

New Lease of Life

A preface by James Packer to **The Principles of Theology** by W. H. Griffith Thomas

Churchman 92/1 1978

Welsh by extraction, scholarly by inclination, hard-working by disposition, evangelical by conversion and Anglican by conviction, William Henry Griffith Thomas (1861-1924) was a Christian minister of outstanding abilities. After fruitful parish ministry at St Aldate's, Oxford, and St Paul's, Portman Square, London, he became Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and then moved to Canada as Professor of Old Testament and, later, of Systematic Theology in addition at Wycliffe College, Toronto. His clear and well-stocked mind and his plain, pointed, thrustful way with words, so businesslike, economical and unsentimental, brought him widespread acceptance as author, Bible teacher and theological instructor on both sides of the Atlantic. All his published work reveals him as a dedicated professional of enormous industry and competence. In 1919 he moved to Philadelphia, and for five years fulfilled a peripatetic ministry throughout North America. He had agreed to teach systematic theology as a visiting professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, which was founded in 1924, but he died suddenly, still at the height of his powers, before the Seminary opened.

He left the manuscript of *The Principles of Theology* complete, and in 1930 it was published in London, with commendatory prefaces by Dr Dyson Hague of Wycliffe College and Dr T. W. Gilbert, formerly Principal of St John's Hall, Highbury. What they said is worth recalling.

'The late Dr Griffith Thomas', wrote Canon Hague, 'was remarkable as a teacher and leader. His outstanding characteristic was clearness and forcefulness. He had the power of presenting every subject, whether with the pen or with the voice, with a singular conciseness of order and method. From his early days in King's College, London and Christ Church, Oxford, he lived a life of the most strenuous activity, and was ever a prodigious toiler.'

'This massive work was the harvest of many years of the widest reading and profoundest thinking. . . . In fact, it is almost an Anglican Encyclopaedia, a volume not so much for reading from cover to cover, but as a book of reference treating in the ablest possible manner those great principles of Christian dogmatics that must occupy the thought and reading of all earnest Churchmen.'

'His (Dr Thomas') many writings made his name well known to the Christian public, and the influence of such of his books as *The Catholic Faith* and *The Work of the Ministry* has been far-reaching,' declared Dr Gilbert. 'But . . . it is no exaggeration to say that all his earlier work will be surpassed by the volume which is now published.'

Half a century later, it is apparent that these were just estimates. Thomas' volume has been in print, selling steadily, throughout the period; it has become the regular textbook on the Articles in evangelical Anglican theological colleges; and it holds its place as the most thorough historical exposition of the Anglican confessional basis that has yet been produced. As such, it stands by merit alongside Hardwick's *History of the Articles*, itself now more than a century old. But with books of this quality age does not matter, for they do not date. They may be ignored or forgotten, as in fact both these have been in recent years; they are not, however, superseded, for a job well and thoroughly done does not need doing again.

Not that these two books are identical in character. Hardwick, goaded by Newman's sleight-of-hand with the Articles, offers specialist research; Thomas' 250,000 terse words, expressing exact thought at maximum compression, constitute a text-book, an organized compendium of biblical and theological material culled from almost four centuries of English writing, aiming to display and vindicate as true, 'the essential Anglican doctrine'. Thomas' statements of purpose in his original preface make this clear, thus:

'It is believed that there is room for another presentation of Anglican Doctrine as embodied in the Articles. In the preparation of it all the important works from Rogers down to modern days have been carefully considered and their vital points discussed as far as possible. The effort has been made to look at the Articles in the light of the historical circumstances which gave rise to them, and thus to derive the essential Anglican Doctrine from the known views of the times of their compilation and revision, and also of the men who were responsible for them. . . .

'It seemed best to keep as closely as possible to the Articles as the truest expression of and best guide to Anglican theology . . .'

Clearly, such a purpose excludes any quest for originality—though it does not by any means exclude the possibility that the author's powers of analysis and synthesis will lead him to crystallize out of familiar material deep simplicities and simple profundities which will strike his readers as new revelations. In fact, Griffith Thomas, brilliant teacher that he was, often achieves just this, as did an earlier church theologian of whom Thomas' compression, precision, penetration, arranging of themes, sharpness of thought, sureness of judgement, polemical edge and practical aims vividly remind one—namely, John Calvin, whose *Institutes of* (not just Christian theology, but) *the Christian Religion* also eschew originality, yet achieve massive clarifications which indelibly impress the mind.

As in general terms Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* rounded off the forty-year Reformation era in European theology, so in general terms *The Principles of Theology* may be said to have rounded off a four-hundred year era of Protestant Anglicanism, and in particular to have summed up a century of vigilant scholarship which, in face of what looked like Rome's Trojan horse in the Church of England, had sought to vindicate historic Protestantism as authentically Anglican and as the only position with more than squatter's rights within the Establishment. This was the scholarship of such men as William Goode, George Cornelius Gorham, T. P. Boulton, T. S. L. Vogan, Nathaniel Dimock, E. A. Litton, Henry Wace, Handley C. G. Moule, J. T. Tomlinson, W. Prescott Upton and Charles Sydney Carter—giants in the land in their own day, however little remembered now. In his preface, Thomas acknowledges a special debt to lectures on the Articles by his two Principals at Kings' College, London, Barry and Wace, and also to two books produced by members of this school of thought. The first is Litton's *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* (first edition in two parts, 1882 and 1892; third edition 1912), 'which for clearness of view, firmness of grasp, balance of statement, and forcefulness of presentation, remains unsurpassed among works of Anglican Dogmatics.' The second is Boulton's manual entitled *Commentary on the Thirty-nine Articles forming an Introduction to the Theology of the Church of England* (1871; fifth edition, 1880), which Thomas always cites as *The Theology of the Church of England*. Thomas' book, like Boulton's, was born in the college classroom (Boulton was the first Principal of the London College of Divinity), and could truly be described as an updating of Boulton, at three times the length. The whole corpus of anti-Tractarian writing stands, however, behind *The Principles of Theology*; Thomas knew it intimately, and drew on it heavily.

Thomas' *Principles* show the stature of the tradition which he represents. It was not the narrow, negative and fanatical thing that narrow, negative and fanatical acts by some Protestants sometimes made it appear. It had breadth, balance, learning and great intellectual strength. Methodologically, in its way of relating Scripture, reason and the Christian past, and substantively, in its account of the content of Christianity, it breathes the spirit of Cranmer, Jewel and Hooker in a very marked way. Distrusting the intellectual rigidity which it thought it saw in Calvin and the Westminster standards, it rejoiced in the elbow-room for mental enterprise and rethinking which the broad and comparatively minimal statements of the Articles allow. Thomas' expression of this attitude is typical. 'There is obvious danger', he writes, 'in every attempt at systematizing Christian truth . . . it is far better to be content with "Articles," or "points," with gaps unfilled . . . This method prevents teaching becoming hardened into a cast-iron system which cannot expand. It is the virtue of the Church of England articles that they . . . do not commit Churchmen to an absolute, rigid system of doctrine from which there is no relief and of which there is no modification.'¹ Both intellectualism and anti-intellectualism are mistakes to be avoided. On the first:

'In the past days theology has been too closely limited to metaphysics, intellectualism and philosophy . . . theology is of the heart, and the deepest truths are inextricably bound up with personal needs and experiences. The moral consciousness of man must also find a place . . . As Christianity speaks to every part of our nature, so every part must take its share in the reception and expression of Christian theology.'²

On the second:

'Modern impatience against dogma, whether on the part of the Ritschlian theologian (Thomas would surely have put "radical" had he been writing today), or of "the man in the street," . . . is a phase of that practical agnosticism which would insist that no valid knowledge of God and His truth is possible.'³ 'The intellectual grasp of Christianity is essential for a strong Christian life, for giving balance and force to experience, for protection against error, for equipment for service. It is possible to be thought spiritual and yet to be only emotional without intellectual clearness and power. This will inevitably produce weakness . . .'⁴

Christianity is life, that is, personal communion with God in and through Jesus Christ, and an experiential, redemption-oriented Christocentricity is thus the key to right theologizing. Let Thomas say it in his own way.

'The sole and sufficient guarantee of Christian doctrine being at once intellectual and experimental is its constant and close association with the Person of Jesus Christ. In order to avoid anything dry and lifeless we must relate every truth to the Person of Him Who declared, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." When it is realised that "Christianity is Christ", that Christ Himself is the substance, source, and spring of all doctrine, our theology will be truly Christian.'⁵

Such is the perspective which Thomas himself maintains throughout this and all his books.

In terms of both motivation and method, the Protestant Evangelical tradition which we are describing—which is, in fact, an ecumenical thing, embracing great Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Lutheran and Methodist writers, as well as Anglicans—may fairly be called biblical, rational, and in its concern for the fulness of revealed truth, catholic also. One basic conviction which its exponents constantly voiced and illustrated was that positions claimed as Catholic—capital 'C'—were really sectarian eccentricities, not having apostolic

warrant; but when Thomas wrote his Protestant exposition of basic Christianity, Prayer Book style, he called it *The Catholic Faith*. As for the way in which teachers within this tradition used reason and the Bible, their assertion of scriptural fundamentals was free of that naive obscurantism sometimes labelled ‘fundamentalist’, and their reasoning stood in sharp contrast to that rationalistic scepticism which often passes for rational theology today. They proceed, rather, on the basis of the historic Christian confidence that what biblical writers affirm is revelation and instruction from God, and that all God’s revelation, viewed aright, will prove to be good and glorious, internally coherent and consistent with all other known truths and recognized values, so that a synthesis of secular and sacred learning, the latter interpreting the former and the former confirming the latter, is a proper and practicable goal. Granted, the tradition as Thomas knew it was stronger on grace than on nature, and on the given realities of supernatural salvation than on the ontological and epistemological problems that are bound up with them, and Thomas’ textbook reflects this. But the clear and insistent way in which writers of this school, to a man, centre on the Christ and the redemption set forth in the New Testament is magnificent. I for one (one of an increasing number, I am glad to say) find this tradition to be surely founded, true in substance all along the line, as far as it goes (internal differences of detail appearing unimportant), and needing only to be undergirded, developed and reapplied at some points to give us just that guidance in grasping God’s truth that we currently need. Therefore, in face of the Athenianism of theology today, with its feverish lust for new directions and its endless speculative flounderings, it is to me a great privilege to be allowed to commend this new edition of Griffith Thomas’ theological Rock of Gibraltar. How many folk now tossed to and fro by conflicting winds of doctrine will be drawn to cast anchor here remains to be seen, but it can be said at once that it will be great gain for the church if many do.

Though Thomas deals with most of the standard themes of theology, offering superb mental frameworks for both introductory overviews and subsequent deeper research, he casts his book into the form of a one-by-one study of the Articles, rather than a topically organized treatise. This gives it an inescapably episodic character, like a stroll through a department store where treasures and trinkets of all sorts are on sale together. It is a reversion from the method of the two evangelical textbooks which, effectively if not intentionally, Thomas’ book displaced, Litton’s and Handley C. G. Moule’s brilliant little *Outlines of Christian Doctrine* (1889; fourth (?) printing, 1919), to that of Boulton. Was this, we ask, the best option? In his preface, Thomas allows that one may wish to ‘study the subject of Dogmatics from a wider standpoint’, but he would certainly have made two points to justify what he did.

First, the Articles retain their place as the Anglican confession—‘they mark the position of the Church of England as it was re-stated in the sixteenth century, and . . . they still mark our present position and attitude’⁶—and in view of their importance, both historical and normative, they ought to be studied in their own terms. Thomas wrote his book, subtitled ‘An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles’, to help us do this, and so learn to distinguish the given and fixed ‘theology of the Church of England’ from the opinions, right or wrong, wise or foolish, of individual Anglicans.

Second, an exposition of the Articles is not only a more modest but also a more representatively Anglican undertaking than a comprehensive dogmatics can ever be, just because at so many points the Church of England leaves its adherents free, in John Wesley’s words, to ‘think and let think’. Thomas’ aim clearly was to write a book which demanded to be read, not as a ‘one-man’, ‘party’ statement, however brilliant, but as a solid demonstration

of where the Church of England, as by law established, actually stands on questions of doctrinal truth.

It is clear that in convictional terms Thomas was an evangelical before he was an Anglican (which was as it always should be); but it is also clear that his reason for being and remaining an Anglican was his certainty that by historical and theological right real Anglicanism is evangelicalism in a pure form. Within the Anglican fold he saw himself and those whose views he shared not as party eccentrics who needed to beg for toleration, but as mainstream churchmen recalling their benighted brethren to a true Anglican identity. 'I do not care much', he once wrote, 'for mere party views, high, low, or broad, but I do care that a minister should be truly converted, truly spiritual, loving his Bible, and hearty in his acceptance of Articles VI and XX. Then he can call himself what he likes.'⁷ To his evangelical associates he once said: 'We ought to have the courage of our convictions. There is no reason why an Evangelical Churchman should ever feel the slightest degree of nervousness about his position; we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by fearlessness and courage. With the New Testament on our side and the Prayer Book on our side, with everything that we know of history from the Reformation on our side, why should we be nervous? . . . Everything that has been discovered connected with the Reformation and the story of Edward and Mary and Elizabeth, has gone to support and confirm the Evangelical position, and we have nothing to be nervous or fearful about. We ought to be courageous and believe in our cause, and the man who does that will find himself on the winning side.'⁸ Thomas was only practising what he preached when in calm yet vigorous confidence, using the rich resources of his broad-based and clear-headed scholarship, he spelt out in detail from the Articles an account of 'the theology of the Church of England' which no faithful Anglican could or can dispute. And Anglicans must acknowledge this; they can, no doubt, ignore Anglican doctrine, or argue that it ought not to be what it is, but they cannot deny, in 1977 any more than in 1930, that 'the theology of the Church of England' (understanding the Church of England as a continuing community, constitutionally committed) is as Griffith Thomas says.

His book has, indeed, scrappy aspects. 'Creation' does not appear in the index, and the phrase 'Maker of all things' in Article I is dismissed in three lines (p 17). Thomas does not discuss the nature of angels nor God's image in man, and his scattered remarks on humanness in the Introduction and the exposition of Articles IX and X do not make an adequate anthropology. The treatment of Article XVII is gingerly and incomplete, and because Thomas is reacting hard against real or fancied extremes his touch in what he does say positively is less sure than usual. The intermediate state is touched on in connection with Christ's descent into hell (Article III) and purgatory (Article XXII), and the resurrection hope has a few lines in the exposition of Article IV (p 81), but in general the treatment of 'redemption applied' is sketchier than the Articles themselves would lead one to expect. The slim account of the Holy Spirit (Article V), as Thomas himself says, needs amplifying from his Stone Lectures, *The Holy Spirit of God* (1913). The old-time 'Keswick' view of sanctification glimpsed on pp 174, 208 f. and 233 f. may seem to need qualifying as well as clarifying, and also some dark sayings about Christ's return and salvation outside the church (pp 88, 256) which reflect dispensational pre-millennialist ideas. Yet for its size the book covers an amazing amount of ground with great thoroughness.

But must not an account of the faith written more than fifty years ago be out of date now? Superficially, yes, but fundamentally, no. It is certainly true that Thomas wrote before theology became ecumenical, and before Barth exhibited objective Chalcedonian Christology set in subjective existentialist cement, and before Bultmann demythologized both the Jesus of

history and the Christ of faith, and before Rome set herself to assimilate Scripture and the Reformation without loss of infallibility (a hard task), and before Anglican radicals, with cool Broad Church arrangements of Bultmann's hot Lutheran music, planted a sceptical and subjectivist 'new hermeneutic' on English soil. It is further true that these developments, whatever their ultimate importance, have come to preoccupy theology so fully that discussions antedating them now seem very remote, so that a man like Griffith Thomas, with his neat simplicities and that 'long peaceful breathing' (Barth's phrase) which marks out spokesmen for traditions, could easily be written off as less like a master than a dinosaur. It is true too that the theological problems which exercised Thomas (the claims of Counter-Reformation Roman and late nineteenth-century Anglican Catholics about church, ministry, mediation, sacraments and salvation) are not for most of us today's chief battleground, if only because Catholics today are confused and conciliatory rather than clear and contentious about them. And it is no less true that the issues pressing us hardest (such as biblical interpretation; the nature of revelation, and of theological language; the alleged propriety of theological pluralism; the relation between faith and history; humanitarian Christology and the new unitarianism; universalism, and the status of non-Christian faiths; and the theology of 'charismatic' experience) were not Griffith Thomas' problems, so that for help through their intricacies we must look elsewhere. Nonetheless, Thomas' magisterial analysis of Christian basics remains precious, for essentials do not change. Pressure from invaders may oblige the city's defenders for a time to think more about the tactics of defence than about the city itself; yet it is the city that matters, and the defence is only important for the city's sake. Thomas' *Principles* gives us not only yesterday's defence, but the eternal city itself, and does so in a way which, like Calvin's, yields more help for today's debates than one would have thought possible.

By all accounts Thomas was a sunny, modest, quiet man, free from pretensions and illusions, who knew his role under God to be one of collecting, crystallizing and communicating truth and wisdom dug out by others, rather than of breaking fresh ground himself. His preface to *The Holy Spirit of God*, and his dedication of it to Davison (Methodist), Denney (Presbyterian), Forsyth (Congregationalist), Robertson Nicoll (Presbyterian), Swete (Anglican), Warfield, and the memory of James Orr (both Presbyterian), 'to whom in various ways I owe so much', make this plain. Synthesis and mediation was his 'line'. It was in lucid and orderly but non-technical presentation of complex things that he excelled. Knowing this, and having no ambition save to do his best for God, he lavished on preaching and journalism the time that academic research and technical writing might otherwise have claimed. The shoemaker stuck to his last. So we must not expect to find in Griffith Thomas what it was not his calling to provide. He would doubtless have accepted as just the judgment of Stewart G. Cole who, after praising the scholarship of the Princeton conservatives of the first quarter of this century, went on to say: 'Of less scholarly equipment but constantly writing for the defence of the faith were such Bible School men as . . . W. H. Griffith Thomas (*sic*)'⁹—save that he would surely have demurred at the description of an ex-Principal of Wycliffe Hall and Professor at Wycliffe College as a 'Bible School man'! But, though he was not perhaps the most learned or profound among the evangelical theologians of his day, the fact remains that to him, as to no others, it was given magisterially and definitively to spell out, on the basis of others' minute researches and debates, what the Articles actually affirm, both in principle and in detail; what biblical warrant there is for making such affirmations; and what their implications are in relation to various forms of Catholic tradition and (less fully) of shallow rationalism. Wise men who care to know these things, or simply want a first-class grounding in evangelical belief, will gratefully reach out for *The Principles of Theology*, saying as David said of Goliath's sword, 'There is none like that; give it to me' (1 Sam. 21:9). May

there be many such! It is my delight, as well as my privilege, to usher Griffith Thomas' greatest book back into print for its new lease of life.

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Endnotes:

- 1) *The Principles of Theology* p xxiv. Article (*articulus* in Latin) means a 'joint' in a body or a 'point' in a discourse.
- 2) *Ibid.* p xxvii.
- 3) *Ibid.* p xxviii.
- 4) *Ibid.* p xxvi.
- 5) *Ibid.* p xxviii.
- 6) *Ibid.* p xxv.
- 7) Quoted from M. Guthrie Clark, *William Henry Griffith Thomas* (Church Book Room Press: London 1949) p 17.
- 8) *The Conflict of Ideals in the English Church* (Wycliffe College: Toronto 1910) p 10.
- 9) S. G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (Richard R. Smith: New York 1931) p 46.