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978-1-107-66891-1 - F. D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology:
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CHAPTER I

THE MAN AND THE THEOLOGIAN

ON October 27, 1853, the Council of King's College, London, passed a resolution that they 'feel it to be their painful duty to declare that the continuance of Professor Maurice's connection with the College as one of its Professors would be seriously detrimental to its usefulness'. A few years hence the College will be keeping the centenary of that momentous day in its history; and though a hundred years is long enough as a space for repentance, it may prove too short a time for a *final* assessment of one of the greatest figures in the history of Christianity in our land. 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' None the less a *fresh* assessment is in process, and no greater honour could fall to me than to be allowed, by the kindness of the Council and Professorial Board, to make in this place my own very small contribution towards this.

Though Maurice was a theologian to the core, he belongs to the story of English 'Life and Letters' in a way that is remarkable for one whose writings were nearly all published sermons and whose literary style was sometimes execrable. He has a place not only in ecclesiastical history but in the circle of such men as Carlyle, Mill, Tennyson, Leslie Stephen. Carlyle

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thought him worthy of more than one pungent paragraph; Mill reckoned with him as a mind of the highest calibre; Tennyson greeted his expulsion from your College by a poem to him, and Leslie Stephen's markedly unsympathetic sketch in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is an inverted tribute to his influence. And though Maurice never met Coleridge he did more than any other man to carry the message of Coleridge into the England of the middle years of the century. We cannot separate Maurice the theologian from Maurice the man; and though these lectures will be about the theology, we shall pause sometimes for a glimpse of the man amongst his contemporaries.

I

Born at Lowestoft in 1805, Frederick Denison Maurice came of a Unitarian household: perhaps 'household' is hardly correct, for while the father, a minister, clung to the end to this creed the mother and four children deserted it for other forms of faith. It was a family saddened by religious divisions; but Frederick to the end regarded the Trinitarian creed, which he came to embrace passionately, not as an abandonment of the doctrine of unity which he had learnt from his father but as an unfolding of its true meaning. 'I not only believe in the Trinity in Unity', he was to write, 'but I find in it the centre of all my beliefs: the rest of my spirit when I contemplate myself or mankind. But, strange as it may seem, I owe the depth of this belief in great measure to my training in my home. The very name that was used to describe

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the denial of this doctrine is the one which expresses to me the end that I have been compelled even in spite of myself to seek.¹ I have time only to recall his boyhood at Frenchay near Bristol; his years at Trinity, where Julius Hare was his teacher, Plato the biggest influence amongst his studies, and Sterling his closest friend; his migration to Trinity Hall on account of its special facilities for the study of law; his agonizing problem of conscience which caused him to leave Cambridge without a degree, for he could not yet declare himself a member of the Church of England; his few years in London writing for the *Westminster Review* and editing the *Athenaeum* in collaboration with Sterling; his conviction that he had come to believe as the Church of England believes and that ordination was his calling; his return to University life—this time at Exeter College, Oxford; his baptism; his graduation; his defence of the obligation to sign the XXXIX Articles on matriculation. This defence was elaborated a few years later in *Subscription No Bondage*, his first theological tract: ‘Subscription is a declaration of the terms on which the University professes to teach its pupils; upon what terms they agree to learn; it is fairer to express those terms than to conceal them, and they are not an unfit introduction to a general education in humanity and physics—because they are theological and on that account very valuable, and the Articles may contribute to the reconciliation of what is positive in all Christian sects.’

Carry the story just one stage further. Maurice was

¹ *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (1885), I, p. 41.

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ordained deacon in 1834, and after two years in Warwickshire as a country curate he is back in London, chaplain of Guy's Hospital. Two more years, and he has written his first theological book, and perhaps the greatest of them all, *The Kingdom of Christ*. His characteristic ideas are already formed, and are finding mature and powerful expression. To say that the whole of Maurice, theologian-philosopher-man, was in this book would be an exaggeration: yet it would not be a grotesque exaggeration. Thirty-six years old, Maurice had found his message and spoken it.

Affectionate in his nature, Maurice is seen at every stage of his life as one of a circle. There was first his family. His closeness to his parents was unbroken, and nothing is more touching than the letter to his father at the time of his ordination, explaining something of his changed outlook and declaring his debt to his home. At Cambridge there was the Apostles' club: Sterling, Trench, Hallam were next to Maurice its most vigorous minds. Sterling was always held in special affection. He took orders, and was for a very short time Hare's curate at Hurstmonceaux; but he abandoned this calling as a mistake and, under Carlyle's influence, moved steadily farther from the faith of the Church. Maurice married Sterling's sister-in-law, Annie Barton, in 1837. Sterling's death in 1844 and Annie's death a year later were shattering blows: he ever reproached himself for what he felt to be his failure to lead Sterling in the way of faith. In 1849 he married Georgiana, the half-sister of Julius Hare, who had himself married Maurice's sister four years earlier.

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It was no clericalist circle, for near to it were two of the greatest lay figures of the century, Carlyle in Chelsea and Coleridge in Highgate. Carlyle was intimate with Sterling, and aroused Maurice's resentment for drawing Sterling away from Coleridge and the Christian faith. Carlyle in a kindlier mood could write 'Maurice has come twice athwart me: a man I like always for his delicacy, his ingenuity and earnestness: he is wonderfully patient of me, I often think; and I ought to esteem his way of thought at its full worth, and let it *live* in me, if I could. Hitherto, I regret to confess, it is mainly moonshine and *Spitzfindigkeit*, and will not live. But the man is good, and does live in me'.¹ But, when exasperated, he wrote, 'One of the most entirely uninteresting men of genius that I can meet with in society is poor Maurice to me. All twisted, screwed, wire-drawn, with such a restless sensitiveness: the utmost inability to let nature have fair play with him'.² Maurice on his part, fresh from attending a lecture by Carlyle, laments that by missing the meaning of the Incarnation that great man lived in a 'world without a centre', and indulged in 'silly rant about the great bosom of nature'; but his vagaries were corrected by a 'real abhorrence of what is base and false' so that 'his inconsistencies . . . seem to me the greatest providential blessings, explaining wherein he is false and enabling us to receive his truth'.³

On the other side of London there was Coleridge.

¹ *New letters of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Alexander Carlyle, I, p. 29.

² *Ibid.* I, p. 108-9.

³ *Life of F.D.M.*, I, p. 282-3.

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Now a sick and ageing man, weakened by years of the opium habit, Coleridge drew many of the young intellectuals of the day by his amazing conversation. Though Sterling was at his feet, Maurice never met him. But if it is true that apart from Coleridge we cannot understand the history of theology in the nineteenth century, it is as true that apart from him we cannot see Maurice in his right perspective.

II

The importance of Coleridge becomes apparent if we ask what reading could be recommended to a layman in the eighteen-thirties who was looking for some vindication of the reasonableness of Christian belief and found the older method of 'evidences' for an external and authoritative revelation no longer satisfying. 'Evidences of Christianity!' said Coleridge. 'I am weary of the word. Make a man feel the want of it; rouse him if you can to the self-knowledge of his need of it; and you may safely trust it to its own evidence'. Coleridge threw aside the apologetic which dwelt upon nature as the perfect machine which must have God as its designer, and led people to think instead about those aspects of man which cannot be classified with nature: his will, and 'reason', and sense of sin. The Christian faith is shewn to be congruous with the truth about man himself, and the Christian Church to be congruous with man's social being. It meant much that Coleridge 'could still, after Hume and Voltaire had done their best and worst with him, profess himself an orthodox Christian, and say and point to the

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Church of England, with its singular old rubrics and surplices at Allhallowtide, *Esto perpetua*'.¹

But Coleridge did far more than stand in a gap. He justified Mill's description of him as one of the seminal minds of the century by introducing a new *method* into the discussion of Christian theology. May we remind ourselves of the main lines of his thought, as it is found especially in his *Aids to Reflection* and in his posthumously published *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*? He recognizes the real, causal activity of the will, inexplicable from the life of nature: he sees the will as the principle of our personality. He recognizes the existence of moral evil whereby man is 'a fallen creature', and knows it—not just because he is told so in the narratives of Genesis, but because he is 'diseased in that will, which is the true and only significance of the word I, or the intelligent self'. He insists upon the distinction between our Reason and our Understanding: the Understanding signifies the use of rational processes in the narrower sense, the Reason includes sense and imagination as well as understanding and is equivalent to 'a total act of the soul'. He claims that by Reason, in this inclusive sense, men may hold real communion with God Himself, and their capacity for seeing

¹ Carlyle *Life of John Sterling*, p. 62. The whole chapter, entitled 'Coleridge', is one of Carlyle's very best. For Coleridge's theology see Hort in *Cambridge Essays* (1856), J. Tulloch in his *Movements of Religious Thought in Great Britain during the Nineteenth Century* (1893), and V. F. Storr in his *Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (a good chapter in a book which is in the main unsatisfactory, not least in its treatment of Maurice). C. R. Sanders in his *Coleridge and the Broad Church Movement* (1942) is invaluable in the mass of material which he collects, but his treatment of the relation of Maurice to Coleridge hardly does justice to the distinctive place of Maurice as a theologian.

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the light is itself the presence of the light shining in their whole being. He thus commends Christianity not simply as a revelation *ab extra* through Book or Church, but as the crown and perfection of all intelligence, the truth in which all lesser truths find their fulfilment. As for the Bible, Coleridge discourages a fear of critical movements: read the Bible like any other book—and you will find that it is *not* like any other: ‘whatever finds me, bears witness for itself that it has proceeded from a Holy Spirit’. Coleridge is not discarding the unique revelation in the Biblical history: he claims to be shewing how that revelation vindicates itself as revelation in the conscience and mind of man. Similarly he is not discarding dogma: he claims to be approaching it through its practical bearing upon man’s need and its self-authentication through its congruity with the truth of man’s being.

It is a far cry from teaching of this sort to our present-day post-liberal dogmatic and Biblical theology. But I would beg anyone whom this description of Coleridge rouses to impatience to read Dr J. M. Creed’s Hulsean lectures, *The Divinity of Jesus Christ*, where an awareness of the many weaknesses of the nineteenth century is not allowed to oust a shrewd appreciation of what such men as Schleiermacher on the continent and Coleridge in England were doing. The notion of ‘Revelation *in vacuo*’ had gone with the turn of the century: the concept of Revelation needed vindication in new ways, on the lines of the congruity of its truth with what man knows (and even feels!) about himself and about nature. Of course the

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risk of a shallow immanentism lurked round the corner: but, says Dr Creed, '*Christus consummator* is the description of our Lord which answers most adequately to the type of doctrine which we have been considering. Men such as Schleiermacher, Coleridge, F. D. Maurice, Westcott, cannot and will not deny the working of God's spirit wherever it may be traced, but they did not cease to affirm their faith in Christ as one who completes what is truly but imperfectly present elsewhere . . . We can no longer think in their terms. But their doctrine is, as I judge, to this extent still valid: first, if our treatment of the manifold data of religions, past and present, is to be fruitful, we need some general conception of religion to help us, before we can proceed to value and to classify. And in the second place the Romantics were right when they insisted that actual religion is always positive and specific'.¹ Dr Creed uses the word 'Romantic' to cover a big variety of writers, but if Coleridge belongs to them in broad description, he was nearer than many of them to the main Christian tradition. He was indeed engaged in expounding the nature of 'religion', but he so did it as to be the defender not only of the Biblical revelation but also of the Church—and the Church of England.

The conception of the Church was an essential part of Coleridge's thought. In his *On the Constitution of Church and State according to the Idea of Each* he parted with the conception of Church and State as two aspects of the same community and expounded the

¹ *The Divinity of Jesus Christ*, pp. 39, 40.

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idea of a national Church which is not identical with the nation since it is a portion of the Church Catholic and Apostolic. Coleridge in a sense prefigured the Oxford Movement: 'My fixed principle is: that a Christianity without a Church exercising spiritual authority is vanity and delusion. And my belief is, that when Popery is rushing in on us like an inundation, the nation will find it to be so'.¹ But it is not among the Tractarians that his real successors were to be found. One whose judgment was seldom at fault, R. W. Church, wrote in his notebook at the time when he was reading for a fellowship, 'There is something in Maurice, and his master Coleridge, which wakens thought in me more than any other writings almost: with all their imputed mysticism they seem to me to say plain things as often as most people'.² *His master Coleridge*: it is a strong phrase, and to understand Maurice we must consider both its truth and its limits.

At Trinity Maurice had 'defended Coleridge's metaphysics and Wordsworth's poetry against the Utilitarian teaching'. More still, 'I had no inclination to infidelity. Coleridge had done much to preserve me from that'.³ Perhaps it was on account of his shyness and diffidence that he never went to Highgate to see Coleridge. Yet all the while Coleridge had been providing, not perhaps the doctrines about which Maurice thought, so

¹ *Aids to Reflection*, p. 295. Newman says that though Coleridge 'indulged a liberty of speculation which no Christian can tolerate, and advocated conclusions which were often heathen rather than Christian', yet he 'made trial of his age . . . and succeeded in interesting its genius in the cause of Catholic truth'. (*Essays Critical and Historical*, I, p. 268.)

² *Life and letters of Dean Church*, p. 17.

³ *Life of F.D.M.*, I, p. 177.