

Alexander Scott and the Reformation of 19th-century Britain
by J. Philip Newell, B.A., B.D., Ph.D.

Alexander Scott, heretic, theologian, educator and social reformer, is an almost entirely forgotten 19th-century historical character. A study of his life and thought is of significant value in and by itself, but he is worthy of being exhumed from the past primarily because he is a window into an age of reformation. Scott is an indicator of the direction of much 19th-century British Christian thought. He reflects in his life and theology, for instance, the transition in 19th-century British Christianity from a limited view of Christ's atonement to a confident declaration of God's universal love. In this and in other areas Scott's often unorthodox convictions signalled a coming change. For this reason, foremost of all, he is worthy of our attention.

Alexander John Scott was born on 26 March 1805 in Greenock, Scotland. His father was a leading minister of the National Kirk and belonged to the increasingly rigid Scottish Evangelical party, which accentuated the hard lines of Westminster Calvinism in its doctrines of limited atonement, predestination and the total depravity of man. At the age of thirteen Scott left Greenock to study at Glasgow University. In Glasgow Scott increasingly became aware of the conditions of the poor, in sharp contrast to the rising standards of the middle classes. Here he witnessed in his second year a political uprising of sixty thousand workers calling for 'Liberty or Death'. Scott lived in an age of revolution and began his university career amidst cries of freedom for all, the vote for all, and education for all. While a sense of the equality and oneness of humanity emerged everywhere in the socio-political realm, the Scottish Kirk as yet remained entrenched in a doctrine of election.

Scott graduated M.A. in 1824 and proceeded immediately to his theological

studies at Glasgow Divinity Hall, where he was surrounded by the rising stars of Scottish Evangelicalism, including Robert Candlish and James Begg. Although he met with nothing broader in Glasgow than the Kirk's Westminster Calvinism, Scott began to doubt the orthodoxy of his day.

Notwithstanding these in embryo objections to the Kirk's theology, Scott became a licensed preacher within the Church of Scotland in 1827. It was around the time of his licensing that Scott met Thomas Erskine, the mystic laird of Linlathen, by this stage a noted lay heretic. In his earliest publications, Erskine, as a lone voice in Scotland, proclaimed the gospel message in terms of a divine pardon offered to all people.²

A second friendship of note at this time was with the minister of Row parish, John McLeod Campbell, now recognised as one of Scotland's greatest theologians. Campbell was immediately impressed by young Scott, and invited him to preach in Row. Scott pointed Campbell and his people to the humanity of Christ alone as the place where God's nature is revealed.³ This is the first recorded instance of Scott's lifelong emphasis on the incarnation, an emphasis which, although almost entirely lacking at this point in British Christian thought, was to become prominent in both Established Church and Nonconformist theology by the end of the century. In Scottish theology at this time the doctrine of the incarnation was dragged in only to lend a certain sufficiency to the vicarious sacrifice on the cross. Scott, on the otherhand, in opposition to the reigning Westminster Calvinist notion of God as a predestinating Sovereign whose righteousness was satisfied by the penal substitution of his Son for the elect, taught that the loving humanity of the incarnate Christ was the central and crowning revelation of God. 'The humanity of Christ is that which translates the ineffable language of the Most High into man's native tongue,'

contended Scott. ⁴ 'In the humanity of Christ, in human thoughts, human feelings, human joys and sorrows, God looks out and articulates Himself to us with a distinctness and a home impression beyond what any other form of manifestation can possess; and seeing Him we emphatically see the Father.' ⁵

A corollary of Scott's conviction that God had revealed himself in the humanity of Christ was a belief in the universal love of God. Against the Westminster Calvinism of his father, his theological instructors, and the vast majority of the National Kirk, which limited the love of God to the elect only, Scott, in his earliest preaching, contended that Christ's unlimited love is the very image of the Father's love for all humanity. 'How is God disposed towards us?' asked Scott. 'He that hath seen Jesus hath seen the Father.' ⁶ No one believing Christ to be the crowning revelation of God can doubt that the Father loves all people and wills their salvation.

Soon Campbell also, in his pastoral care of the parish of Row, began to assure ⁷ his people of the pre-eminently loving nature of God. Instead of a spiritual posture of subjective self-examination and doubt, fostered by Westminster Calvinism's doctrine of election, Scott and Campbell encouraged an objective confidence in the loving moral character of God as revealed in the humanity of Christ. The early preaching of Scott and his friends was among the earliest of signs in 19th-century Britain of an emerging acceptance of the catholicity of God's love. By the end of the century this 'heresy' was to have become orthodoxy.

It was around the time of Scott's early preaching that he began to seriously doubt whether he could conscientiously continue his ministerial career, when the Kirk's

Westminster Confession of Faith denied the universality of God's love. He decided to relinquish the idea of ministry and instead took up the study of medicine in Edinburgh. In the summer of 1828, however, Scott again joined Campbell for a few months on the west coast of Scotland. The parish of Row was becoming a rallying point for the disaffected, and, during these summer months, inquiring students began to gather around Scott and his friends. They were joined by Edward Irving, the romantic and apocalyptic minister of the Scots Kirk, in Regent Square, London. It was during Irving's time with Scott and Campbell that he also was converted to a belief in the universality of God's love. And Scott was now persuaded to join Irving in London at Regent Square, on the understanding that he was to be theologically unrestricted.

Soon Scott and his friends were subjected to sharp criticism, for the orthodoxy of their day rested almost entirely on the theology of the 17th-century Westminster divines, a theology which made no room for a belief in the universality of God's love. 'Do you know that this doctrine is looked on as a heresy by almost all the teachers of religion in this country,' Erskine asked his sister in 1828, 'and that a directly opposite doctrine is preached?' Virulent opposition began in 1828. Andrew Thomson, the leader of the Evangelical party, accused them of having 'propagated doctrines which belie the word of God most odiously - which reason repudiates as inconsistent and mistaken - which break the constitution of the gospel into pieces, and substitutes for it freaks of fancy and unwholesome paradoxes - and which introduce into religion all that is silly and bigotted and presumptuous.' Thomson represents, perhaps exaggeratedly, the formidable opposition and hostility of the establishment against this young and small group of reformers.

While the controversy over the universality of God's love began to rage, Scott, in his search for a vital Christianity, developed a Spirit emphasis which was to have explosive consequences. A thirst for the living and spontaneous characterised Scott's entire life and thought. 'There was an exuberance of living, instant thought in the man,' wrote one of his friends. 'His words partook somewhat of the fine confusion of immediate, formative life.'¹² In one of Scott's first publications he had concentrated on the experiential and Spirit-inspired nature of Luther's religion. This, he said, rather than Luther's emphasis on Scripture, was the 'energetic' reforming principle: 'One living man with the Spirit dwelling in him and speaking by him is more to a country than thousands of Bibles.'¹³ It was this search for the dynamic that attracted Scott to the early Church, characterised as it was by charismatic life. The charismata demonstrated the vitality of the early Christian body, and should, Scott believed, characterise any Church that is inspired by the Spirit. Scott persuaded Irving and others to seek the charismatic life of the primitive Church, and early in 1830 on the west coast of Scotland, as a direct result of Scott's preaching, extraordinary phenomena began to occur which some believed were a resurgence of the New Testament gifts of the Spirit.¹⁴ A number of people spoke, wrote and even sang in 'unknown languages'. Others claimed also to have been healed. Clearly, extraordinary things were taking place, and, regardless of how these events are to be interpreted, cures of some description seem to have occurred.¹⁵ The charismatics came under hostile fire from the ranks of the orthodox, and were slandered also by the secular press. The Evangelical journal of the Scottish Kirk called them 'a coterie of sillies.' 'If they should not be condemned for their impious pretensions,' said the writer, 'they should be pitied

for their insane illusions, and looked after by their friends.' The extraordinary phenomena soon began to spread to other parts of the country, and within the year charismatic utterances were interrupting the services at Regent Square in London and causing widespread controversy.

Scott soon rejected the phenomena as inauthentic and as the product of religious hallucination. He painfully parted company with Irving and the movement which his preaching had in no small way inspired. Regardless of whether or not these charismatic occurrences are perceived as having been of the Spirit, Scott's theological emphasis on the charismatic life of the early Church is of considerable interest as one of the earliest intimations of modern pentecostalism, which was not fully to emerge in the Western Church until the turn of the 20th century. Furthermore, Scott's theology of the Spirit can be said to have anticipated the Spirit emphasis which since his day has become increasingly evident in nearly every major branch of the Christian Church.

A few months before the burst of charismatic activity in Scotland, Scott had received a call to the Scots Kirk in Woolwich, just outside of London. Given Scott's image as an unsafe theological dissident it is somewhat surprising that he was almost unanimously elected to Woolwich. After his acceptance of the call Scott applied to the London Presbytery for ordination, for as yet he was licensed only to preach, and not ordained to celebrate the sacraments. Scott's 1830 ordination examinations before the London Presbytery became the centre of controversial attention in the London newspapers. His doctrine of Christ's human nature called forth criticism from the Presbytery and was reported with hostility in the London Times. Scott and Irving had,

for some time, been teaching that Christ's human nature, although sinless, was that of all humanity. In radical opposition to the orthodoxy of the day, which emphasised Christ's divinity to the almost total neglect of his humanity, Scott taught that Christ shared a common brotherhood with mankind. Christ's human perfection was due not to a nature other than ours, he said, but rather to the constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit. 'He is just as emphatically man as he is emphatically God,' Scott argued against the Docetic tendency of his age. 'He excels us, not in that He is less truly man than we, but that He is man in very truth.'¹⁸ Scott's theology of the humanity of Christ was an early indicator of the coming reform of an inadequate, and largely Docetic, Christology in 19th-century Britain.

A concomitant to Scott's incarnation emphasis and his stress on the full humanity of Christ was a nobler understanding of humanity in general than that expressed, for instance, in the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the total depravity of man. 'The Incarnation, if it mean anything at all,' he later wrote, 'is a coming closer to man, a bringing the Divinity and humanity nearer to one another, a making the divine not to be present, beside the human merely, but in the human; a making the human to be divine by being entirely penetrated with the light of God.'¹⁹ The Spirit of God works in the spirit of man by entering into union with humanity. 'What is most human becomes the most divine: what is most divine, the most human.'²⁰ The Infinite, he said, is 'consubstantiated with the human.'²¹ Again Scott's thinking can be seen to have anticipated another aspect of late 19th-century theology, in its more exalted understanding of mankind.

Prolonged discussions in presbytery over the humanity of Christ ensued before

large crowds of spectators and reporters. In the autumn of 1830 Scott intensified the conflict by stating to Presbytery that his conscience would not allow him to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith as an expression of his own faith, as every candidate for ordination was required to do, for the Confession denied the essence of Christianity; it limited the love of God to the elect. ²² Scott's case was referred to the highest court of the Scottish Church.

In May 1831, Scott appeared in Edinburgh before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and asked to be tried by the Word of God alone, and not by the Kirk's creeds and confessions. ²³ The appeal to Scripture as opposed to tradition, and particularly the appeal to the gospels, was to become a marked feature of the reformation of 19th-century British theology, and it is not inaccurate to say that the reformers generally were more directly Scripturally oriented than their opponents. It must be said, however, that the defenders of orthodoxy, for the most part, were men who believed their Confessions and traditions to be based upon the Word of God. While recognising something of a scripture versus tradition opposition, therefore, it is important to relativise that antithesis.

The doctrines of the Westminster Confession to which Scott objected before the General Assembly were, he said, contrary to the Word of God as contained in the Scriptures. Scott's friend, Campbell, had contended that the doctrine of God's universal love was reconcileable with the Confession of Faith. Scott, however, was asserting, much more radically, that doctrines in the Confession were actually 'contrary to the Word of God'. Such a direct assault upon the theology of the Church's Confession was unprecedented

within the National Kirk. His most serious objection was directed against the Confession's attempt to limit the love of God to the elect. This he regarded as a negation of the Gospel. There were other points of objection, including Scott's protest against the Confession's Sabbatarianism. His theology of the universal love of God did not allow him to regard Sunday as a day of legalistic observance designed to satisfy the righteousness of an omnipotent sovereign. Scott's attempt to de-puritanise the Kirk's legalistic observance of the Sabbath and to declare Sunday as a day of celebrating the resurrection was the first theological sign of the anti-Sabbatarian reforms of late 19th-century Britain.

The members of Assembly interrupted Scott's speech, and claimed that 'it was unworthy of the dignity of the Assembly', ²⁴ to sit and hear a preacher of the gospel argue that the Church's Confession of Faith was false. It was the duty of ministers not to innovate, 'but to explain the Word of God agreeable to the standards of the Church.' ²⁵ Scott pleaded for toleration, an attribute almost entirely lacking in the dogmatic atmosphere of the Scottish Kirk at this time. The leaders of the Church found it impossible to mix theology with charity, and refused even to discuss Scott's theological convictions. The Assembly immediately and unanimously deposed Scott from the ministry and prohibited ²⁶ all ministers of the Kirk from ever 'employing him to preach in their pulpits.' Scott's plea for toleration went unheeded, as did ²⁷ more over the next few years, but Scott's was only the first of a flood of requests over the next fifty years for theological toleration, which, before the end of the century, were to produce a much broader theological climate, in which Declaratory Acts, for instance, were passed to relieve ministers from a strict adherence to every article of the Confession.

Years of isolation followed the Assembly of 1831. Scott returned to his congregation in England, the majority of whom followed him to an independent chapel in Woolwich. While feeling isolated, Scott and Campbell chose not to officially join another denomination, for every Church in Britain at this time was hemmed in by doctrinal and confessional restrictions, and not one Church unequivocally declared God's love for all humanity. Scott and his friends also believed that, in truth to their conscience, they should not attempt to divide the larger Churches by beginning a separate denomination. For the next couple of years Scott lived in relative seclusion in Woolwich where he preached on Sundays and offered weekly public lectures on a vast range of subjects, moving from theology to poetry to science to socio-political thought, attempting to hold all things together in relation to his belief in God. Within a few years he began to lecture to larger audiences in London and elsewhere in Britain, continuing his early message of the universal Fatherhood of God and the full humanity of Christ. In an attempt to counteract mid 19th-century orthodoxy's tendency to divorce divinity from humanity and God from the natural world, and as a direct result of his theology of incarnation, Scott increasingly emphasised the immanence of God. The aim of the entire universe, he said, is to reveal God, to communicate the Father's spirit to man's spirit. God wears an expressive look in creation for the soul of man to see and feel. Humanity, Scott said, 'holds manifold communion with a mind uttering itself in all surrounding nature.' This immanentist stress paralleled a similar strain within the romanticism of his day, but was clearly consistent with Scott's incarnational emphasis, and can be seen to be related to the increasing tendency of 19th-century theology to emphasise a redemption of the world

over a redemption from it.

Scott's emphasis on the immanence of God in the created order positively influenced his approach to science, for to learn of nature was to learn something of God. At a time when scientific development, and particularly evolutionary thought, was threatening many religious minds, Scott was concerned to hold together religious and scientific knowledge,²⁹ 'If there is one God,' he asserted, 'there can be but one source of truth.' There is no incompatibility between true religion and true science. Scott encouraged the Church to ally itself with all truth. 'Be assured,' he said, 'there is a harmony in all truth, a mutual dependence. All its lines converge. There is a point, in which meeting, they lean one upon another; and he who will try to do without any of them will find that the rest must suffer.'³⁰ Scott's public lectures on science and religion prepared at least a section of the religious public for the conflicts which were to ensue in the post-Darwinian controversies, and can be seen to have been instrumental in the eventual acceptance of the evolutionary principle by the majority of British Christian thinkers.

Scott's search for unity between religion and science was typical of his approach to every aspect of life. Whether in poetry, politics or philosophy Scott did not exclude his Christianity, for God was to him 'the Being on which all being rests, the Intelligence according to which all things have their law,' and 'the illumination by which each thing is beheld.'³¹ Scott encouraged a broadly interested and confident Christianity which could offer a unique perspective in every department of life. 'I know not,' he said, 'with what religion has nothing to do.'³²

Scott's search for unity was also applied to the state of the British Churches, which

were sorely divided at this time. He criticised the majority of Scottish Presbyterians and Dissenters and Evangelicals of England for not even desiring unity, and, while he applauded the Anglo-Catholic emphasis on unity, felt that a unity based upon an external ecclesiasticism was not a real oneness. The Church's unity is not achieved by bringing people under the same roof, by making them repeat the same creed, or by making them recognise the same external government. Rather, the real unity of the body of Christ is constituted by the Spirit, just as the unity of the natural body is constituted by the principle of life. The Church's oneness is essentially to be a 'unity by life', said Scott, rather than

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a unity by form. Scott's call for a united Church without uniformity was among the earliest signs of a movement which was to gain some ground in the late 19th century and emerge in the early 20th century as the ecumenical movement.

Even greater than the unity of the Church was for Scott the unity of humanity. If others will be 'Roman Catholics or 'Anglo-Catholics, be you 'Human Catholics,' he said. Scott's call for a catholic humanity reflected the increasing tendency of many 19th-century British Christians to not only seek a greater communion with non-British Christians but also to recognise a common humanity with the people of other religions.

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Gradually Scott enlarged his English circle of friends, and became a personal link between many of the theological reformers of Scotland and England. Perhaps the most important of his English theological friends was Frederick Denison Maurice, who was to make major contributions to the reformation of 19th-century British theology, and who was deeply indebted to Scott. Always, however, there was to be a significant degree of disagreement between the two men, the faithful Episcopalian taking

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a higher view than did Scott of the visible Church, its sacraments, and the authority of the ordained. Scott was always critical of Anglicanism's, and particularly the Oxford Movement's, dependence upon ecclesiastical authority, and its disregard for the individual conscience. Scott had developed, by this stage, a theology of the spiritual conscience, which closely resembled both Schleiermacher's and Coleridge's concepts of spiritual consciousness. The conscience, distinct from man's understanding was for Scott a universal faculty in man, capable of receiving the eternal voice which calls man to unite with God and presents to him a character which it commands man to be. 'Man may know,' said Scott, 'when that is presented to him, from which he dare not be out of communion, under penalty of being out of communion with God.' This spiritual eye in man is not infallible, but humanity is bound to make the most of it. 'We cannot do without it,' said Scott. 'There is a region - and the highest of all regions of our inquiry and of our practical demeanour in this world - in which, if we have not this guidance, we have none. For it is no answer to say - "We have God, we have the Bible, we have the Church." I say not one of these is to be read, otherwise than by the spiritual faculty within us.' Any attempt to place the Church, its sacraments, or the ecclesiastically ordained between God and an individual's spiritual faculty Scott regarded as 'idolatrous'. The conscience has an absolute and boundless right over man, and it is a false liberalism which forgets that over this God-given faculty, we have no rights whatsoever. 'We are not to believe any thing because we like,' said Scott. 'We are to believe because we are bound to believe.'

Late in 1846 Scott moved from Woolwich to London, hoping thereby to be closer to

the heart of the capital's theological, literary and political life. On Wednesday evenings

he would open his London home to literary and theological friends such as William M.

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Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Maurice and Francis Newman. Scott

wrote for The North British Review and, on Sunday evenings, preached at a Literary

Institute in central London. It was at one of Scott's Sunday evening sessions in 1849

that the young Scottish poet, George MacDonald, at this stage a theological student, first

encountered Scott. MacDonald and fellow theological students would sneak away from their

college on Sunday evenings to hear the still widely suspected Scott expound his Christian

faith. From this time forward MacDonald repeatedly and unhesitatingly spoke of himself

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as a disciple of Scott's. Within a number of years Scott's theology was being

reproduced in MacDonald's prolific writings, the young poet-novelist having picked up

Scott's distinctive emphases of the universal Fatherhood of God, the sacredness of creation,

and the humanity and Christlikeness of God. In story form MacDonald communicated to

thousands of readers in Britain and in North America what Scott had taught the relatively

few. The establishment of a belief in the universal Fatherhood of God in late 19th-century

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Britain can be said to be as much due to George MacDonald as to any other single writer.

During the final twenty years of Scott's life he increasingly gave himself to a

socialising of the Christian conscience and to a working for the education of neglected

segments of society, including women, the working classes, and religious dissenters.

The Church's lack of social awareness he felt was largely responsible for the secularising

of society. 'A theology that shut out human interests,' he said, 'has taught men a humanity

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that shuts out God and Christ.' He followed with interest the political movements of the

working classes, notably Chartism and Socialism, and in response to the working class unrest of 1848 Scott and his friends, including Maurice and Charles Kingsley, founded what later became known as Christian Socialism, the first daring attempt in Britain to hold together the Christian faith with aspects of Socialism. ⁴³ At a time when the word 'cooperation' carried dark and revolutionary connotations, Scott advocated the cooperative principle of Socialism while denying its secularist creed, and in so doing anticipated British Christianity's eventual acceptance of a form of socialism as compatible with the gospel. Scott criticised the wealthier classes for self-interestedly resisting all social change and blasted the Church for sanctioning the emphatic preservation of the distinction of ranks. Christianity, he said, ought to expand 'the man beyond the mere brute propensity to self-Conservation, by the force of love to man, grounded on a love unlimited, the love of God.' ⁴⁴ The Christian Socialist hope, partly realised over the next twenty years through publications, cooperative associations for workers and working mens' colleges, was to involve the Christian Church in the elimination of social injustices in 19th-century Britain. ⁴⁵

Late in 1848, shortly after the birth of Christian Socialism, Scott was elected to the chair of English literature at University College, London, the only seat of higher education in Britain totally free from religious tests. And within the year, despite heavy criticism, especially from the Church of England, Scott, Erasmus Darwin and other friends, began what later became known as Bedford College, the first centre of higher education for women based upon the principles of religious freedom. ⁴⁶

In 1851 Scott became the first principal of Owens College, later the Victoria University of Manchester, also a centre of university education committed to religious liberty. Scott's

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impact upon his largely Nonconformist students was immense, not a few of whom later became prominent socio-political and theological reformers, and at least two of whom, D.W.Simon and J.A.Picton, were to effect major changes in 19th-century Nonconformist

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theology. During Scott's latter years in Manchester he was frequently visited by many

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younger theologians from different parts of the country. Two of these, both Nonconformist

ministers, Henry Solly and James Baldwin Brown, clearly evidenced, in controversial

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books dedicated to Scott, his theology of God's universal Fatherhood. Brown's election

to the chair of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1878 indicated a growing

acceptance within Nonconformity of Scott's theology. Other visitors to Scott in his latter

years included three future Moderators of the Church of Scotland, and perhaps the three

greatest 19th-century reforming leaders of the Kirk, Norman Macleod, Robert Herbert

Story, and John Tulloch. Their contributions to the ecclesiastical and theological

reformation of Scottish Christianity reflect many of Scott's emphases.

Although Scott had never been directly involved with any established ecclesiastical body after the time of his deposition in 1831, his contact with theologians from nearly every Protestant Church in England and Scotland offered him a continuing influence upon the reformation of 19th-century British theology. In 1864, however, Scott's health began to fail him, and his active contribution to the ongoing reform declined. On 12 January 1866, on the northern shore of Lake Geneva, Scott, at the age of sixty, died. With his death, and then much later with the death of his personal disciples, the memory of Scott faded, for his influence was almost entirely personal. As Baldwin Brown once said to Scott: 'You, more than most men living, have written your records not in books, but on the

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fleshly tables of the hearts of your pupils and friends.' Explicit reference to Scott may have ended with the death of his last disciple, but the succession of some of his deepest convictions continued until they found a permanent, and often central, place in the British Churches. As a seminal influence upon many theological reformers, and as a window into the lives of prominent Christian thinkers of his day, Scott deserves a place in the history of the Reformation of 19th-century Britain.

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A.J.Scott, On the Divine Will (Greenock, 1830), p16.

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A.J.Scott, 'Introductory Discourse on Revelation', Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans (London, 1838), p15.

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A.J.Scott, Hints for Meditation on Acquaintance with God (Greenock, 1831), p10.

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See J.McLeod Campbell, Reminiscences (London, 1873), pp24-7.

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See R.H.Story, 'Edward Irving', Scottish Divines (Edinburgh, 1883), pp242-3.

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A.J.Scott, 'Social Systems of the Present Day', The Woolwich Gazette, 2 January 1841.

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'Case of Mr Scott - Heresy', Caledonian Mercury, 28 May 1831.

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Records of the General Assembly 1828-31, Scottish Records Office, Edinburgh, CH1/1 81, pp527-8.

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See J.B.Brown, The Divine Life in Man (London, 1860); and H.Solly, The Doctrine of Atonement (London, 1861).

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Testimonials to A.J.Scott (Edinburgh, 1856), p20.