

A.N. Prior on James Joyce

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The New Zealand logician Arthur Prior (1914-1969) was a man of many and varied interests. Originally deciding to study medicine at Otago University, he soon changed to graduate with a BA in Philosophy and Psychology. A convert from Methodism to Presbyterianism, or more particularly Barthian Calvinism, Prior became a theology student with the aim joining the clergy of the Presbyterian Church; he also to become a religious journalist, an expert on both Scottish theology and Jonathan Edwards, a philosopher of religion, and a literary critic before he decided to concentrate on logic. Prior had a lifetime's deep interest in literature as evidenced from the age of sixteen when he compiled a list of his 'ideal library'.¹ This combination of interests means that to understand Prior we need to realise that becoming a logician did not just mean abandoning theological study and immersing himself in philosophy – nor does it seem that it was a matter of disbelieving in theology and now believing in philosophy (Hasle 1999). Until the war (and it appears beyond) Prior strongly considered a career as a religious journalist writing widely on theology and contemporary Christianity, especially when travelling and living on the Continent and in England with his first wife Claire.

When he did take up a position teaching philosophy at Canterbury University College, Christchurch in 1946 he continued to write on religious issues. Prior's public face is exercised in what, it can be argued, is a last attempt at a form of public, non-ordained ministry.

This attitude can be discerned in an article Prior wrote in 1941 for *The Outlook*, the magazine of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. In 'Some Mail Gone Missing' (Prior 1941: 10-11) Prior considers how the

¹ For a discussion on the early Prior and a list of this ideal library see: Grimshaw 2002.

Church could implement a social voice, based on a letter written to the London *Times* by various church leaders in England, “solemnly renouncing, in the name of the Christian Church, the evil of racial discrimination and the bar.” Prior asks if such a process is really the most successful or appropriate? (*ibid.*) Does it, he asks, change the attitudes of those in London “refusing to have Negro air wardens” or Christchurch (New Zealand) landladies knitting for missions “but refusing to let Chinese visit their tenants”? Prior believes the problem is one of logic: the letter’s signatories intended the letter as also a personal one to each of these individuals “just as if it had his name and address on it” but “the letter hasn’t been delivered to him (at all events, its delivery is improbable).” (*ibid.*) Prior compares the situation to 17th century Scotland. Here Church ratification would have been swift, letters sent to all presbyteries with calls for a public fast “for the sin of racial discrimination” and, importantly “the unchristian character of such discrimination being explained, and difficulties answered, in a paper giving the ‘reasons for a Fast.’” (*ibid.*) This would have been followed by Church disciplinary action (warnings, and if necessary, excommunication) and Parliament being “pestered” by the Church to take appropriate action, this all only taking “at most a month or two to swing into action throughout Scotland.”

The basis of such a public move was discipline, (ultimately excommunication) but this, Prior notes, is neither possible nor the best way to proceed today. To implement a modern version Prior suggests clerical action: pastorally, in preaching “about it with the utmost concreteness” and partaking in public agitation. Prior also calls for prophetic action not just to communicant members of the church but to those outside the church “just as discipline formerly was not only applied to convinced Christians but to everyone in Scotland by the law of the land.” (*ibid.*) The problem is the Church has not only lost its prophetic approach but now only preaches to “and otherwise approaches only the ‘converted’”:

One of the main reasons why the Church fails to influence the world today is that it has given up the attempt before it has even begun, and assumes to start off with that the world consists of people who “won’t understand.” Our forbears knew better. (*ibid.*)

This, I argue, is the reasoning behind Prior’s venturing into being a Public Philosopher/Public Intellectual. He wishes (driven by his study of Scottish theology) to attain some sort of a prophetic voice and talk to those whom, it may have been decided ‘won’t understand’. The Public In-

tellectual does adopt a certain prophetic role, while their discussion in the public realm of matters that may, on the face of it have only a 'sectarian interest' is an attempt to 'influence the world today'.

In fact it could be argued that the decisive turns away from this position were firstly the loss of books and notes in two house fires – the second in 1949 damaging a manuscript on a history of Scottish theology and destroying further material – and the publication in that same year of his first text *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. (Hasle 1997/2003)

The circumstances of Prior's move from theological study into firstly religious journalism and then philosophy, has tended to be read as if embodying a modernist sense of inevitability (perhaps influenced by the analytic school?). Yet recently I became aware of a document that challenges this history of either a smooth transition or a sudden turn to philosophy. In August 1936 Prior wrote to the Convenor of the Knox Theological Hall Committee asking for his name to be "definitely" crossed off the list of Theological Hall students. What makes this letter important for revising common histories of Prior is the statement: "The course of my personal life has brought me to a crisis in the past few months." As a result Prior has:

...come to doubt very seriously my vocation to the ministry. Neither my desire to serve the Church nor my interest in theology has dimmed this year, but I have become more and more convinced that I am not cut out for the work and the life of the regular ministry. (Prior 1936) (*italics added*)

The reply from the Convenor is sympathetic, noting the Committee's acceptance "with regret." While this is a stock phrase and can be excused as niceties, the Rev. David Herron's further comments also signal a wider view that Prior's move from study for the ministry was not a move from the wider work of the church and theology:

However, if you feel that this is not the life work to which you have been called you are wise to withdraw at this stage. No man could be more unhappy than one in the ministry who felt it was not his vocation. I trust that you will find your right niche and that you will be able, *without actually being in the ministry*, to make a valuable contribution to the work of Christ and His Church. (Herron 1936) (*italics added*)

These two letters² are important not only for revising the current view of

² My thanks to Jane Bloore of PCANZ archives, Knox College, Dunedin for finding these letters when I contacted the archives for information on Prior's writings in church journals.

Prior's transition from Religion to Philosophy, but they also help us understand why he seemed to undergo what, in Jack Copeland's phrase is his "bohemian wanderings" in Europe.³ Both Prior and Herron (and by implication the Theological Hall Committee) seem aware of the fact that Prior, whilst removing himself from clerical activity, will continue to act within a type of Christian world and activity. The change is not one of doubts of faith and intellectual questioning (the most common reasons to withdraw) but rather ones occasioned by personal circumstances (and it can be possibly implicated, morality) due to his relationship with Claire Hunter.

Even before this move, Prior while still a theology student had involved himself in religious journalism, mainly in the form of reviews and small pieces on literature that he approached from the transitional perspective of a theologian becoming a philosopher of religion becoming a philosopher of logic. Amongst the literature Prior considered important, the work of James Joyce stands out and this short essay is an introduction to two pieces Prior wrote, "Something to Read I: Ulysses" (Prior 1941; *infra*, 203-206); and "The Theology of James Joyce" (Prior 1943; *infra*, 207-210).

Both pieces were written when Prior had returned to New Zealand, a period of peripatetic employment including, as listed by Anthony Kenny, hotel porter, newspaper reporter, high school teacher of French and English and railway man (Kenny 1972: 325). His marriage to Claire Hunter had failed, and he was yet to meet Mary Wilkinson who was to become his second wife. During this period he continued his association with two periodicals, the New Zealand Student Christian Movement's *Student*, (which he had edited in 1934 when it was called *Open Windows*), and the British journal *The Presbyterian* which he had helped to establish while in Birmingham during the early years of the war. While the two pieces under discussion date from the 1940s, I have discovered an earlier reference to Joyce in Prior's writing that indicates he had read Joyce at least as early as 1936 – and most probably before.

Reviewing Arthur Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* in *Student* in 1936, Prior notes that Eddington had always previously been considered in tandem with the work of James Hopwood Jeans.⁴ Prior consid-

³ Jack Copeland, Prior, Arthur. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prior/>

⁴ It should be noted that 4 books each of Eddington and Jeans are listed in Prior's *Ideal Library*.

ers this a “rather facile” (Prior 1936: 12) juxtaposition and then mentions the following:

One used to hear much, for instance, of “James Joyce-and-D.H. Lawrence” – who have little in common apart for the fact that the Censor hasn’t much time for either of them. (Lawrence always wrote on the principle of allegedly “inspired” outbursts, while Joyce has always been essentially a *careful* writer, spending literally days in search of the “*mot juste*.” With the result that Joyce, even in his new “jumbley” style, always conveys the impression of freshness, while Lawrence, for all the beauty of many passages, has long stretches of what can only be called tiresome and repetitious ranting, reminiscent of extempore prayers.)” (*ibid.*)

It is important to remember that Prior’s reading of both Joyce and Lawrence had occurred while he was a student, and it appears, while he was a theological student. The crisis in his personal life mentioned in the letter to the Theological Hall Committee is, it appears, linked to his meeting and beginning a relationship with Claire Hunter while both were student journalists. (Kenny 1972: 323) The interest in the new sexual openness offered by Joyce and Lawrence, combined with the new morality of socialism (Prior identified lifelong as a socialist (Kenny 1972: 321) and Claire was a “card carrying communist” (Mary Prior: 1998) who later went to live in Moscow) continued, and as has been previously noted, his fellow New Zealander the novelist and publisher Dan Davin, encountered Arthur and Claire coming to stay in Oxford and wishing to discuss “the intimate details of their sexual lives.” (Grimshaw 2002: 494-5) This is mentioned because it signals a side of Prior not widely acknowledged, that he was very much a modern man, a man of the new age and moralities in the 1930s. His reading of Joyce and Lawrence was part of his radicalism, his modernism, which included politics, literature, Barthian theology and philosophy of logic. As for his access at this time to the novels of Joyce in a small city in the South Island of New Zealand, it appears, according to the Otago University Library catalogue, that the library had a copy of the 1934 Random House edition of *Ulysses* and it can be conjectured that copies of Joyce’s work would have been circulating in the leftwing and bohemian circles he frequented. That he can write of Lawrence and Joyce in the journal of the New Zealand Student Christian Movement at that time, also gives us a revised understanding of the cultural climate in which he lived and wrote.

This discussion helps us to understand that when Prior writes of Joyce in the 1940s he does not do so out of a vacuum. He writes of Joyce from a

position of engaged reading and analysis over some years, from a position of leftwing politics, from a position of transition from Christianity not from an absence of religious belief. As Prior writes in *Student on Ulysses*, he reads not as a literary fan or expert, and more so not as the committed reader of ‘good novels’; but *Ulysses* is a book he constantly re-reads – and in this statement we can conjecture, has re-read since the mid-1930s at the very least. Perhaps Prior identified somewhat with Stephen Dedalus, as both are former theological students and while Prior, unlike Dedalus, is not “steeped in St. Thomas Aquinas” (Prior 1941: 3; *infra* 203) he is likewise critical of the Catholic church,⁵ as evidenced not only in his well-known paper “Can Religion Be Discussed” (Prior 1942) but also by the comment in a 1938 review for *The Criterion*, that “Much reading of ‘Catholic Sociology’ induces, in some of us at least, the very new and strange experience of sympathizing with Capitalism.” (Prior 1938: 162)

What Prior appears to appreciate in Joyce is how one’s “hobby-horse” that is the particular thing of interest, obsession or preoccupation, whether politics, theology or sex is “rooted in a context of everyday human life, entering into that life, influencing it and being influenced by it.” (Prior 1941: 3; *infra* 204) Prior’s use of F.D. Maurice to support his comments is not surprising, for as he had previously written in a article on Maurice, “Few theological writers have been more endlessly suggestive” and Maurice influences Prior in “all kinds of discussions and other mental activity.”⁶ (Prior 1935: 82) Central to Prior’s endorsement is that *Ulysses*

⁵ Prior undertook a sustained, public argument in the pages of the weekly *New Zealand Listener* with the New Zealand catholic priest and Thomist Fr. G.H. Duggan over the latter’s representation of evolution, following Prior’s critical review of Duggan’s *Evolution and Philosophy* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W Reed, 1949). See Prior 1949: 17. The debate was closed down by the Editor, 3 March 1950.

⁶ There is also, in the Prior archives in the Bodleian Library, in Box 6 an unpublished ms *Children of the Damned*. The description is:

This paper examines the cases of four persons directly or indirectly influenced by a perception that they themselves, or one of their parents, were irretrievably damned. The persons in question are Frederick Denison Maurice, a Victorian-age English theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, 19th century Danish Christian philosopher, “Rabbi” John Duncan, 19th century Scottish Presbyterian minister and missionary to the Jews, and James Joyce. In each case a Freudian analysis is offered as an explanation of their preoccupation with damnation, especially with reference to the Oedipus-complex.

<http://www.prior.aau.dk/Boxes/Box+1+-+11/Box+6/Children+of+the+Damned/>

For wider access to what is in the archives see: <http://www.prior.aau.dk/Boxes/>

I also thank Alessandro Pagnini for bringing the following to my attention in box 6 of the Prior papers: “Finnegan’s Wake - an interpretation”, *infra*.

enables us to fully understand our times, and more so the way our special interests are embedded, in the everyday. It is Leopold Bloom, the second major character in *Ulysses*, who for Prior most enables us to perceive Joyce's central insight on the embeddedness of life. Bloom is the modern man *par excellence*, in all his variety and possibility, a character who enables us to see what we are truly like. There is an interesting theological issue at stake here, for Bloom seems to become, for Prior, the example of what the modern man is and could be, a modern type of *Ecco Homo* (John 19.5), who is also, for Prior, most importantly given the context of the war, a Jew. For Prior's point is that in the modern world, it is the Jew, never completely assimilated, who enables us to see our society as it truly is, who enables us to better understand ourselves, by their differences and observations that arise.

The second article was published in the *Presbyter*, a British journal committed to the promotion of Barthian theology and edited by Daniel Jenkins and the New Zealander Lex Miller, a friend of Prior's from theological and SCM days in Dunedin. As noted by Densil Morgan, the aim of the *Presbyter* was no less than to be a manifesto for "the transformation of theology in the twentieth century." (Morgan 2010: 183)⁷

Prior had written for *Presbyter* while in Britain before and during the early years of the war and he continued to write for it while back in New Zealand.

Prior's short article on Joyce is, understandably, far more theological and academic than that in *Student*. He assumes a theologically literate audience, but also, an audience who has read Joyce and will understand how there could be such a thing as the theology of James Joyce. The basis is an ironic take on a Calvinist doctrine that the reprobate may yet "enlighten the elect and serve the end of their salvation" (Prior 1943: 10) in that in a fallen world, even the heterodox, especially if theologically trained as Joyce was, may enable us to understand the fallen world in which we live – and our fallen state – more clearly. It is important to remember that at this stage Prior is still a type of intellectual Barthian Calvinist, but as his use of Joyce indicates, he is beginning to situate himself on the road to formal unbelief. As a diary entry from March 25, 1942 states:

Theology is an illusion, but it is an illusion that is somehow "close to life," and the study of theological systems illuminates real problems in some way, and that's

⁷ Morgan provides the most accessible and comprehensive overview of *Presbyter* available.

why I'm interested in it. The theologian's "story of man's redemption" is not just fiction, but real history distorted.⁸

Joyce is therefore a fascinating resource for Prior because in his writings Joyce illuminates real problems of existence in ways that acknowledge the theological legacy of belief and Christian culture but also resituate them into a society looking to live after Christianity, in fiction that is also real history distorted.

The central point from Prior's previous essay was that the Jew in the modern Gentile world, in particular Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, by their failure to completely assimilate, asks questions of how things are, that makes the observant Gentile reassess their world. That point is here expanded by Prior to question whether, like Jews, Christians are meant to be not at home in this world: to be "pilgrims and strangers," in effect, replicating the role of the wandering Jew. Prior is careful to stress that such observations and indeed Joyce are not anti-Semitic, noting that in *Finnegan's Wake* Joyce identifies himself with Jewry. (Prior 1943: 11)⁹ The value of Joyce for theology is that he in effect, between *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, between Stephen Dadelus and "Shem the Penman" positions an identity that is in line, in a heterodox, inverted fashion, of the famous new identity of Christianity identified by Paul in *Galatians* 3.28; in Joyce there being *both* Greek and Jew, an important inclusive *human* identity for moderns, especially in a world being riven apart by anti-Semitism. The theology of Joyce is therefore an inclusive theology in a world whereas, in Nazi Germany, theology was exclusive, and it must be remembered, Barth, as drafter of the German Confessing Church's *Barmen Declaration* (1934) had made a very public stand against exclusive, race-based theology. Therefore Prior is using Joyce to reinforce a political theology of inclusion, stressing, as he reads Joyce also claiming, the unity of a common ancestry for Jew and Gentile.

Prior also uses Joyce to introduce what can be termed a theology of death, a topic he was to later return post-war, this time using Melville's *Moby Dick*. (Prior 1946: 1-2)¹⁰ Prior identifies a Joycean heterodoxical re-

⁸ See: <http://www.prior.aau.dk/E-texts/Diary+of+Faith/>

⁹ It is noted that the Canterbury University Library has two copies of the Faber 1939 *Finnegan's Wake* and that it is highly possible that if Prior did not have his own copies of Joyce from his time in Europe he could have accessed *Finnegan's Wake* from this source while living and working in Christchurch.

¹⁰ At the end of this article Prior recommends: ... "on the 'death wish' within ourselves see

working of the twelfth chapter of *Ecclesiastes* in *Finnegan's Wake* wherein the Joycean “jumbling” echoes our common ancestry in our thinking of death from within *Ecclesiastes*, even if, by the time we come to this present age, it has become strongly profaned in a secular world. Prior reinforces this by noting the Barthians argue for the inclusion of *Ecclesiastes* in the biblical canon for its attitudes carry over into that of the New Testament; in Joyce the theology of death of *Ecclesiastes* is, via the New Testament, further carried over, if re-expressed in the language of modern confusion and resignation. What is fascinating is that there is a strong subtext of Prior undertaking a Barthian reading of Joyce wherein Joyce is the heterodox theologian of what Barth identifies as the “marking time” of Christianity, a time without special revelation but rather having to exist both in reference to the past and in expectation of what is to come. In this world of Joyce and Barth, the righteous and unrighteous alike coexist in a unity of mankind, in common subject not only to death but to death in unity as sinners. That all exist as sinners, that all exist in this unity of mankind under death is identified by Prior as the central theology, heterodox though it may be in Joyce, a theology that has neo-orthodox support from Barth.

Prior's conclusion is one that it is wished he had further developed: that Joyce offers a theology of satire, a satire that has its roots in the common unity of *Ecclesiastes* and the New Testament, reaching in Joyce a “jumbly” theology of the profane.

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