Intellectual and Spiritual Journey of Rev’d Prof. Stuart G. Hall

In his own words, 2020.

On 7 June 1928 May Catherine Hall (née Wale) gave birth to Stuart George Hall, a son for George Edward Hall and a brother for their 14-month old daughter Jean April. He was taken for baptism to St John’s Church in Fitzroy Square, which was largely destroyed by bombing in 1940. His mother was a baptized communicant of the C of E, and remained a regular worshipper till her death. She taught her children the elements of praying daily. Stuart’s second name George came from the Hall family. It was also the second name of May’s only brother Alick, who had perished in 1917 in the disastrous second battle of Arras. No one ever told me why I was called Stuart. The only story I ever heard was that my mother saw it on an election poster and liked it.

Stuart’s father, George Edward Hall, went to London from his native Chesterfield, partly in rebellion against the strict Baptist teetotal religion of his parents, who reared a large family. He found May alone, having lost both parents and her sister during the War. As a constable in the Metropolitan Police he could offer a secure living. He was not a religious man, but liked choral singing.

After my mother, I leant on my big sister Jean April Hall, on most matters of consequence, and picked up her ideas and godly principles. But the first articulate faith I had came from the teachers of infants and juniors at St Mary’s (Stoke Newington Parochial school). We learned the Catechism by heart, and substantial passages from Bible and Prayer Book. I had definite hopes of communion with God, if I were patient; and I was very early persuaded that if there is a God he has to be the Top Consideration. Either he is Top or he is nothing. My friends, my colleagues, my children and my students have all suffered my efforts to live out that persuasion. But this awareness goes back historically to the beautiful, dedicated women who taught me to believe.

Jean with her consistent love and dedication continued to influence me right through her life. But of course no influence was as great as the love of most of my life, Brenda Mary Henderson. Brenda toppled me into love with her against many of my stricter convictions. My rigid God-is-Top philosophy did not match her own way of believing and praying, any more than her social background matched mine. But she loved people as I never did. I thought of God as Top, while she put Love as top, and it is no accident that her favourite Bible verse affirms that God is Love. It has taken me a life time to learn and repent, and my beloved second wife Mary has tried to finish what Brenda laboured at for all those years. It is no accident, given the debt I owe to the spirituality of the women in my life, that I was quite early convinced of the rightness of women’s ministry in the church, which I steadily supported from the time it became a live issue.

Confirmation in the Church happened in 1941, when Jean and I were living with my father’s sister, Marie Linnette Thompson, in Knighton, Leicester. I took confirmation seriously, and I remember struggling to define Sin during instruction. I sang in the church choir, then returned to supporting my mother, when we went back to London, at a small Anglo-Catholic church in Islington, where I learned how ritualism worked. Schoolboy influences however, and reading the Bible for myself, turned me against it.

The accidents of broken war-time education meant that by the time I had to make subject choices for the 6th form I had a good record in science and moderate ones in Latin and
French. We worshipped at the time at Holy Trinity Hampstead, where Douglas W C Ford preached intelligent and forceful sermons. It is no accident that I still remember a sermon on ‘Big Things First’, which coincided with my personal philosophy.

My mother took me to see him about my 6th form choices. He told me that my place was in the Church’s Ministry, and I must opt for Classics. I complied readily. My schoolmasters were pleased, though I had to start 6th form Greek from zero, often in the school shelter under fire from flying bombs and rockets. I suppose Greek Grammar was one way to defy Hitler. But it sealed my divine vocation and my devotion to Greek at a stroke.

Three years in the sixth form brought me to Oxford entrance exams, and an open Examination in Classics at New College. I took up my studies there after two years of National service in the army. My 2nd class in Hon. Mods. disappointed my tutors, but reflected my want of serious (poetic) humanity. I did better in Greats (Final Honours in Lit. Hum.) thanks to a good feel for philosophy and excellent tutorial supervision in history. I did my pastoral training at Ripon Hall. I went on to the Theology Final Honours, where I could have been better supervised, and my studies were interrupted by a wonderful engagement and marriage.

The Bishop of Southwell, Russell Barry, did not share the inhibitions of many other bishops, who expected young ordinands to remain single during their first curacy. ‘Hallo, Hall. I hear you have committed matrimony,’ was the start of a good relationship. Thus with furniture variously acquired, a pair of bicycles and a new-born son, my diaconate began at Newark on Trent with a stipend of £375 p.a.

My training had been abbreviated. I had to conduct funerals, never having even attended one. I was ignorant and clumsy about pastoral visiting. I should have perceived that I was better attending the open seminar for the clergy which Alan Richardson ran at the University of Nottingham. It was only 16 miles each way on the bike, and renewed my friendship with Bob Leaney, who had taught me at Ripon Hall. Brenda bore at Newark a daughter, Nicola, and began a school teaching career.

After three years I accepted an invitation to become Tutor at The Queen’s College Birmingham, specializing for 5 years in the New Testament, and enjoyed teaching. There God gave us a third child, Edith. At Newark I had worked for and won the Canon Hall Greek New Testament Prize. I also became interested in the Septuagint. My elders and superiors in the Church urged me to apply for University posts. That led to a switch in direction, because my friends at Nottingham appointed me to teach the Early Church. I had too much to do catching up in that as my main field. But my 16 years at Nottingham were decisive for my career. My work would be summarized later in a widely used student handbook, Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church.

Apart from the early church I was kept busy catching up with courses which my predecessor had begun: Modern English religious thought, liturgy, and Bible tutorials. The decisive event arose however when a Classical scholar, Molly Whittaker, began a seminar on Melito of Sardis On Pascha. She had been invited to reconcile the newly published Greek Bodmer Papyrus with the existing edition based on only one papyrus copy. Whittaker found Greek Uncial script difficult to read, whereas I found it easy. With astonishing generosity Molly gave up the project to make room for me.

The result was the foundation of a lifelong attachment to the text of Melito, including learning enough Coptic to cope with the Crosby Sahidic papyrus, and a new Greek page in my last decade. When I was appointed to the chair of Church History in London, Melito was the only book I had published.
Nottingham added one other significant direction of study. Richard Hanson, engaged to rescue the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* from torpor by getting writers on the Early Church, got me to write two short articles. My work was thorough and revolutionary enough to persuade the editorial board to make me Hanson’s successor when he suddenly resigned. My standing with that encyclopaedia contributed to the respect in which my scholarship was held. I remained deficient in conversational German. Administratively I was involved in the setting up of BEd degrees on behalf of the Faculty of Arts. When the London College of Divinity moved to Bramcote, it fell to me to devise courses, including the BTh, for the local Theological Colleges. I cooperated in this with Colin Buchanan of LCD.

Nottingham also completed the family with Walter’s birth, and educated three of the children at the High schools. Walter would later distinguish himself in music and humanity. Brenda dropped school-teaching in favour of eminent careers in Floral Art and in academic and legal Indexing.

When Bob Leaney retired as Head of Department the time had come for a shift from the old ‘Biblical Theology’ exemplified by Alan Richardson towards the Philosophy and Phenomenology of religion. I was not surprisingly passed over in favour of John Heywood Thomas. John and I became good friends. But I was expected to look for a move, and was appointed to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History at King’s College London.

My appointment was itself a shift, since I had seen my work as chiefly textual and doctrinal. I had never belonged to the Ecclesiastical History Society, which had been founded and largely managed from King’s College. I made haste to join, and started contributing to the *Proceedings*. I later became Chairman for a year.

Coinciding with my appointment at King’s I was invited to speak from an Anglican perspective on the Universality of the Gospel. I was immediately elected to membership of the Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses, a body of Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theologians of many nationalities. I had too much to do to attend regularly before my retirement from King’s, but wrote several papers and was for six years President. My Presidency led to one important publication when in 2009 I edited two years of *Proceedings* as *Jesus Christ Today*, a set of studies of the perennial living heart of Christianity, which is the belief that the crucified man from Nazareth is Lord of the Universe. It remains as impossible as it seemed to be when Paul taught it; it remains a miracle that anyone believes it, or ever did.

At King’s I continued to edit articles for the *TRE*, and wrote several, including Melito and Constantine. I enjoyed working with my German colleagues. The article on Constantine went alongside the partnership with Averil Cameron on translating and commenting on the newly edited Greek edition of Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*. Our joint edition owed much to Averil’s brilliance as a Roman Imperial and Byzantine scholar, and our book was in diverse ways original.

My interest in Paschal homiletic, based on Melito, led me in a new direction. I was asked to attend a meeting of the Gregory of Nyssa Symposium on Gregory’s Paschal homilies. I found his writing so difficult that I made a translation into English, which was published with the *Proceedings*, and I came to be invited to translate several other works of Gregory, including three books *Against Eunomius*. These were published with other studies by members of the Colloquium. I took the opportunity to improve the Greek text occasionally.
Retirement did not bring idleness. From 1990 to 1998 I served as Priest in Charge for St John’s Pittenweem and St Michael’s Elie. I discovered that 2005 was to be the centenary of St Michael’s and the bicentenary of St John’s. The result was a small history of the two churches, *Heritage and Hope*, my only attempt at local history.

Various things have needed finishing off. It was so with editing the *TRE*, which filled a great deal of my life. But Gregory of Nyssa, and numerous learned reviews especially for the *Journal of Theological Studies*. A joy at the end of my academic career came when Brent Nongbri identified the lost page of Melito in the Bodmer Papyrus, and I was able to share the publication with him in *JThS*.

I now have to meet God my Father and Saviour. Somewhere in the vicinity will be Douglas WC Ford, who articulated my calling to the priesthood and to ancient Greek, at the behest of my beloved but under-appreciated Mother.