

CHAPTER I

KIRKS AND KIRKMEN UNREFORMED

JOHN KNOX called his great work 'The History of the Reformation of Religion', but his ablest opponent, Ninian Winyet, was no less concerned for 'reformation of doctrine and manners'. Nor was it only the challenge of radicals which provoked the more conservative to an interest in reform. It is true that the provincial council of the Scottish church which in 1559 adopted measures directed at 'the reformation of church discipline' was acting in response to somewhat novel proposals put forward by certain 'temporal lords and barons'; but in so far as those lords and barons were concerned with the need for churchmen to seek 'reformation of their lives' they were asking no more than another provincial council had declared to be its own object a decade earlier, when it passed statutes 'for the reformation of morals in the Church of Scotland'. Demands for reform had indeed come still earlier from Scottish laymen, but from those of impeccable orthodoxy: in 1541 a Scottish parliament which legislated against 'heresy' also passed an act 'for reforming of kirks and kirkmen'; the impulse to pass that act is to be related to King James V's exhortation to his bishops, a short time before, to reform their manner of living; and that exhortation in turn was prompted by a performance of the earliest version of Sir David Lindsay's *Three Estates*, a satire which had as its sharp and persistent theme the need for 'reformation'.

All could see that much was in need of reform. But it was of 'discipline', of the 'lives' of the clergy, of their 'manners' and their 'morals' that reformation was all but unanimously craved. Such reformation meant primarily the reform of ecclesiastical polity, and already before 1560 there can thus be discerned that emphasis which was to determine so much of later Scottish church history, in which the interest has so seldom been either theological or liturgical. Certainly the preoccupation of any historian of the Scottish reformation must be, as the preoccupation of contemporaries was,

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with church order, with systems of administration, with organisation and even with finance. And he must start where contemporaries started, with the structure of the late medieval church.

Sixteenth-century writings, some of them with a popular appeal in their own day and later, and some of them of great literary merit, have done much to make the discreditable state of the late medieval church the familiar topic it has remained ever since. But the amount of criticism of ecclesiastical institutions which survives from the period of the reformation may mislead in more than one way. Few, if any, Scottish works in which similar material could be found are extant from earlier generations; if they were, they might disclose that it is as true of Scotland as it is of England that an awareness of abuses and an anxiety to remedy them were no novelty in the sixteenth century,¹ and it might emerge that the impression of a sharp deterioration in the hundred years or so before the reformation is very largely an illusion. In any event, the writings of reformers, whether moderate or radical, are not the place to look for a cool and balanced verdict; they must at least be analysed and tested like any other historical material to discover how far their evidence is consistent in itself and how far it is corroborated or refuted by other information, or they may be used mainly as a commentary on the truths disclosed by an examination of more objective sources. If this is done, and if—facile simplification being set aside—it is once appreciated that the structure of the late medieval church was a complex structure, embracing institutions of diverse origins, multifarious purposes and varying qualities, it emerges that, while the picture is a dark one, the gloom is not wholly unrelieved.

The houses of monks and canons regular had nearly all been founded more than three centuries before. Not only had the foundation of new houses long ceased, but the further enrichment of existing houses had become exceedingly rare, and these facts, while undoubtedly arising partly from mere changing fashion, do suggest that the value of monasteries was no longer apparent. Nor is it difficult to cite a whole series of incidents generally indicative of decline. Before the fourteenth century was out, the bishop of Glasgow had received a papal mandate to visit monasteries in Scotland and

¹ Cf. W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 238.

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Ireland, 'they being in many ways deformed and broken down'.¹ When, early in the fifteenth century, James I censured the Benedictine and Augustinian orders,² he may have been doing no more than imitating Henry V of England,³ whose prisoner he had lately been, but his foundation of Scotland's only house of the strict Carthusian rule—the Charterhouse at Perth—looks like a practical commentary on the laxity of the older orders. The 'Charturis monkis' were able to maintain their own fervour, for, in the words of an admiring friar a century later, 'be giding of the halie gost [they] ay remanit without fall', and in 1500 their austerity drew into their ranks an Augustinian abbot who despaired of his own order.⁴ In general, however, the dominant characteristic of a sixteenth-century monastery was that it was a property-owning corporation.⁵ The abbot was now primarily a landed magnate, and too often a secular cleric, a layman or even a minor who could be only a titular head of a religious community. The monks, losing sight of one of the essentials of their rule, now lived in comfort and at leisure on their individual 'portions', and the 'portion' approximated so closely to a benefice that it could even be assigned to a person who was not a member of the conventual body.⁶ When efforts were made to deal with this and other abuses they were unwelcome. It may have been no more than courtesy when, in 1531, the Scottish council sent an officer of arms with the abbot of Glenluce to 'assist him in his visitation' of the Cistercian abbeys;⁷ but there was no ambiguity in the following year, when the abbot of Souleseat, faced with the task of visiting the Premonstratensian houses, applied to the crown for 'supply, help, maintenance and assistance' because he dreaded that the abbots 'wald nocht obey, bot be the contrary resist and withstand to the

¹ *Calendar of Papal Registers*, IV, 251.

² A.P.S. II, 25 (translated in Dickinson, Donaldson and Milne, *Source Book of Scottish History*, II, 97–9).

³ Wylic and Waugh, *Reign of Henry V*, III, 283–4.

⁴ Abell's *Chronicle* (Nat. Lib. Scot. MS. 1746), fo. 79b; John Bellenden, *Hystory and Cronikles of Scotland* (1821), II, 299.

⁵ Cf. *Letters of James V* (H.M.S.O.), pp. 174–5 (A.D. 1530).

⁶ *Formulare*, II, No. 444; R.S.S. V, 220, 1007; *Melrose Regality Records* (S.H.S.), III, 154, 162–3; *Acts of the Lords of Council in Public Affairs* (H.M.S.O.), p. 611; R.S.S. VII, 2491.

⁷ *Acts of the Lords of Council in Public Affairs*, p. 348.

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sammyne'.¹ Another visiting abbot, sent by the chapter general of the Cistercians to inspect their Scottish houses, confined himself to an attack on the violation of the rule forbidding private property, against which he fulminated censures and then 'promptly departed', leaving the Scottish monks indignant at an attempted interference with what they regarded as 'the immemorial manner of monastic life' and some of them ready to desist from the 'offices of prayer', in protest.² There was at least one other occasion when Scottish monks went on strike, by desisting from the recitation of the offices, but then it arose from a refusal to increase their portions.³ One can only speculate whether a preoccupation with the size of portions led to a deliberate policy of restricting entry and whether monks who wanted to leave a house, at the sacrifice of their portions, would have any obstacle put in their way. The evidence does on the whole suggest that in many houses the number of monks declined appreciably in the two or three decades before 1560,⁴ and—unless, indeed, an entrant paid a heavy premium⁵—it is hard to believe that the convent would welcome recruits.

It is equally hard to believe that either abbot or monks would put before their own immediate financial advantage the duty of husbanding the resources of the house or the expenditure of money on the fabric, and easier to believe the allegation that an abbot would build a palatial residence for himself and allow the church and the domestic quarters of the brethren to go to ruin.⁶ Yet, while records

¹ R.S.S. II, 1349.

² *Letters of James V*, pp. 210–11; James Campbell, *Balmerino and its Abbey*, pp. 110–12.

³ *Formulare*, I, No. 261; cf. *Melrose Regality Records* (S.H.S.), III, 176–7.

⁴ The principal evidence about the personnel of the houses lies in the signatures to charters granted by abbots with the consent of their convents. While a single charter is never conclusive proof of the number of monks at a particular date—for not all the members of the community necessarily signed—the examination of a series of charters may be relied on to give the names of all the monks over a period. Corroborative evidence is sometimes available: e.g. at Melrose, where twenty-seven monks signed a charter in 1527 and only eleven signed one in 1557 (Morton Papers, Box 54), the number of monks alive in 1555 was sixteen (*Melrose Regality Records*, III, 192) and in 1562 was thirteen (*Thirde of Benefices* [S.H.S.], pp. 134, 157).

⁵ Robert Richardson, *Commentary on the Rule of St Augustine* (S.H.S.), p. 174; cf. p. 10 below. ⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 54–5, 98–9.

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provide evidence about monastic finance and about the state of the buildings,¹ it is none too easy to form a clear picture of life in a Scottish monastery on the eve of the reformation. There is little real proof that the monks were other than respectable in character. It would be unsound to attach much importance to doggerel verse, where the attractions of facile rhyme were the first consideration, but it should be noted that while the writer of the notorious lines beginning 'The paip, that pagane full of pryde' castigates the secular clergy for sexual immorality, he makes no such accusations against the monks. The abbot, indeed, he classes with the bishop, who 'wald nocht wed ane wyfe',

Thinkand it was ane lustie lyfe
 Ilk day to have ane new ane,

but of the monks of Melrose he has nothing worse to say than that they
 maid gude kaill

On Frydayis quhen thay fastit.²

Sir David Lindsay, in *The Tragedie of the Cardinall*, refers generally to the 'gret abhominatioun in mony abayis' which would be seen by their founder, King David I, were he to return, but in *The Three Estates* he excludes men's houses from his indictment and makes the king see only 'the great abominatioun among thir abesses and thir nunries'. His only specific allusion to immorality in monasteries is in the lines

Speir at the monks of Bamirrinoch
 Gif lecherie be sin,

which may easily have been a topical reference to some isolated scandal; elsewhere he makes a distinction between the abbot, who says of himself

My paramours is baith als fat and fair
 As ony wench into the toun of Air

and, on the other hand, the monks, who

leif richt easelie
 Thair is na monks from Carrick to Carraill
 That faits better and drinks mair helsum aill.³

¹ P. 21 below. ² *Gude and Godlie Ballates*, ed. D. Laing (1868), pp. 178–81.

³ Lindsay, *Works* (S.T.S. ed. D. Hamer), I, 142; II, 51, 281, 315, 317.

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Knox indeed tells of an 'ancient matron' who called the monastery of Scone 'a den of whoremongers',¹ but even she singled out the abbot as especially vicious, and of his evil life there is ample supporting evidence.² Ninian Winyet, again, who was not sparing in all the criticism that was needed, says nothing worse of the monastic life than that it was 'abusit among mony in idilnes and welthy lyfe, and cloikit with glistering ceremoneis . . . mair than in trew religioun'.³ There was assuredly no austerity about a system which permitted Adam Chatto, subprior of Kelso, to have a 'double portion', consisting of £40, thirty bolls of bear and twelve bolls of wheat, with 'twa corne yairdis and the fruit yaird occupyit be the said Adam and his servandis, lyand besyid the said abbay, with ane chalmer in the dortar thairof'.⁴

Possibly the most damning fact about the monks is simply that they played hardly any part in the reformation, on either side. Monkish resistance to reform, from purely selfish motives, was not indeed unknown, but it is difficult to name a monk who made a notable stand on any higher ground.⁵ On the other hand, not a great many monks took an active part in the work of the reformed church,⁶ and the only one who achieved any distinction as a reformer was the Cistercian John Mackbrair, who left Glenluce so early as 1550 and entered the ministry of the Church of England.⁷ It was very different with the canons regular. At an early stage the Augustinians had produced Alexander Alane or Alesius, a reformer of international reputation, and a little later Thomas Forret, canon of Inchcolm, who was put to death for 'heresy' in 1539, while in John Winram, subprior of St Andrews, they gave a superintendent to the reformed church.⁸ Robert Richardson, a canon of Cambuskenneth, had been early in the field as a more conservative reformer, and wrote a commentary on the rule of his order in 1530; but

¹ Laing, I, 362 (Dickinson, I, 191).

² P. 104 below.

³ *Certane tractatis* (Maitland Club), p. 110.

⁴ R.S.S. VII, 1888.

⁵ Quentin Kennedy is no exception, for he was a secular before his appointment to the abbacy of Crossraguel.

⁶ See G. Donaldson, 'The parish clergy and the reformation', in *Innes Review*, x.

⁷ *Dumfries and Galloway Nat. Hist. and Antiq. Soc. Trans.* 3rd ser. ix, 158 f.

⁸ D.N.B. (Alesius); Laing, I, 63 (Dickinson, I, 26); p. 126 below. See in general Peter Lorimer, *Patrick Hamilton*, pp. 166–76.

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he, too, seems to have ended his days in the reformed church, though south of the Border.¹ The canons regular, who had all along been in the habit of serving as vicars in churches appropriated to their houses, found it easier than monks did to take part in the work of the reformed church as ministers and readers.²

The general opinion seems to have been that the monasteries, at least in their traditional form, could simply be disregarded. The efforts of the occasional zealous abbot or of the provincial councils³ seem to have been directed mainly towards the fostering of intellectual pursuits and the raising of educational standards, and Winyet, defender of the old order though he was, does not seem to have envisaged the monasteries continuing as they had been constituted of old: 'of the quhilkis monasteriis every ane, be a godly reformation, besydes a cumpanie to waik on prayar, micht haif bene a college of godly leirning to the support of puir studentis'.⁴ When tumult arose in the realm, the monasteries suffered fewer and less destructive attacks than the friaries, but a possible explanation of this is that as the monasteries were mostly in rural areas they were not ready targets for zealous burghers. The sacking of Scone was the work of an urban mob from Dundee and Perth, and the Charterhouse shared the fate of the Perth friaries not because it was corrupt—the evidence is all to the contrary⁵—but because it was situated within the burgh. The pattern of the attacks hardly permits any inference either about the state of the monasteries or about the popular attitude to them.

Yet in spite of all the obscurity and uncertainty there are two things to be said for the standards maintained by the monasteries: legitimations of the offspring of monks below the rank of abbot and prior are very hard to find—and to that extent some of the verses

¹ If he is to be identified with the Scottish clerk naturalised in England in 1540 (*Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, xv, p. 292) he was probably associated with English influence on the Scottish government's experiment in a reforming policy in 1543 (*ibid.* xviii (1), Nos. 478, 696; (2), No. 392). See also G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, iv, 420–1.

² See *Innes Review*, *loc. cit.*

³ Pp. 32–3 below.

⁴ *Certane tractatis*, p. 110.

⁵ It should be noted that the prior, at least, took the conservative side (*R.S.S.* vi, 297).

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quoted above are substantiated;¹ and right down to the reformation the monks continued to receive an education which at least taught them to sign their names.²

It is impossible to say as much for the nunneries, where the inmates were illiterate. With the exception of the sisters of the house of St Katharine of Siena in Edinburgh (founded in 1517), it is hard to find a Scottish nun, or even a prioress, who could sign her own name.³ The sisters of this recent foundation—which may have had a pre-eminence among women's houses comparable to that of the Charterhouse among men's—were exceptional in other ways as well, for in Lindsay's *Testament of the Papyngo* it was among them that Chastity found a refuge after she had been repulsed by other nunneries.⁴ In general, the breakdown of discipline seems to have been almost complete. In 1549 we find a nun of Haddington suing the prioress for a payment due to her,⁵ and in the same year the provincial council ordered all prioresses to gather together the dispersed nuns of their houses and maintain them either in their own houses or others:⁶ reading the two pieces of evidence together one concludes that prioresses were prepared to let their nuns depart and so be relieved of the cost of maintaining them. Of the unchaste lives of the nuns there is a lurid account in a report made at Rome in 1556,⁷ and that the nunneries had gone further in decay than any other organisation in the church is in any event suggested by the fact that three or four of them were among the very few foundations which had been suppressed before the reformation.⁸

¹ It may be argued that this evidence is not significant, on the ground that the children of men who had no private property had no reason to seek legitimation: but (a) one would still expect to find legitimations after 1560, when the former regulars could hold private property, and (b) the principal advantage of legitimation was that it avoided the escheat of the bastard's goods to the crown should he die without lawful heirs of his body or disposition of his goods.

² Not quite invariably: John Rig, canon of Whithorn, could not write (*Register of Deeds*, II, 170).

³ D. Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland*, pp. 95–8; Morton Papers, 18 Aug. 1560; Books of Assumption, I, 195v; *East Lothian Antiq. and Field Naturalists' Soc. Trans.* v, 15.

⁴ Lindsay, *Works*, I, 83. ⁵ *Acts of the Lords of Council in Public Affairs*, p. 595.

⁶ Patrick, *Statutes of the Scottish Church* (S.H.S.), p. 96.

⁷ Pollen, *Papal Negotiations with Queen Mary* (S.H.S.), pp. 528–9.

⁸ D. E. Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland*, pp. 120, 121, cf. pp. 125, 127.

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The oldest Scottish friaries dated from the thirteenth century, and belonged to a phase which had immediately followed the main period of monastic foundations. But, while several Dominican and Franciscan houses were thus as old as some of the monasteries, the Carmelite friaries mostly originated after 1300, and a series of foundations of Observant Franciscan friaries extended through the late fifteenth century and even into the beginning of the sixteenth. Not only were new friaries thus being founded, but some of the older ones were still, in the middle of the sixteenth century, increasing their property by bequest and gift,¹ and it may be inferred that institutions which continued to attract fresh endowments must have been in a fairly healthy state. The friars were still known as preachers, and indeed so far as preaching was provided at all the burden seems to have fallen on them instead of being shared by the secular clergy:

War nocht the precheing of the beggyng freris
 Tynt [lost] war the faith among the seculeris²

As usual, it was the recent foundations—among the friaries those of the Observants—which were most faithful to their ideals, and the Observants of Jedburgh attracted to their rule a pious chronicler who had formerly been a canon of the Augustinian house of Inchaf-fray.³ With the onset of the reformation, friars were prominent on both sides. Knox's aversion to them arose less from any corruption in their orders than from the strong opposition which some of them offered to his party. On the other hand, not only did many friars become ministers or readers after 1560, but for a generation before that the Blackfriars especially had made conspicuous contributions to the furtherance of the reformed cause and several had been exiled or put to death.⁴ As to their morals, even the industrious Hay

¹ E.g. Moir Bryce, *Scottish Grey Friars*, II, 41, 42, 103, 138, and *Black Friars of Edinburgh*, pp. 85–91; *R.M.S.* III, 575; *R.S.S.* IV, 442, 1620.

² Lindsay, *Works*, I, 86; cf. 139, 276, 332, II, 89, 313.

³ Abell's Chronicle (Nat. Lib. Scot. MS. 1746), fos. 82b, 113a. Investigation might disclose that the Observants in general declined to accept the reformation and that some of them took refuge overseas, but there is no evidence to support the tale of a wholesale exodus. A Carmelite of Linlithgow, too, was a recusant who went into exile (*R.S.S.* VII, 632).

⁴ See in general Peter Lorimer, *Patrick Hamilton*, pp. 177–91.

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Fleming could not find a single legitimization of a child of a friar, and the catalogue of clerical misdemeanours in *The Paip that Pagane full of Pryde* has little ill to say of friars except that they resorted to flattery in order to obtain alms and that with 'babbling' they 'blerit our ee' [blinded our eyes]—which suggests preaching in support of the traditional theology.¹ Although John Major, a generation earlier, had been critical of the sumptuous churches of the friars,² their houses were not, as a matter of fact, wealthy.³ It is true that it was worth while to pay a premium for admission,⁴ and that as professional mendicants the friars acquired a reputation for greed which became proverbial;⁵ yet the worst that Knox could say of the Greyfriars of Perth was that they possessed fine linen and had a large store of salt beef in the month of May,⁶ and it may be significant of their standards that the payments made to friars after the reformation amounted to only a third or less of those made to monks, even although the monks, unlike the friars, were still entitled to free quarters.⁷ However, the revenues of the friars were derived largely from annuals payable from tenements in burghs,⁸ their houses were situated in burghs, their way of life open to the constant observation of the burghesses. Thus even the slightest deviation from their professed ideals would arouse immediate criticism, and, whenever feeling ran high, their properties were ready targets for zealously protestant burghers as well as for riff-raff in search of loot.⁹ The attacks on the friaries do not provide conclusive evidence either of grave delinquency within them or of a serious popular aversion, any more than the looting of Italian ice-cream shops in 1940 indicated the previous existence of anti-Italian feeling in Britain or any defects in the Italians as citizens.

¹ *Gude and Godlie Ballates*, pp. 179–80. Cf. Lindsay, *Works*, II, 89, 91.

² *Greater Britain* (S.H.S.), p. 297.

³ See the tables in Moir Bryce, *Scottish Grey Friars*, I, 140, and in Easson, *op. cit.* The Dominicans were better off than the Franciscans.

⁴ Moir Bryce, *op. cit.* I, 184; II, 36.

⁵ M. Anderson, *Proverbs in Scots*, Nos. 535, 739, 1712.

⁶ Laing, I, 322–3 (Dickinson, I, 162–3).

⁷ See *Innes Review*, *loc. cit.*

⁸ The Observants did not possess annuals, and were quite the poorest order.

⁹ Cf. John Lesley, *History of Scotland* (Bannatyne Club), p. 275; and see p. 48 below.