Foreword

The re-issuing of MacKinnon's (1913-1994) *Borderlands of Theology* in 2024 signals a persistent and developing interest in the eccentric Scotsman's theological, philosophical, and ethical provocations. First published in 1968, this collection of occasional essays and lectures constitutes something of a time capsule, conjuring a set of post-war controversies in Oxbridge idiosyncratic to that time and place. And yet the temptations toward facile idealism, moral relativism, soulless utilitarianism, and ecclesiastical fundamentalism are still with us, and for this reason, MacKinnon's motivating anxieties and convictions resonate still.

MacKinnon's academic career began at Keble College, Oxford, in 1937, continued at the University of Aberdeen from 1947-1960, and flourished in Cambridge where he held the Norris Hulse Professorship between 1960 and 1978. Through these posts, and the academic community surrounding them, Mackinnon was formed by discussions and influences which were then imparted to the next generation of thinkers. MacKinnon's philosophical temper was shaped by what he perceived to be the discrediting of 19th Century idealism by new purgative waves of empiricism and logical positivism, and, in time, the so-called 'linguistic turn' in which Wittgenstein would play a seminal role. There were also other influences, such as when, in 1932, MacKinnon's teacher at New College, Isaiah Berlin, invited him to join a selective all-male discussion group 'The Brethren', at which A.J. Ayer held court and logical positivism was in vogue. Later, as a Fellow of Keble College, MacKinnon taught Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, and Philippa Foot from Trinity Term 1940 until their finals in 1942. All of them would cite MacKinnon's influence in helping them to resist the dominant strains of moral subjectivism, and each went on to forge

creative philosophical legacies in their own right. He also taught Plato to Elizabeth Anscombe, and with her, was involved in Oxford Pax, an anti-war group based at Blackfriars; and his position at Cambridge was where his lasting influence on Rowan Williams was cemented.

Throughout the essays and lectures in this collection, we find evidence of MacKinnon's profound but not uncritical commitment to the Kantian 'revolution'. Clearly, he was a passionate teacher of Kant's philosophy to new generations of students and, as the thoughtful review of Strawson's *Bounds of Sense* in this volume suggests, maintained an intense interest in contemporary developments in Kantian scholarship. For MacKinnon, Kant had achieved an impressive and necessary deconstructive transformation of inherited metaphysical and theological foundations, but, crucially, intended to leave space for faith via a demanding but overly rigid conception of practical morality. MacKinnon emerged from his reading of Kant convinced that agnosticism was always to be preferred to the much more corrosive temptations of anthropocentrism. His philosophical contemporaries, however, were plunging the scalpel of scepticism far more deeply than loyal Kantians, as they advanced what we now call the analytic and linguistic 'turns' in philosophy. Their influence had swept through Oxford and Cambridge, challenging complacency in divinity faculties, and dislodging time-worn methods of grounding theological and moral epistemology, which were, in any case, being destabilised from within by theological modernists.

MacKinnon came away from his early philosophical reading convinced that the idealism espoused by a previous generation was flawed in its fundamental logic. He also faulted its all too confident assertion of metaphysical truth, and what he perceived as its unacceptable implications for philosophical and political responses to concrete suffering. MacKinnon would reject any form of idealism that championed metaphysical or ideological universals to the detriment of particular cases, and resisted attempts at rolling particular experiences of contradiction or suffering into sacred 'theodicies' or secular 'synthesises'. This was in a context in which some British theological modernists had embraced local adaptations of the Hegelian legacy enthusiastically. These theological modernists looked to idealists such as Green, Bradley and Joachim in the hope of advancing a metaphysical framework within which Christianity might be deemed sufficiently rational, and thus justified in fulfilling its role as the midwife to inevitable social progress. The horrors of both World Wars of the early

20th Century, together with significant moral failures of the churches, made such systems impossible and unconscionable for Mackinnon.

In reaction, MacKinnon's philosophical and theological soundings took on a realist temper: greater weight was given to the intellectual labour of apprehending reality rather than constructing it, even if a restless Kantian concern for the conditions that make this apprehension possible were returned to again and again. Attentiveness to the concrete particular is seen to ground and discipline flights into the abstract and general. In terms of contemporary philosophical dialogue partners, John Wisdom and R.G Collingwood loomed large: their opposition to facile moral subjectivism, openness to the problem of metaphysics, and nuanced positioning within a dialectic between realism and idealism garnered MacKinnon's admiration. While both figures were seen to avoid the worst temptations of idealism, they also joined MacKinnon in avoiding the temptation to imagine the possibility of presuppositionless knowledge, or the realist view associated with John Cook Wilson and H.A. Pritchard, tending instead toward a position which held that the act of knowing made no difference to what is known.

In the realm of theology, P.T. Forsyth, Henry Scott Holland, Karl Barth, and Hans Urs von Balthasar became lively conversation partners, providing radical alternatives to the types of idealist and modernist theological options MacKinnon found unconvincing. However dramatic the difference between these theologians and the atheistically-minded analytic philosophers encountered in his formative years in Oxford, MacKinnon saw analogous moves in their realist commitment to apprehending the world in terms of facts presented, rather than mere wish fulfilment. He saw promise in the way each of these theologians, albeit with vastly different emphases and temperaments, sought a metaphysically minimalist post-Kantian orthodoxy that also took seriously the 'fact-like', historically-rooted nature of Christological dogma, even as the language employed became more mythic and poetic by necessity. Embracing a realistic appraisal of theology's growing marginality in the British university, and the secularisation unfolding beyond it, MacKinnon rejected any sort a panicked retreat into nostalgic dogmatism, reactionary metaphysics, or 'ecclesiastical fundamentalism'. Furthermore, he admired theologians and philosophers who were unafraid to see poetry and the imagination as servants of a truly rational apprehension of reality, rather than its enemy. Such a conviction is evident in the esteem MacKinnon gives to St. John's gospel throughout his oeuvre.

Perhaps one way to summarise MacKinnon's distinctive stance is to say that he was a quintessentially modern theologian who thoroughly rejected the extremes of fashionable 'theological modernism.' By this I mean that MacKinnon was acutely aware of the technological, political and scientific revolutions that marked the transition to the 20th Century, and its associated philosophical developments, such as existentialism and logical positivism. He, however, distanced himself from theologians who concluded that the Christological affirmations articulated at Nicaea and Chalcedon were no longer viable as a result, as if by default. For MacKinnon, the theological modernists were right to see Kant, Wittgenstein, and to a lesser extent Freud, as offering unavoidable purgative therapies, yet they were wrong to abandon the apocalyptic, wrong to downgrade the patristic Christological inheritance, wrong to downplay the impulse that gave rise to the language of classical metaphysics (particularly notions of 'substance'), and wrong to seek a new foundation for theological claims in unmoored religious experience and moral optimism.

As history seemed to be taking an apocalyptic turn with the 'revelation' of the holocaust and the advent of atomic weaponry, MacKinnon joined theologians pointing to the apocalyptic rupture of the crucifixion as a source for theological and ecclesial purgation, endurance, and possible renewal. For me, the essays in this volume that are the most bold, autobiographical, and suggestive are those focused on Christology, and the most urgent and angry pertain to what MacKinnon saw as the church's anaemic response to the advent of Britain's post-war policy of nuclear deterrence. While the essays on Christology explore the kenotic particularity of Jesus' life and death, the essays on atomic weaponry seek to highlight the temptation, in the spirit of Caiaphas, to push Christ to the margins on the strength of a debased utilitarian calculous. In this way, the potential for theological moralising to become unfaithful was never far from MacKinnon's concern; indeed, it came to strike him as almost inevitable within the context of a Church established by law. Drawing moral theology into close contact with Christology was a way of offsetting temptations to abstraction and legalism, which MacKinnon perceived as insulating the church from the traumas of history, the cry of the suffering, and the pragmatic, often tragic, choices of discipleship.

In keeping with this Christological focus, MacKinnon's standard of judgement was not sought in 'neutral' secular philosophy, but in the particular life and fate of Jesus, whose way of affirming divine command and natural law was via antinomian disruption, and the

use of provocative open-ended parables and sacramental signs. In developing a mode of Christian practical reason that sought to avoid subjectivism and abstraction, MacKinnon was inspired by Bishop Joseph Butler. He saw opportunities and temptations in the Augustinian-Protestant and Aristotelian-Thomistic trajectories, and felt no need to make a facile choice between them. Both could turn concrete moral dilemmas into dry intellectual puzzles, rather than invitations to remain awake with Christ in the garden of gethsemane, where the contours of the obligation and its cost may become disturbingly clear, or avoided all together. We may detect a faint resonance here with Bernard William's 1965 essay 'Ethical Consistency', where notions of reason, both over-confident and impoverished, leave us in the position of thinking that every moral dilemma must be solvable, if only more information was gathered and more intensive thought undertaken. We might also see resonances of the work of Stanley Cavell, who, like MacKinnon, circles around to the task of description and re-description, drawing on various resources in philosophical and literary canon to enact a kind of therapy. His work identifies various temptations that arise when we attempt to apprehend moral obligation in the midst of the sheer intractability and complexity of human entanglements.

As a theologian, MacKinnon clung to the 'fact-like' quality of Christ's revolutionary presence in history, the 'fact-like' nature of moral imperatives that flowed from it, and the 'fact' that individuals and groups can always choose otherwise but are also constrained by limited vision and structural injustices. Such 'facts' render human beings as both supremely dignified and the most tragic of creatures. In this vein, one of MacKinnon's most daring moves, shocking at the time but now very much mainstream, was to interpret Jesus' choice to plumb the depths of failure and humiliation on the cross in tragic terms. The cross was simultaneously the event giving rise to Christian claims relating to universal redemption, the 'destiny' to which Jesus was obediently bound, and a dramatic failure that could have been otherwise. In his other writings, the fate of Judas and the thread of distorted theologising that turns the crucifixion into an impetus for anti-Judaism and antisemitism in the centuries thereafter typified for MacKinnon the necessity of the tragic ascription. That Christians may both worship the tortured saviour and become torturers and killers themselves, fuelled by moral certainties pertaining to divine imperative or convictions pertaining to the greater good of Church

and State, is a devastating manifestation of tragic and a rebuke to theologies that trade in facile optimism. And yet, for MacKinnon, in as far as tragedy can drive us to a place of agnostic protest and purgation, to the foot of the cross, it may also be a means by which questions of transcendence may emerge once again. As human bodies and language itself are contorted by suffering and inarticulacy, a way of endurance may open by which tragedy is perceived without the loss of hope.

Many aspects of MacKinnon's thought presented in these pages remains opaque, partially developed, bound to a particular contexts, and shaped by a refusal to enact forms of clarity and closure where such things would be dishonest to the intractability of the problems encountered. Even so, readers may discern here the workings of a courageous and original thinker. Perhaps his decision to stay in the 'borderlands' will offer inspiration to those questing for a renewed catholic humanism in a context marked by dangerous climate change and post-truth politics. It may be that MacKinnon inspires theologians and moral philosophers to range between disciplinary boundaries, avoiding easy answers, enacting bold experiments in moral realism and also in faith.

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