

Introduction

“Who is John Oman?” This question has been put to me hundreds of times by relatives, friends, people at dinner parties – anyone who has inquired about my academic interests over the past several years. Oman’s name is certainly not a “household word” among students of theology today, and he goes largely unread despite the fact that his works have occasionally been reprinted. Even among members of his own tradition, the United Reformed Church in England and the various branches of Presbyterianism in Scotland, Oman’s work remains a relatively forgotten part of the British theological heritage.

This book, however, is founded on the conviction that John Oman should be read today, and that he can be read with much profit. His language might border on the old-fashioned and the Victorian, but there is a persuasiveness and depth to his thought that greatly repays any effort to understand and appreciate it. Oman is neither a contemporary theologian, nor a well-known one, but I believe that a study of his writings can shed fresh light on many of the theological questions that we struggle with today, especially on the question that is the foundation and goal of all theology: the question of God.¹

Oman’s never-wavering conviction was that the only God who is worthy of the name is a God whose passion is men and women, all of whom God invites by every circumstance of their lives into a gracious, personal relationship with Godself and life-giving communion with one another. He never wrote a book on God as such, but all his thought was based on this conception of God’s radically personal nature and gracious dealing with humanity. What I have attempted to do in this book is to systematize Oman’s thought into a coherent doctrine of God, explicating and organizing what is often only implicit and random throughout his writings. I have quoted from his works quite freely, without regard for the dates of the

various works, but from his first publication to his last, Oman is the same on all his major points. Indeed, to give just one example, the importance of personal faithfulness to “discipline and duty,” out of which arises the experience of God as personal, is stressed in the opening pages of Oman’s first book (*Vision and Authority* [1902]), and the same words are the last words of his last (*Honest Religion* [published in 1941]).

My hope in writing this book is twofold. In the first place, I hope that my readers will come to understand the fundamental importance of a theology that from first to last takes the personal, relational nature of God – indeed of all reality – with utmost seriousness. With Nicholas Lash I am convinced that we need to break the stranglehold that a mechanistic image of the universe has on our imaginations if we are adequately to image the God of Jesus Christ in today’s world.² My theological studies as well as my pastoral experience over the last twenty years have convinced me that not only is a personal, gracious God the only God worthy of belief; such consistent, personalist thinking about God might even be a major factor in rescuing our world from nuclear or ecological disaster.³

Secondly, I hope that readers of this book will discover the thought of a great man, and will be inspired to read his works at first hand. I have tried to keep much of what I have systematized in Oman’s own words, but short quotations, however striking, cannot substitute for a direct reading of the man himself. As the title of this book indicates, this is a book about John Oman; but it is also, and even primarily, a book about what is perhaps his chief concern: the graciousness of a personal God.

This book represents a substantial revision and rewriting of my doctoral dissertation, completed in 1986 under the direction of Professor Thomas F. O’Meara, OP, at the University of Notre Dame. I want to take this occasion to thank Dr. O’Meara for all his support and trust during the writing of the original version, as well as the members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Robert Krieg, CSC, Dr. James White, and Dr. Patricia Wismer.

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Introduction

3

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CHAPTER I

A harmonizer of opposites

In the first lines of his autobiographical masterpiece *Father and Son*, Edmund Gosse describes his book as “the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs.”¹ *Father and Son* is a remarkably frank account of one person’s struggle with naïve faith in an age of monumental shifts in human consciousness and human knowledge. In many ways, as he intimates in his opening lines, Gosse’s own personal struggle was the struggle of two epochs, two ages: the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, with all that such a transition implies: the end of Victorian repression and the beginning of a more (at least outwardly) honest time of freedom to question and think for oneself.

Born into a deeply religious family of Plymouth Brethren, the son of the eminent naturalist, Philip Gosse, Edmund was raised in an almost hermetic atmosphere of unquestioned faith. But once on his own in London, and free to read and question for himself, he found that he could choose against religion only in order to take “a human being’s privilege to fashion his inner life for himself.”² For Edmund Gosse, the two temperaments and two consciences could not live together; for him, at least, it was all or nothing, faith or faithlessness, certainty or agnosticism—and he took the latter path.

Whether John Oman read Gosse’s book when it appeared in 1907 is not certain, but had he read it, he certainly would have been able to identify with Gosse’s dilemma. Oman certainly participated in the tensions and struggles of his times, and in many ways was a person of tensions himself. Oman’s life, like Gosse’s, was lived across two centuries. Born eleven years after Gosse in 1860, he also died eleven years after him, in 1939; he lived forty years in the nineteenth century, and almost forty in the twentieth. Like Gosse, he too

struggled with the challenge of science to religion, particularly with the challenge of cosmic and human evolution, and with the challenge as well of historical criticism to biblical and ecclesiastical authority and dogmatic certainty. Oman was a thoroughly modern person, and faced the questions and doubts of modernity unflinchingly.

But in a way quite unlike Edmund Gosse, Oman did not find the abandonment of religion the truly honest solution. It was not a question of an exclusive “either/or,” a choice of religion over against individual identity; it was rather one of an inclusive, radically revisionary “both/and.” Oman’s answer to the struggle of Gosse’s two temperaments was by way of a kind of harmonization of opposites.³ This can be seen, as his old student, T. W. Manson, wrote some years after Oman’s death, even in the titles of his works: *Vision and Authority*, *Faith and Freedom*, *Church and Divine Order*, *Grace and Personality*, *Natural and Supernatural* – all reflect the era’s and Oman’s own “fundamental struggle to hold together things that, on the superficial view, seem to be incapable of reconciliation.”⁴

The key to this harmonization was not some kind of vague compromise with the spirit of the times. It was a recognition of the fundamental significance of the person – himself or herself a harmony of opposites. In the person, aspects of reality that seem on the surface to be opposite and contradictory are combined in a unique way: spirit and matter, individuality and sociability, incommunicability and relation, inviolability and vulnerability, immanence and transcendence, subjectivity and objectivity. For Oman, only the person could synthesize these dialectical elements adequately, and so only the person held the secret to reality’s meaning. The human person and human experience are analogies, sacraments even, of all of reality, which at its heart is radically personal.

Perhaps the tensions that were part of Oman’s very make-up contributed to his basic attitude of harmonization. As I’ve mentioned above, Oman lived half his life in one century, and half in another; he might even be called a “twentieth-century Victorian.” But there were other tensions to be harmonized. He was a Scotsman who lived in England, a pastor who was a scholar, and while he held the position of a Cambridge professor he always remained close to his rather humble rural roots. No wonder then that Oman’s philosophy might be characterized paradoxically as an empirical

idealism, and as a theologian he might be called, as Brian Gerrish has called Schleiermacher, a “liberal evangelical.”⁵

What I would like to do in this first chapter and in the next is to introduce the reader to the person and world of John Oman in order to get a “feel” for the man and his concern for making religion intelligible in his radically changing world. To appreciate Oman fully, it is important to know about his life, the main historical, cultural and intellectual currents of his times, and the intellectual movements that were particularly influential in the formation of his thought. The rest of this chapter will sketch out Oman’s life; the second will survey the wider world in which he lived. These two chapters, together with a third on theological method, will provide a foundation for his doctrine of a gracious, personal God which will be developed in the rest of the book.

John Wood Oman was born on the Farm of Biggings, in the parish or town of Stenness, on the main island or “Mainland” of Scotland’s Orkney Islands on 23 July 1860. He was born the son of Simon Rust Oman and Isabella Irvine Rendall into what eventually became a large family – he was the second of six children, four sons and two daughters.⁶

If it is true that one’s earliest environment shapes a person in decisive ways, the fact that Oman grew up in the remote and windswept Orkneys and came “from the dour independent breed of Scottish crofters”⁷ is significant. Orkney’s remoteness, its sparse population, its fierce storms, the necessity of knowing how to sail a boat, to chart a course and to plow a stony field all seem to have contributed to Oman’s character, independence of thought, and style of religion. In Oman’s writings his contact with the sea and the land often served to make a striking illustration of a technical point. In his last, posthumously published book, *Honest Religion*, for example, the flavor of life in Orkney is evident in a description of his personal brand of Calvinism: “Extreme Calvinism I never came across, for I knew it only among a race who, whether for thought or action, divided humanity into men who went to sea and muffs who stayed at home, and for whom the sovereignty of God meant the assurance of being able to face all storms, and seek no harbour of refuge.”⁸ And it is the experienced sailor who speaks of the risk of faith as a “security on the ocean” that is “never to be won by hugging the shore.”⁹

In his published writings Oman never spoke directly about his family. He did, however, dedicate his second book to the memory of his father in a line that shows the debt he owed both to his father and his birthplace. In the dedication, Oman spoke of his father, a farmer and mail-steamer captain, as “a scholar only of life and action, but my best teacher.”¹⁰

Oman’s early education was conducted by a tutor whom a neighboring family had hired and who seems to have taught some of the other neighbors’ children as well. Church life as well would have had a strong influence on Oman’s mind and character. The kind of Calvinism that Oman described in *Honest Religion* would surely have been conducive to hard intellectual work and independent thinking. At any rate, Oman developed as a “dreamy, shy youth,”¹¹ a boy whose ideals at age fourteen were no greater than “to ride a horse bare-backed and steer a boat in a gale,”¹² but who, by age seventeen in 1877, when he entered Edinburgh University, had acquired “a well-stored mind, with anything but an insular intellectual outlook and more important still, with his native gift of original thought unimpaired.”¹³

Even though he had had no formal schooling up until this time, the system of universities in Scotland was such that anyone from any and all Churches and social class could study at them once they had reached the proper age and educational level. P. Carnegie Simpson speaks, as a “national prerogative” in Scotland, of “a good education for the family despite *res angusta domi*.”¹⁴

Oman’s career at the university was a distinguished one. A degree was won by attending classes for four years, and then by taking examinations in classical literature, mathematics and philosophy. Oman graduated in 1882 with first class honors in philosophy.¹⁵

It was during his university years that Oman not only discovered his life-long passion for truth; he also, quite unexpectedly and, it seems, quite unwillingly, discovered his vocation as a minister and theologian. The occasion which brought on this discovery was the crisis in the Free Church of Scotland which is commonly called the “Robertson Smith Case.” This controversy represents such an important moment in Oman’s life that some paragraphs are needed to describe it in some detail.

William Robertson Smith was a brilliant young professor at the Free Church College in Aberdeen who, in 1875, had been given the commission by the editors of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia*

Britannica to write several articles on biblical topics. There had been a flurry of controversy when Smith had published his first article entitled “Angel,” but when the second volume of the encyclopedia appeared, it contained Smith’s article entitled “Bible” which had been written under the full influence of the German “higher criticism.”¹⁶ This article created an outraged protest from Smith’s very traditional and very conservative church.

At the general assembly of the Scottish Free Church in 1876, Smith’s views were discussed and some in the assembly wanted to bring charges of heresy against him. The man who was the acknowledged leader of the church, however, Principal Robert Rainy of New College, Edinburgh, defended Smith’s unorthodoxy, even though he hinted that someone with Smith’s views should not be allowed to teach at one of the Free Church’s official institutions.¹⁷

Between the 1876 and 1877 assemblies, Rainy tried to get Smith to agree to some kind of compromise position, so that both he and his accusers could be satisfied. Smith, however, wrote harsh and unbending replies to his critics – “precisely the kind of thing which, from Professor Smith’s point of view, was irresistible and from Principal Rainy’s, deplorable.”¹⁸

As the case proceeded through 1877, 1878, and 1879, it attracted international attention and interest. P. Carnegie Simpson reports that Wellhausen, with whom Smith had studied, followed the procedures closely. On the conservative side, Simpson continues, John Henry Newman wrote to the Principal of Robertson Smith’s college in Aberdeen that he would “rejoice to hear that you have succeeded in your efforts against the Liberalism of our day.”¹⁹ Alec Vidler writes how the controversy dominated the news in these years. It even overshadowed interest in William Gladstone’s “Midlothian Campaign” in 1880 which brought the Scots-ancestored statesman back to power as prime minister and changed the course of British political life. The whole affair was reported at length in the newspapers and “followed and reproduced in railway carriages, workshops, and country smithies.”²⁰

It is no exaggeration to say that the discussion, which was read with care all over the country, was an epoch in the theological education of Scotland. A presbytery is often left entirely to the more ecclesiastically minded of Churchmen, but on these occasions men attended – laymen as strongly as ministers – who had to inquire their way to the Presbytery Hall.²¹

The final outcome of the case was that Smith, though not found guilty of heresy, was dismissed from his teaching position at Aberdeen. His own personal defeat, however, was interpreted as a moral victory by his followers, and as the last gasp of opposition to the newer positions of scriptural scholarship. Within a few days of Smith's defeat, some three hundred of his supporters published a statement which declared that "the decision of the Assembly leaves all Free Church ministers and office-bearers free to pursue the critical questions raised by Professor W. R. Smith."²²

B. M. G. Reardon eloquently sums up the Robertson Smith case in his history of British theology in the nineteenth century:

The trial for heresy of a prominent scholar and sincere Christian teacher is to present-day ways of thinking repugnant and absurd. But Smith's case, however inconvenient to himself, was not simply a waste of time and energy. His own carefully worded statement, eloquent and logical, forced the biblical question upon public attention and gave rise to nationwide discussion. Issues had been brought to the fore which could not now be ignored or suppressed. Younger churchmen were bound to take account of them and ponder their implications. Criticism had so challenged orthodoxy as to make a complacent relapse into the old assumptions impossible.²³

Such "complacent relapse" was certainly impossible for the young John Oman, who, like so many in Scotland, followed the Robertson Smith case closely and from it found a passion for truth and honesty in religion which impelled him toward the ministry and which lasted all his life. Years later, in 1922, on the occasion of his inauguration as principal of Westminster College, Cambridge, Oman reflected on his student years and on the crisis that turned his life so decidedly in the direction of the pastor and scholar:

When I went to the university, a raw lad from the ends of the earth, with little equipment except a vast responsiveness to the intellectual environment, the Robertson Smith case was shaking the whole land. I had no notion, in those days, of ever being interested in theology, and my ignorance of the matters in dispute was profound. But I read his speeches, and, on one occasion, heard him. I seemed to find the same kind of knowledge as was making the world a place for me of incessant discovery and the same passion for reality as seemed at the moment life's supreme concern.²⁴

He went on in this lecture to say that, besides the resonance he felt with Robertson Smith's honesty of scholarship, what struck him was the fact that people were saying that "even if all he said were true,

regard for useful tradition and the ecclesiastical amenities should have kept him from saying it.”²⁵

In his Preface to the 1928 edition of *Vision and Authority* Oman said that this opposition to Robertson Smith had had a strange effect on him: “Had I been then intending the ministry, probably I should have been put off it, but this affected me somewhat as a call to my life’s work.”²⁶ Toward the end of his life, in *Concerning the Ministry*, Oman confessed that he did not want to be a minister, but it was something that he could not escape. If he were to be true to himself in the face of the questions raised by the Robertson Smith case, it was something that he had to do.²⁷ And so he gave up his ambition to be a physician²⁸ and after graduation from the university he entered the United Presbyterian Church Theological Hall and began theological studies.

From 1882 until 1885 Oman studied theology at the Theological Hall. In these years he came under the influence of, among others, the rather enlightened systematic theologian, John Cairns, and the eminent *professor extraordinarius* of practical theology, John Ker.²⁹ In addition to his studies in Edinburgh and according to a program of the Theological Hall, Oman was exposed to German theology in summer semesters at Erlangen in 1883 and at Heidelberg in 1885.

At Erlangen Oman attended the lectures of Franz Hermann Reinhold von Frank, the “real dogmatician of Erlangen Theology”³⁰ at the time, who had developed an experience-centered approach into a complete system. He also attended the lectures of the exegete, Theodor Zahn, of the philosopher of religion, G. Class, and of the Church historian, Albert Hauck.

Though a strongly conservative school, Erlangen was one of the premier theological centers of Europe at the time, and von Frank in particular was one of Europe’s leading theologians. *Erlanger Theologie* was opposed to the dominant liberal theology of which Ritschl and subsequently von Harnack and Herrmann were the leaders, but despite its conservative tone it was not a return to the scholasticism or to the rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but a creative challenge to it.³¹ The idealism of Schelling, who was professor at Erlangen from 1821 until 1827, was of considerable influence, as was – though perhaps to a lesser degree – the influence of Schleiermacher. But it was this influence of Schleiermacher which led the Erlangen theologians, particularly Johann Christian Conrad von Hofmann and Franz Hermann Reinhold von Frank, to seek “an