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F.D. Maurice and the Unitarians

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'In the fullest and best sense of the word I can be nothing else than a Unitarian.'¹ At a time when 'unitarian' is being used in a sense far from complimentary in discussions on some recent theological works from Cambridge,² it is salutary to be reminded of F.D. Maurice's remarkable declaration of 1861. The son of a Unitarian minister, and generally finding himself alongside the Unitarians in everything save their negations, Maurice was considered by many in his own day to have remained a Unitarian at heart. H. P. Liddon refused to preach at Westminster Abbey in 1864 because his name would have appeared on the same list as that of Maurice.³ But what sort of 'unitarianism' is it that has subsequently exerted so profound an influence on such diverse, yet wholly orthodox, British Christians as P.T. Forsyth, H.H. Kelly, J. Scott Lidgett, W. Temple and A.M. Ramsey, or the Americans Phillips Brooks and H.R. Niebuhr?

Maurice's Unitarian background

A man brought up, as Maurice was, in a Unitarian household, and who so often spoke about his thirst for unity,⁴ naturally invited questions about his deepest convictions. Liddon's attitude has already been noted. In his letter to Dean Stanley, declining the invitation to preach in the Abbey, he referred to the American Unitarian W.E. Channing and clearly associated Maurice with him. *The Record* called Maurice a Socinian, which he considered 'a particularly broad and immense lie'.⁵ His contemporary, Edward White, thought that the chief effect of reading Maurice's works was the production of Unitarians.⁶

The fact of the matter was that Maurice had been bred a Unitarian, and never lost sight of the truths of the Unitarian position, though he was acutely aware of its limitations. He believed that their narrow representation of the 'unity of God' principle had driven them into confusion.⁷ He recognized the truth their name implied, but to him their doctrines were feeble.⁸ In 1847 he noted that they were dwindling in size, but 'something worse may succeed'.⁹ Yet as one who had been brought up amongst them he 'must needs sympathise much in struggles to which I owe everything',¹⁰ and anything relating to the movement touched him very nearly.¹¹

It was natural, therefore, that once he had embraced the Church of England, Maurice should try to win the sympathy of his father, and

Unitarians generally, to his understanding of Christian truth. Further, he knew that many non-Christian thinkers had a greater respect for the Unitarians' deism than for the doctrines of orthodox Christianity. One of Maurice's tasks as a theologian was to reconcile the rational views of the critics with Christian doctrine wherever possible.¹² Though small in number, the Unitarians had considerable influence. They had received a notable impetus in the last quarter of the previous century through the work of Joseph Priestley, whose scientific researches had already made him well known and respected by the time he published his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* in 1782. It was a powerful demonstration of the Unitarian point of view, and Samuel Horsley, then archdeacon of St Albans, and later a bishop, issued a learned and skilful reply. Many Anglican clergy accepted the Unitarian position, some going so far as to give up their orders to minister in the newly-founded Unitarian chapels.¹³ Lindsey, vicar of Catterick, was one of the founders (with Priestley and Thomas Belsham) of the Unitarian Society. He left the Church of England and opened the Essex Street Unitarian Chapel in London in 1774, the first chapel specifically so named. S.T. Coleridge, who deeply influenced Maurice, considered himself a Unitarian in his twenties, and in 1798 preached at their Shrewsbury chapel with a view to obtaining the pastorate.

The middle years of Maurice's life coincided with the appearance of a number of books by Unitarians, or writers with Unitarian sympathies, and these questioned much traditional Christian teaching. In 1838, when Maurice produced the first edition of *The Kingdom of Christ*, the Unitarian Charles Hennell¹⁴ published his *Inquiry Concerning the Origins of Christianity*, a remarkable piece of textual criticism from the hands of an amateur. David Strauss arranged a German translation and offered high praise.¹⁵ Hennell's sister Caroline had earlier married Charles Bray, whose treatise, *The Philosophy of Necessity* (1841), denied all human freedom. Mary Ann Evans (later known as George Eliot) became an intimate of the Hennell-Bray circle, and was deeply impressed by Charles's book.¹⁶ This influence and friendship led to her translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, which appeared in English in 1846 and had an enormous sale. Strauss's book, combined with his friendship with Carlyle, resulted in a total loss of faith for John Sterling, Maurice's Cambridge contemporary and brother-in-law. During this period Maurice appears to have undermined what remained of Sterling's faith. At any rate, the painful recollections of the episode prevented him from later reading Julius Hare's memoir of their friend.¹⁷

The decade of *Das Leben Jesu* also saw several books from the hand of Frank Newman, John Henry's brother.¹⁸ They were full of doubts and difficulties, and through them the new American version of Unitarianism reached a wide audience, acquainting readers with

the teaching of R.W. Emerson and Theodore Parker. Maurice believed that Newman's subjective faith would remain a refined individualism, never to become a Catholic faith embracing all men. With Newman, Maurice associated the Manchester Unitarian W.R. Greg, who put forward his objections in *The Creed of Christendom* (1851).¹⁹ Though a member of a leading Manchester Unitarian family, Greg was edging towards agnosticism. There is a thin line connecting the thought of the Unitarians with other intellectual movements of the period. It can be detected in the welcome which Frank Newman gave to the immensely popular book, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, published anonymously in 1844 by Robert Chambers. It was an example of the pre-Darwinian scientific challenge confronting Maurice, just as Charles Lyell's works on geology had been in the previous decade. Static theories in science were having to give way to dynamic theories, and Maurice recognized that a similar challenge confronted theology.

But when Maurice addressed himself sympathetically to Unitarians he had in mind the younger thinkers such as James Martineau. Martineau had much in common with Maurice, struggling to meet the new challenges to faith and developing a more spiritual philosophy than his Unitarian antecedents. He represented a generation that had left the controversies of the previous century behind them and were dissatisfied with the rational forms of worship associated with Priestley. Martineau told Channing in 1840 that there was far less belief, but far more faith, than twenty years before.²⁰ J.H. Thom, J.J. Tayler, C. Wicksteed and Martineau together formed a mediating party in Unitarianism, and their moral calibre and deep spirituality called out the best that Maurice had to give.

The sovereignty of love

The worship that Maurice experienced as a boy was Unitarian worship, addressed to God, following the teaching of Lindsey and Clarke. This was of signal importance in his theological development, and the conviction that God was the living Father of all mankind became his basic doctrine.²¹ Thus Maurice played a key part in transforming the popular image of the Deity from that of an external Sovereign to that of an immanent Father, whose sovereignty resides in his love. Maurice 'learnt in the Unitarian school to feel and think first of the Father', and 'to realise the meaning of the name of the Father, the meaning of the unity of God'.²² Comparing German with English modes of contemplating matters of faith, Maurice said it was necessary to begin from the Father in order that something might be known of the Son and of the Spirit. 'Our greatest national errors, shortcomings and sins, have arisen from our forsaking that line, which God has marked out for us.'²³ The Unitarian emphasis on God as Father sometimes led Maurice into misunderstandings: his critics

believed that he saw the Son in a derivative or secondary sense—hence the accusation of Socinianism. Maurice accused *The Record* of not listening to him, for he believed ‘there cannot be a Father without an only Begotten Son of the same substance with Himself, there cannot be any Unity but the Unity of the Eternal Father with the Eternal Son in the Eternal Spirit.’²⁴ For Maurice, the divine society of the Godhead implied the Trinity.

Maurice’s upbringing gave him a deep attachment to the doctrine of the unity of God. He conceived this to be the cardinal point of Unitarianism, a positive principle with which no man should dare to trifle. ‘The belief of a Being not manifested in outward forms, but manifested in His works; not divided according to the diversity of His operations, but *one*, was the belief that lay at the root of all their teaching.’²⁵ The Unitarians held, said Maurice, a strong inward conviction that ‘the unity of God is a deep, primary truth.’ With this conviction was associated another, that God’s unity must be the ground of all unity among men. If there was a universal religion, this idea must be at the root of it.²⁶

Again, his understanding of the traditional doctrine of the Fall was ultimately derived from the conviction he shared with the Unitarians about the unity and love of God. He examined their understanding of this doctrine in *The Kingdom of Christ*,²⁷ and listed the answers given to them by orthodox Christians. The answers were not those that Maurice read in his gospel: ‘The horrible notion, that has haunted moralists, divines, and practical men, that pravity is the law of our being, and not the perpetual tendency to struggle against the law of our being (the Gospel) discards and anathematises.’²⁸ It was in the inclination of man to become his own law and centre that depravity consisted; neither body nor soul could be in itself evil.²⁹ Thus Maurice met the Unitarians’ criticisms by declaring that the divine image was there all the time, and sin resided in the inclination of man to turn away from God. Man was not ‘in Adam’ but ‘in Christ’, and Christ’s incarnation was in God’s purpose before the Fall.³⁰ He wrote to R.H. Hutton, a Unitarian who became an Anglican: ‘I can therefore do justice to the Unitarians’ protest against the language in which many who call themselves orthodox describe the condition of mankind, just because I adopt the belief in the perfect divinity and the perfect manhood of the Son of God.’³¹

The Unitarians did not accept the current teaching about everlasting punishment. Maurice himself was brought up in the belief of universal restitution, and was taught that the idea of eternal punishment could not be equated with a belief in the goodness and mercy of God.³² As a youth, Maurice thought the Unitarian convictions weak, but found nothing better until he became convinced that the absolute love of God was the point of departure for the gospel, and the knowledge of God was its reward. It was to

Thomas Erskine of Linlathen that he owed the turning of his mind towards the first concept, and it can be dated to his late 'teens, that is, the early 1820s. The second concept deepened in his mind later, and owes much to Clement of Alexandria, whom Maurice greatly admired. At any rate, the mature Maurice was able to reject the merely good-natured God of the universalists, and could write to his young enquirer F.J.A. Hort in 1849:

I am bound to believe that the eternal life into which the righteous go is that knowledge of God which *is* eternal life; I am bound to suppose that the eternal punishment into which those on the left hand go, is the loss of that eternal life—what is elsewhere called eternal death.³³

Thus it can be fairly claimed that Maurice's distinctive teaching on eternal life, which earned him his dismissal from King's College, London, in 1853, owes its origin to his sympathy with Unitarian teaching and his reaction to its weakness. Three other areas of his work and thought which indicate his Unitarian heritage are worthy of mention: his deep concern for a better understanding of other faiths,³⁴ his opposition to systematic theology,³⁵ and his concern for social welfare.³⁶ But it was in answering the Unitarians' objections to the doctrine of the atonement that Maurice revealed his greatest reaction to their teaching, and showed himself capable of cutting new paths to escape from the impasse of his day.

Atonement as the work of God

Unitarianism, with its traditional belief in the goodness of God, was fundamentally opposed to the penal substitutionary view of the Atonement. Maurice had every sympathy with this critical attitude, for he, like the Unitarians,³⁷ held unswervingly to a belief in the God of love. 'Charity is the ground and centre of the universe: God is charity.'³⁸ He could in no way accept the view that God the Son was appeasing the wrath of God the Father. In Maurice's view, the penal substitutionary doctrine questioned the goodness of God, and appeared to him to drive a wedge between God and man by affirming a total breakdown in the divine-human relationship. For Maurice, the concept of God as loving Father had to remain the keystone of theology. Further, he was repelled by any tendency to isolate the cross from the full doctrine of incarnation. The atonement had to be linked to the whole revelation of God and the whole mystery of man.³⁹ The way forward for Maurice was an understanding of the atonement which put the whole concentration on the work of God, his victory in Christ,⁴⁰ his sacrifice in the Son as man's representative and head (not substitute). The work of God in Christ is seen as that of one reconciling sons to their father.⁴¹

He sets out his teaching on the atonement in his *Theological Essays*,⁴² addressed to Unitarians, and in *The Doctrine of Sacrifice*,

dedicated to the YMCA. Maurice's *Essays* had formed the subject of a series of lectures by the Scots divine R.S. Candlish, delivered to the YMCA in 1853, in the course of which the lecturer accused Maurice of being in substantial agreement with the Unitarians. Maurice replied in a long dedicatory letter which prefaces his *Doctrine of Sacrifice* (1850). The letter was published separately in 1860 under the title *Charges of Heresy against Mr Maurice*.

The concept of sacrifice is at the heart of Maurice's teaching on the atonement. Sacrifice, he taught, manifested God's mind, accomplishing his will in the redemption and reconciliation of his creatures, enabling them to become like their Father by sacrificing themselves.⁴³ The question Maurice posed (Athanasius-like) was 'What has God done?' His reply was that God the Son had fully satisfied the goodwill of the Father by entering man's lowest condition; that the Father was fully satisfied in the Son, whose total sacrifice of his whole life was fully drawn out by the cross. By concentrating on the work of God, Maurice established a unity between creation and atonement, between sacrifice and the doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁴ The apostles treated Christ's death 'as that wonderful event to which all God's purposes, from the beginning of the world, had been tending ... they looked upon this reunion, or reconciliation, as unveiling a deep mystery—the deepest mystery of all—in the relations of God and man, in the being of God himself.'⁴⁵

Maurice's teaching on the atonement is rooted in the concept, derived ultimately from the Christian fathers of Alexandria, that man's relationship with God is real and continues despite man's sin. Because he held so firmly to this view, Maurice was unable to go very far with the leaders of the Oxford Movement, despite their expectations of him after his pamphlet, *Subscription No Bondage* (1835). Maurice clung to a belief that men were made in the divine image, and that sin was a turning away from things as they really were. As John McLeod Campbell observed,⁴⁶ this raised questions about Maurice's notion of the reality of sin. Deeply conscious as he was of his own sinfulness, Maurice never gave it that sense of final reality which he gave to his belief in the love of God the Father, and mankind seen only in the Son of God.⁴⁷ He can therefore be described as a dualist: not one who saw evil as an eternal principle opposed to God,⁴⁸ but concerned with the opposition between God and that which, in the world he has created, resists his will. Maurice dwelt long upon man's turning away from the truth and believing in a lie.⁴⁹ He could therefore hold a doctrine of the atonement which strongly emphasized Christ's victory over that negative, evil influence at work among men, without damaging his overarching view of the God of love and the wholeness of creation.

In describing the atonement, Maurice spoke in dramatic terms of God's victory of life over death, employing the images of conflict,

warfare, ransom and deliverance from bondage.⁵⁰ He stressed that God's redemptive activity began with creation. Not surprisingly, his view has been described as classical,⁵¹ though there is more than a hint of exemplarism in his idea of man becoming like his heavenly Father through a life of sacrifice. Yet Maurice was not concerned with resurrecting old teaching, but with answering the criticisms of sincere Unitarians. Without realizing it, he had reintroduced to Anglican theology a fresh emphasis on the incarnation, which was to remain dominant to the end of the century.

Though Maurice was 'in the fullest and best sense of the word' a Unitarian, he was even more emphatically a Trinitarian. He saw the Trinity as the ground of human relations, but he was critical of an over-emphasis on the idea of 'Persons who perform certain acts of creation, redemption and sanctification.'⁵² Maurice's letters to his father from Cambridge⁵³ indicate his idea of God as involving trinity, and he shared with Coleridge a concern to affirm distinction without division. It was his quasi-philosophical manner of making these affirmations which undoubtedly led his critics to question his orthodoxy. Yet he was in the company of Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus and Origen in so much that he wrote, and the whole tenor of the Maurice corpus echoes the teaching of the Greek fathers. As they looked back to Plato, so did he, and found it vital to speak of both unity and trinity. He died with the Trinitarian formula on his lips, but there was no doctor's hood in his wardrobe nor canon's stall in any cathedral. He had sympathized with Unitarians and others who were asking questions about what was considered orthodox teaching, and the price had been high. Of one thing we may remain certain: F.D. Maurice would throw himself just as enthusiastically into today's debates, and would emerge uniquely F.D. Maurice.

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NOTES

- 1 F. Maurice, *Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (Macmillan, London 1884), vol. 2, p.388.
- 2 One has in mind G. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Clarendon: OUP, Oxford 1977); C.F.D. Moule, *The Holy Spirit* (Mowbray, Oxford 1978); D. Cupitt, *Jesus and the Gospel of God* (Lutterworth Press, London 1979). A.J. Long, principal of Manchester Unitarian College, underlines in the 1978 Essex Hall lecture the extent to which several recent Anglican writers have adopted what to him appears a Unitarian position. After referring to the work of Professor Maurice Wiles and others, Mr Long concludes: 'It can hardly be denied that *The Myth of God Incarnate*, despite the fact that it almost totally ignores the historic contribution of Unitarianism, contains one of the best statements of the Unitarian case against traditional Christology ever to appear in a "mainstream" publication' (p.12). The Revd Michael Harper, in the 1979 Ashe Lecture, observed: 'The fact that esteemed theologians are able to hold to Unitarian views of God, and that the Church won't

- or can't do anything about it, is a grave scandal and symptom of disease' (*Church Times*, 21 September 1979).
- 3 J.O. Johnston, *Life and Letters of H.P. Liddon* (Longmans, London 1904), p.74.
 - 4 *Life of Maurice*, vol.1, p.41.
 - 5 *Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.515.
 - 6 F.J. Powicke, *Congregational Quarterly*, April 1930.
 - 7 *Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.89.
 - 8 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.351.
 - 9 *ibid.*, vol.1, p.440.
 - 10 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.351.
 - 11 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.143.
 - 12 At the height of the Maurice controversy at King's College, London, his friend and brother-in-law, Archdeacon Hare, wrote: 'I do not believe that there is any other living man who has done anything at all approaching what Maurice has effected, in reconciling the reason and conscience of the thoughtful men of our age to the faith of our church' (*Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.184).
 - 13 The most notable included Edward Evanson (1731–1805), Gilbert Wakefield (1756–1801), John Jebb (1736–86) and Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808).
 - 14 Charles Christian Hennell (1809–50) was the son of a Manchester Unitarian businessman. He devoted his leisure to various fields of learning and culture.
 - 15 Strauss drew attention to the fact that, in the strict sense, Hennell was not a theologian, had not been confined by the limits of a university education, and was not a member of the established church, 'that drag-chain of English manufacture' (*Memoir of Charles C. Hennell*, by his sister Sara, privately published and circulated 1899, p.55).
 - 16 R.H. Hutton, *Modern Guides to English Thought in Matters of Faith* (Macmillan, London 1888), p.280; cf. G.S. Haight, *George Eliot* (OUP, Oxford 1968), p.39.
 - 17 *Life of Maurice*, vol.1, pp.452–3.
 - 18 See F. Newman, *A History of the Hebrew Monarchy, 1847; The Soul, its Sorrows and Aspirations, 1849; Phases of Faith, 1850*.
 - 19 *Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.59.
 - 20 J.E. Carpenter, *James Martineau* (Green, London 1905), p.188.
 - 21 D.G. Wigmore-Beddoes, in *Yesterday's Radicals* (James Clarke, Cambridge 1971), pp.90ff., draws attention to some of the links between Maurice and the Unitarians.
 - 22 *Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.515.
 - 23 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.253.
 - 24 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.515.
 - 25 F.D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ* (Macmillan, London 1891), vol.1, p.137.
 - 26 *ibid.*, vol.1, p.138.
 - 27 *ibid.*, vol.1, pp.140–2.
 - 28 F.D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (Macmillan, London 1891), p.39. cf. 'Protestants and Romanists, even while they denounce and excommunicate each other, yet appear to recognize the fact of depravity, of evil, as the fundamental fact of divinity. The fall of Adam—not the union of the Father and the Son, not the creation of the world in Christ—is set before men in both divisions of Christendom as practically the ground of their creed' (F.D. Maurice, *The Conflict of Good and Evil in Our Day* [Smith, Elder 1865], p.170).
 - 29 *Theological Essays*, p.40. For further development of the same idea, see Maurice's sermon on the Passover in *The Patriarchs and Lawgivers of the Old Testament* (Macmillan, London 1877), pp.197–8.
 - 30 *Life of Maurice*, vol.1, p.376.
 - 31 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.408.
 - 32 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.15.
 - 33 *ibid.*, vol.2, p.18. For the letter to which Maurice was replying, see A.F. Hort, *Life and Letters of Fenton John Anthony Hort* (Macmillan, London 1896), vol.1, pp.116–23.

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- 34 Maurice's Boyle lectures published in 1847, under the title *The Religions of the World*, are a landmark in the study of non-Christian faiths. Writing in the *Congregational Quarterly*, April 1930, F.J. Powicke said: 'Am I wrong in thinking that this Boyle lecture ... did more than anything else to inspire that new attitude toward the non-Christian world which is now characteristic of the missionary and those who send him forth?'
- 35 J.M. Ludlow said that the word 'system' was like a red rag to a bull so far as Maurice was concerned (N.C. Masterman, *John Malcolm Ludlow* [CUP, Cambridge 1963], p.53).
- 36 Maurice, with Ludlow, Kingsley and others, demonstrated this concern particularly during the period 1848 to 1854. His sermons on the Lord's Prayer (February to April 1848) show him preaching a gospel which obliged his congregation of barristers and law students to address themselves to social issues. The period is closely documented in T. Christensen, *Origin and History of Christian Socialism 1848-54* (Aarhus 1962). The Unitarians' contribution to social progress is documented in R.V. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (Allen & Unwin, London 1938).
- 37 Maurice told the Revd D.J. Vaughan: 'What [the Unitarians] require is a more complete statement of the truth of the Trinity and the atonement; they want no dilution of either ... it is the popular dilution of both which has outraged their consciences. The entire union of the Father with the Son is what we have to assert if we would overcome the notion of a Son who changes the Father's will' (*Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.379).
- 38 *Theological Essays*, p.8.
- 39 F.D. Maurice, *The Gospel of St John* (Macmillan, London 1893), p.497.
- 40 Maurice, *The Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Macmillan, London 1879), pp.239-41.
- 41 *ibid.*, p.230.
- 42 Particularly the seventh essay, 'On the Atonement', pp.109-29.
- 43 *The Doctrine of Sacrifice*, p.xliv; cf. *Life of Maurice*, vol.2, pp.383 and 394, and F.D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Heaven* (Macmillan, London 1893), p.xxxi.
- 44 *The Doctrine of Sacrifice*, p.194.
- 45 *The Gospel of St John*, p.332.
- 46 *Life of Maurice*, vol.2, p.538.
- 47 *Theological Essays*, p.39.
- 48 cf. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Heaven*, p.xxix, 'When we dare to accept the Gospels as they stand, we shall be able to oppose the Manicheism which draws from the sense of moral and physical evil the inference that there are two rival creators.'
- 49 *Life of Maurice*, vol.1, pp.106 and 155. The theme is taken up in the hymn, 'O God of Truth', by Maurice's disciple Thomas Hughes (*Hymns Ancient and Modern* 513).
- 50 cf. *The Kingdom of Heaven*, pp.xxiv-v.
- 51 Notably by A.G. Hebert in the preface to his translation of G. Aulen's *Christus Victor* (SPCK, London 1961), p.vii. and by A.M. Ramsey, *F.D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology* (CUP, Cambridge 1951), p.63.
- 52 *The Doctrine of Sacrifice*, pp.xxxvi-vii.
- 53 *Life of Maurice*, vol.1, pp.92-6 and 132-8.