high expectations. Some of those best qualified to judge such matters claimed, after hearing him, that he had exceeded their expectations. Some still recalled the power of a particular sermon decades after the fact. In all of the sermons he gave he was meditating upon scripture, and he would have spent hours consulting his German commentaries in preparation.

Although Forsyth remained committed to the conviction that “the moral is the real”, he would come to reject Ritschl’s gospel as “unevangelical”. In so doing he was rejecting the liberal Protestantism which was becoming increasingly attractive to late 19th century congregationalists partly because it promised to assuage Victorian anxieties about holiness. “Tired of moral precepts and attitudes which represented Christianity as ‘just human nature at its best’, and God’s kingdom as “just our natural spirituality and altruism developed”, Forsyth, writes Goroncy, accused “his generation of succumbing to cheap comforts, or muffling the moral note, of seeking a form of idealised Christianity divorced from a historic and perennial Christ and of interpreting sin “in a softer light than God’s””.

In the light of the cross, there can be no question of God letting sinners off the hook, as it were, because what is at stake is not a principle that God can set aside, but God himself. “The holy God must go out in judgment against all that mocks and flaunts holiness because God’s Godhead is at stake”, Goroncy writes, “and because God is committed to hallowing all things”.

That God’s being is in question here is not unrelated to the divine commitment to hallow all things: in effect, these are two sides of the same coin. The very nature of God is holy love, and when God creates the world he calls into being creatures who are sustained by – and who must answer to – God’s own “hungering holiness”. It is this holiness that “constitutes and directs all being, binding a coherent universe in such a way as all remigrates to its source in God”. When human beings refuse this creative holiness, it is not some kind of abstract moral order conceived independently of God

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that is put at risk, but the one who is committed by virtue of his very being to hallowing all things. To pray “hallowed by thy name” is to recognise that what sin places at stake is God’s being itself.

It was Hegel who had claimed in his *Philosophy of Religion* that “God cannot find satisfaction through anything other than Himself, but only through Himself”, although this was an insight that already had a long history within the Christian tradition by the time that Hegel came to it. Anselm of Canterbury, for instance, had insisted that the debt incurred by sin could only be satisfied by God himself. But while Forsyth drew upon Anselm’s account of the atonement in *Cur Deus Homo*, he is sceptical of what Paul Fiddes calls the 11th century archbishop’s “excessive objectivity”, preferring more ethical and personal categories to Anselmic jurisprudence.

Certainly, Forsyth moves far beyond Anselm when he speaks, as he does in *The Pulpit and the Age* (1885), of “[t]he living God” as “the dying God” and of “the Eternal principle of Eternal life” as “always and only possible even to God by Eternal Death”.

As Goroncy points out, the debt to Hegel is clearly evident when Forsyth contends that in the death of Christ, God makes death part of his own eternal life, and so (to quote Hegel) “comes to Himself”. While it might seem as if such talk of divine “self-realisation”, of God finding or coming to himself, which is intrinsic to Forsyth’s reading of the cross as divine theodicy, risks reducing the atonement to an exercise in divine solipsism, one of the great strengths of Forsyth’s account of God’s “hungering holiness” is that it effectively rules out such suggestions.

God’s regard for the holiness of his name – for, that is, the integrity of his very being – is a regard also and at the same time for human beings. If the atonement is divine self-reconciliation, its work is not done, Goroncy notes, “until there is created a ‘reciprocal communion’ between humanity and God”.

“The great theologies are epics”, Forsyth would write in *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (1909). This seems as good a description of Forsyth’s own theology as any. It is usual for scholars to comment upon the unsystematic quality of his work. Nothing could be more wrong-headed. Forsyth’s writing is certainly occasional, each essay, sermon, lecture, and book called forth by some specific need. But his moral and theological – and by now it should be clear why the distinction should not be pressed too hard – vision is highly coherent.

Like Calvin, Forsyth gives us “a gospel deep enough” with “all the breadth of the world in its heart”, as must any theologian who knows what they are about. Unlike Calvin, Forsyth’s theology demands that he takes the word “breadth” with a kind of ultimate – one might even say metaphysical – seriousness. In his final chapter, Goroncy shows that everything, or everything that matters, about Forsyth’s doctrine of sanctification necessitates a commitment to universalism. The cross is where “all things are (so to say) tied up”, Forsyth writes in his great theodicy, *The Justification of God* (1916). “All history, through his great act at its moral centre, is, in God, resolved into the harmonies of a foregone and final conquest”, he affirms in *The Cruciality of the Cross*.

Admittedly, such claims do not themselves entail a full-blown universalism, but in their light it seems a bit churlish not to go all the way. At any rate, Forsyth holds to a “hopeful” rather than “dogmatic” universalism, which is certainly a respectable theological position. But Goroncy persistently pushes Forsyth on this point, and his persistence pays off. As he shows, Forsyth cannot take refuge, as others have, in the doctrine of divine freedom because for him God’s freedom is “already bound up in his determination to hallow all things”. And since what is at stake in this hallowing is the very being of God, the price of one everlastingly unrepentant sinner is not the existence of hell, nor even the defeat of the purposes of God, but the collapse of divine being itself. There is simply no possibility of the coexistence of divine holiness and its antithesis. While Forsyth makes this point repeatedly, he does not follow his own logic, which Goroncy shows, “demands either universalism or annihilationism”, to its end. As Goroncy also points out, there are serious difficulties with the idea that God might, after a suitable term of punishment, annihilate creatures that he had brought into being. Forsyth really has only one option available to him. And yet he hedges.

It is interesting to speculate – and here this is all that can be done for lack of evidence – as to why Forsyth tacitly refuses to draw the necessary consequences of his theology. The author of *This Life and the Next* (1918) was hardly unconcerned with the last things, so that cannot be the reason. In all likelihood, as Goroncy suggests, ecclesial and theological politics played a role in Forsyth’s public agnosticism, which may have seemed to the principal of a congregational college and leader within the congregational community to be the most prudent course. There may have been another

reason, which Goroncy does not mention. It is possible that in hedging on the question of dogmatic universalism Forsyth was, perhaps even unconsciously, questioning the Hegelian assumptions that made that universalism a necessary consequence of his theology. There is a lot of Hegelian in Forsyth's work. Perhaps in the end he wanted to say something different.

And perhaps in the end he did. Forsyth was often tempted to "flirt with the mythological", as one of the most astute of his 20th century admirers once remarked. This is true not least when he talks of the "dying God" or construes sin as the antithesis of, and a threat to, the divine being itself. The Augustinian conception of sin as privation, along with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* on which it depends, is an attempt to rule out something like Forsyth's account of sin (and with it, any notion that God's being might be subject to threat). Forsyth was nervous about the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, because it seemed to him not to be ethical enough – a criticism which suggests that he was reacting against the rationalist orthodoxies of the 18th and 19th centuries rather than Augustine or Thomas.

Curiously, while he rejected the metaphysics of what he calls "Chalcedonianism", and for all his Kantian objections to speculative thought, what Forsyth offers is nothing if not a profound essay in the metaphysics of divine being. Goroncy, perhaps Forsyth's finest interpreter, captures the heights and depths of this metaphysical vision in *Hallowed Be Thy Name*, revealing the richness and coherence (questions about universalism aside) of Forsyth's thought, because he knows that the metaphysics are always in the end an attempt to wrestle with the "evangelical centre".

In his wonderful and authoritative study of Forsyth, Goroncy shows how breathtakingly audacious his metaphysical theology is in both form and scope. But perhaps in order to gain the measure of the man, we also need a comprehensive study of his engagement with the Bible. One might begin with Goroncy's recent publication of Forsyth's sermons, *Descending on Humanity and Intervening in History: Notes from the Pulpit Ministry of P. T. Forsyth* (Pickwick, 2013).

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