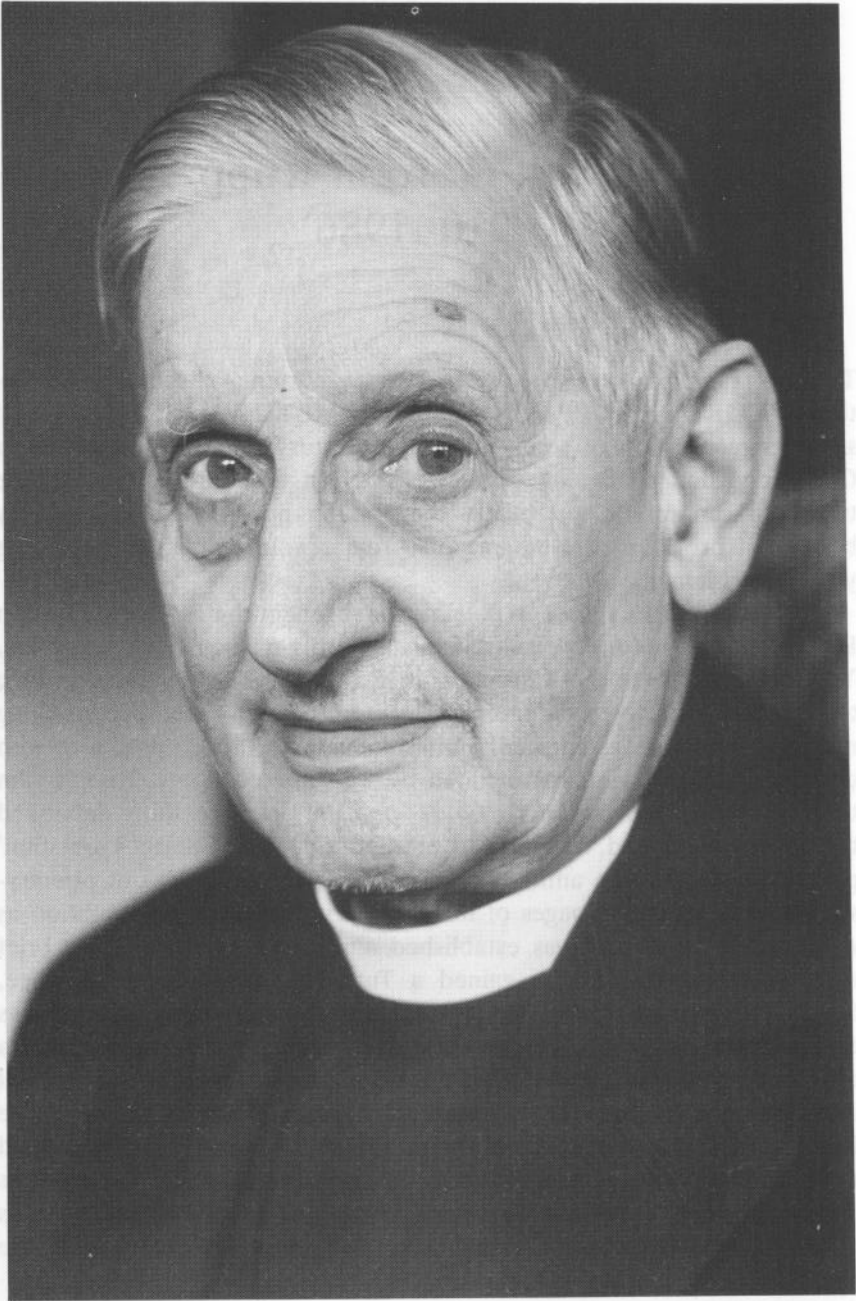


Ernest Gordon Rupp 1910–1986

THROUGH FENLAND FOG AND FROST on a winter morning, a headstone inscription to 'GORDON RUPP, F.B.A., D.D.' as 'METHODIST PREACHER' suggests recognition of some nineteenth-century minister rather than a Cambridge don professing Church History in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Albeit bleak, the epitaph nevertheless has validity because it proclaims the enigma of a remarkable individual in striking yet succinct language.

It was an early exercise in polemic that brought the Reverend Gordon Rupp a certain notoriety. In itself this is hardly a singular circumstance. Yet how appropriate that Chislehurst's Methodist Minister should trouble to provide so effective a defence of Martin Luther at a time when anything remotely German was decidedly unfashionable. Although produced with due deference to standards dictated by war-time economy, Rupp's slim tract – *Martin Luther, Hitler's Cause- or Cure?* – successfully debunked the debunker. Indeed, an appendix entitled 'The Art of Select Quotation' proved so effective an antidote to the dangerous distortions of primary-source material in the pages of his adversary, that Rupp's reputation as a Reformation scholar was established almost overnight. After a brief spell at Wesley House, he gained a Tutorship at Richmond College, Surrey (1947); and from there, by invitation of the Master and Fellows of Trinity, he visited Cambridge again to deliver, as Birkbeck Lecturer, a considered course on Luther. Rarely has a guest lecturer been instrumental in revising accepted academic opinion, University circles buzzing with 'the Reformation according to Rupp' to such an extent that Herbert Butterfield was asked for an assessment of the current Birkbeck course in the columns of *The Cambridge Review*. The article made good reading, and remains of relevance. For when addressing himself to the place of humour in the



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lecturer's art, the Professor of Modern History wrote that Rupp 'takes us through darker tunnels and thornier paths, into worlds well beyond the frontiers of wise-cracking'.

With the publication of his *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition* later that same year, followed by *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* in 1951, it was no surprise to find Gordon Rupp appointed Lecturer in Divinity at Cambridge from Michaelmas 1952. This post he held for four years, treating historians and theologians to stimulating classroom expositions covering the whole range of Reformation Studies. Meanwhile, those preferring written analysis applauded the appearance of the Birkbeck course, now suitably extended for publication, and a major work of Luther Studies in English as *The Righteousness of God* (1953). In this place it is appropriate to emphasize the sheer englishness of the monograph, Rupp, with characteristic modesty, later informing a research student privileged with confidences *de temps en temps*, that his work merely introduced to Karl Holl those who would not, or could not, *Deutsch sprechen*.

In 1956 the University of Manchester instituted a new Chair in Ecclesiastical History, inviting Dr Rupp to become the first incumbent. By permission of the Methodist Conference he was able to accept the proffered post, not only filling it with distinction for twelve years, but also playing a wider role of increasing importance in such a significant Northern city. The appointment was a triumph, but if the eighteenth-century patronage of Norman Sykes had secured Rupp to be the first professor, the Cambridge upstart initially experienced such a hard time from an ambitious Senior Lecturer that, apart from the enjoyment work with the Free-Church Colleges brought him, Rupp found little comfort in work among the dark Satanic mills. Sykes's second *coup* thus helped his pupil almost more than the first, the creation of another Church History chair translating the troublesome Bishop Fraser Senior Lecturer, one Clifford Dugmore, to King's, London, in 1958. Gaining what he once described as 'a second wind', Rupp was at last able to get to grips with his real Manchester assignment, and quite apart from teaching Reformation Studies in the Department of History, became Dean of the Faculty of Theology (1961 & 1962), and, from 1966, held office as Public Orator to the University. That he also continued to work closely with the many Theological Colleges adorning Manchester in those days, explained the return to Cambridge of a man whose wide experience the Methodist Conference intended to use when he was appointed Principal of Wesley House (1967).

Shortly afterwards, the mantle of his mentor Norman Sykes fell upon him when the Electors chose Rupp as Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History in succession to Dr W. O. Chadwick. In fact, 1968 proved something of an *annus mirabilis*, for it was in June that Gordon Rupp was elected

President of Conference by a body of some six hundred Methodist Ministers and Laymen at the Central Hall, Westminster. After chairing the actual Conference session, a year of itinerant visitation of Methodist Districts throughout the length and breadth of the land followed, coupled of course with chairmanship of the Church's Central Committees. It was a demanding period requiring rare reserves of stamina and talent, but a time made altogether memorable by the President's revelations of wisdom and wit at new-style 'Teach-in' sessions designed to challenge and encourage the sect's faithful in the 'Good Old Cause'. On such occasions Gordon Rupp was evidently and effortlessly at home with all types of congregation—northern industrial 'ex-Primitive', London suburban, remote and rural, school and University. Possessed of consummate pastoral skills, as a preacher he could play on every kind of audience almost at will. In a trice sober men and women were thus led through helpless mirth at aspects of the human situation to an adoring meditation of the Christ Who inspired and confirmed them in the faith. Ten years on (1978) he would publish *The Sixty Plus & Other Sermons* and the briefest sampling of such homilies explains his pulpit approach and appeal. But in 1968 there were also sorrows to endure, for that year brought Rupp, just as much as Archbishop Michael Ramsey, considerable personal grief when the Church of England chose to ignore its leadership and reject the unity proposals for healing the schism with Methodism. Undaunted, however, Principal Rupp was well placed in Cambridge to achieve much in microcosm by encouraging dispirited students to play an active part building up a united theological college—to be known as the Cambridge Federation—based in Jesus Lane.

For some considerable time Dr Rupp had been in demand as a speaker at ecumenical conferences, and it was certainly appropriate that, in addition to the honorary doctorates and fellowships that now came his way, the ex-President of Conference should gain recognition as a Member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. If colleagues in the Cambridge Faculties of History and Divinity sometimes bemoaned the absence of the Dixie Professor at academic boards, it was because his impish reserve invariably denied them any insight or reference to his world-wide involvement. The only complaint lesser mortals could reasonably make about Rupp was Samuel Johnson's critique of a Wesley so busy that he never found the time to 'fold his legs and have his talk out'. At Manchester Professor Rupp had done the work of two men; and *Alma Mater Cantab.* demanded even more of him. With the publication of *Patterns of Reformation* (1969), the Dixie afforded Reformation Studies another substantial work of scholarship, in particular bringing a much-needed balance and sanity to the historian's understanding of sixteenth-century religious radicalism. At Wesley House too, a College

now transformed by the generous benefaction of the Rank Building and the enhanced community life thus symbolized, the counsel and vision of the Principal and his wife proved crucial in the implementation of the new training scheme for ordinands. Likewise, the higher reaches of ecumenical involvement continued to take their toll, so that if Professor Rupp was missed one Thursday because he was lecturing in the United States of America, absence the following week could be explained in terms of a visit to an Iron Curtain country. It might seem that he who once termed Erasmus 'the original flying Dutchman' was himself fast becoming something of a fleeting ecumenical vision. Yet in fact Cambridge, just as much as Manchester, gave full scope for the old priorities, regular evenings being set aside when Gordon and Marjorie attended their local church Bible class. As for retirement, Rupp had a Canterbury vision, for, a citizen of *Ave Mater Angliae*, Martin, only son of his marriage to Marjorie Edith (née Hibbard), was himself happily married with a family of three, with twins in the Cathedral Choir School. In Canterbury, too, was a little-used accession—the Weimar *Ausgabe* no less—in the Library of the University of Kent.

But the vision was never realized and Rupp's last years denied the man, like many a productive scholar, an Autumn of mellow fruitfulness. If his scholarly circle paid him tribute with a *Festschrift* (*Christian Spirituality*, edited by his pupil Peter Newman Brooks) as early as 1975, Rupp's death in 1986 prompted much comment on a man whose wider ministry touched a full spectrum of lesser mortals. On the whole, he was a man who wrote theological history—for many nowhere better than in his last 'big book', *Religion in England, 1688–1791*, a Clarendon Press study of a period in which, because of the origins of Methodism, he had regularly dabbled and held almost as dear as the Reformation itself. But reports of his unexpected death submitted Rupp to the widest social comment. Already known for his silence (or absence) at formal Faculty and College meetings in Cambridge, his reputation for participation elsewhere now became apparent. He had, it transpired, been acute as an observer for Methodism at Vatican II, and a leading Roman Catholic ecumenist noted that 'he spoke with such a sense of affection for the people he was talking to . . . yet we knew he could not attend a lot because of Marjorie's grave illness'. Nor was his comment uncritical, for the same witness found himself in shock when Rupp 'launched into a spell-binding exposition of the origins of controversy over the Eucharist; and throughout . . . the leading American Methodist sat in an armchair reading the *New York Times*!'

Like the two words engraved on that headstone in the Cambridge City Cemetery, such a spotlight reveals the man's commitment to the early principles of his sect. He had, after all, undergone ministerial

training at Wesley House when men like Maldwyn Hughes and Newton Flew exerted powerful sway to mould the Christian witness of many. Such tutelage surely spawned both spoken and preached words, not to mention those Ruppian references to 'our hymns' or 'our doctrines'. For example, an early Epworth Press essay, *Protestant Catholicity* (1960), made it clear that albeit Protestant and reformed by commitment, Rupp was well aware that Protestantism and Catholicism meant much the same to their adherents. It was therefore liberalism he loathed, to make throughout his life a consistent and steadfast stand for orthodoxy, and to deplore contemporary emphases on a social gospel preached out of context for its own sake. As for 'Liberation theology', he once confided that such teaching could all be contained on the back of a postcard. For if Rupp wished to criticize, he invariably turned to satire, and the misused wealth of some American Methodists he readily lampooned as being far from the spirit of the founder.

No memoir can indicate the full dimensions of such a man, and if he wrote a lot, a book of the wit and wisdom of Gordon Rupp himself could make compelling reading. Although rarely worth the candle, so to state, archbishops, particularly of Canterbury, seem to command biographies. Despite the sensitive assessment of Gordon Wakefield and Ben Drewery in press and from pulpit therefore, in a century when the faith itself is under threat, Rupp is a far more significant subject for such treatment. Yet it is unlikely that such consideration will come his way, and what he once termed a 'Maitlandism' as he prepared to address the Downing Historical Society, should surely apply. The lines in question ran:

Lives of great men all remind us
As we o'er their pages turn
That we often leave behind us
Letters we had better burn.

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Note. For re-used material in this essay, due acknowledgement goes to the S.C.M. Press for understanding and permission.