

# **FREDERICK DENISON MAURICE**

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**TRINITY COLLEGE CHAPEL**

**1 NOVEMBER 2009**

**THE FIRST LESSON: Revelation 21: 5-8**

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

**FREDERICK MAURICE'S COMMENTARY ON REVELATION, 21:8**

All blessedness—oh! when shall we understand this?—consists in the acknowledgment of that which is; all damnation in the denial of it. That men disbelieve the good and gracious God to be their Father—that they count Him not their Father but their enemy—this makes them cowards; this makes them traffickers with impure and evil Spirits; this makes them corrupters and destroyers of each other's purity; this makes them trifle with each other's life; this makes them worshippers of visible things; this is the lie of which all other lies are the offspring. Those spirits which reject truth, which feed on a lie and live in a lie, are in the lake of fire. There is no way of describing their condition but that. A fire is burning in them which nothing can quench... If we look at this fire merely as reason, without Revelation, looks at it, we could find in it only despair. When God enters, despair ceases. He is called in Scripture the God of Hope. That which we think of as His must give us hope.

F.D. Maurice, *Lectures on the Apocalypse* (1861), pp. 71-2

**RING OUT, WILD BELLS**

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,  
For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,  
The faithless coldness of the times;  
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,  
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

from Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850), Stanza CVI

'Muddle-headed', said James Stephen. 'The most hopelessly imbecile thinker that any section of the world have been driven to believe in', said James Froude. 'Muddy, dim, and foggy', said George Eliot. 'By nature puzzle-headed and indeed wrong-headed', said John Ruskin. And they were his friends.

I don't know what Wittgenstein thought about Maurice, but here's how the historian Owen Chadwick's describes what he must have been like in the pulpit: 'His face was noble and his expression reverent. He exalted his hearers, but could not make them understand what he said.' His sermons 'are filled with literary head-scratching. The tone is intense, the inspiration jerky. He wades along a stream of rhetorical questions and litters the banks with parentheses, dashes, inversions, notes of exclamation. The reader is battered and fatigued by the demand to feel indignation on subjects where he did not know himself to feel *anything*; unable to grasp the author's meaning while seeing that this meaning is life or death to the author.'

And so to two final quotations, which I take as my texts. The first comes from the young Catherine Winkworth, who said this about his published sermons: 'He takes such pains to say things in the simplest language that I am surprized, when I come to the end of the sentence, to find it not so clear as I thought it was. But he must be an extraordinary man to exert such influence over the young men who come in his way'.

And finally, Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College: 'He was misty and confused' and 'none of his writings is worth reading. *But he was a great man.*'

He was born in 1805 into a Unitarian family. Unitarians were the most despised type of social outsiders. They also directly opposed the prevailing religion of the first half of the nineteenth century, the religion of evangelicals, high churchmen, and most Nonconformists—a prevailing religion that can be

summed up in the phrase, 'Be very afraid'. Unitarians by contrast believed in a God of Love, meaning a God of Soft Love, not Tough Love.

But when Maurice was ten, two of his young cousins died. His mother and three elder sisters felt that their God of Love had led them up the garden path, and, like so many folk then, in their sorrow they sought to find some consolatory *meaning* in the event by reconfiguring God as a God of Punishment, a retributory Providence. They became Calvinists. Maurice and his father, however, remained Unitarians.

In 1823 he came up to Trinity. As a non-Anglican he was not allowed to graduate. At this point I have to say something that may dismay the Dean. Maurice was never a Fellow of Trinity. There are some muddle-headed Fellows of Trinity, but not as muddle-headed as Maurice. So I'm afraid he's an interloper in this series of addresses, the title of which I didn't know until it was too late to abort. But he *was* a fellow in the sense of being a bloke, and he spent some quality time in Trinity, as I shall say, so I think it's all right for me to continue.

He gravitated to Trinity Hall. He became keen to be a lawyer. He would have been very good at getting juries to acquit, but he would have been a hopeless draftsman. Anyway the family finances collapsed, he needed money, and there was no money to be made in the Law. If you wanted a secure and comfortable income the best thing was to become a Church of England clergyman, which he did.

He was appointed chaplain at Guy's Hospital, where in 1838 he published his first theological gob-stopper, *The Kingdom of Christ*, a mishmash of existentialism and Platonic mysticism. It was obviously profound, but so hard to understand that everybody said he'd better become an academic. So in 1840 he became Professor of Literature at King's College London in the Strand, a very orthodox

High Church institution, and then in 1846 he added the Professorship of Divinity, the same exalted Chair that was later held by our present Dean.

I don't know whether our present Dean dabbled in radical politics like Maurice. In 1848 there were violent revolutions in almost every European country. In Britain there was what we call the Chartist Movement, and in that year I think Britain came closer to having a revolution than at any time since the 17th century. Whether or not that is true, the *fear* of revolution was palpable. Maurice joined with a group of friends who called themselves Christian Socialists – notably Charles Kingsley, John Ludlow, and Thomas Hughes. Their message, much mocked by Marx, was that working people did not need the vote or welfare but God's love; that they could only learn to love God through loving each other as brothers; and that the best way to teach them to love each other was by the upper classes showing love to them. Not by giving them money or bread, you understand, but by associating with them and extending the hand of fellowship.

Maurice remained active as a teacher in Working Men's colleges for the rest of his life. He also returned to Cambridge though not Trinity as the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy, and he died – adored – in 1872. 'The most beautiful soul I have known', reflected Charles Kingsley. 'The most saint like, or, if I dare to use the words, the most Christ like individual I have ever met'. Those words are quoted in the old DNB but I don't know who said them.

I've only got time to focus on the event for which he is best known.

In 1853 the governing body of King's sacked him from his professorship because he had denied the doctrine of eternal punishment, meaning he had denied the literal 'fire and brimstone' view of Hell as depicted in the first reading. At least, that was the reason they *gave* for sacking him. The *real*

reason, I suspect, was that he was a self-styled socialist with working class contacts.

Because he was a sweet and mild man, the King's governing body thought he would go quietly; instead he fought back ferociously in pamphlets, the issue was raised in Parliament, and the whole affair blew up into a great *cause célèbre*.

His enemies called him a wet universalist, someone who thought (like Unitarians) that *everyone* would be saved. No, he insisted, I think most of us will be damned!<sup>1</sup> It's just that the condition of the damned will not be literal torment; and it won't last for ever because (I quote) like our own word 'period', 'the word "eternal" does not convey so much the impression of a line as of a circle. It does not suggest perpetual progress, but fixedness and completeness,' not 'endlessness' or 'duration' but a 'quality' of experience. Being in Hell is a state of being deprived of God. Since the reason you go to Hell is that you haven't loved God in life, being deprived of his company after death can't be regarded as a hardship. To put it another way, people who don't love God are already in Hell, are already in the lake of fire, so it won't get any worse for them afterwards.

Although he expressed this simple idea so impenetrably that half the time no one knew what the hell he was talking about, they got the gist. God was not to be regarded as synonymous with thunderbolts or tough love or providential retribution. He had not, for example, for good but inscrutable reasons of His own, caused the recent Irish famine, as many people supposed.

Because the extraordinary thing is that that within ten years, in the Church of England – not among Nonconformists but in the Church of England – after a

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<sup>1</sup> 'I was brought up to believe in universal restitution, but I wavered as I grew because Unitarians perverted Divine perfection into mere good nature.' Maurice to F.J.A. Hort, 23 Nov. 1849, *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*, ed. F. Maurice (1884), ii. 15-16.

two-generation long period of Hell-fear, Maurice's views swept the board. Liturgical attention switched suddenly from Easter to Christmas, from Christ as saviour of mankind through the mechanical process of his Atonement, described the 'hinge of Christian truth', from that to Jesus as incarnate Lord, teaching mankind how to live rather than how to die, Jesus as the very first socialist, and the great inspiration of the early British Labour Party.

One quotation will have to do as a summary of the Maurice effect. It's from a letter written by a friend in 1858 about a society lady, Charlotte Williams-Wynn, who was in the throes of a nervous breakdown.

'What religious teaching she had in her youth was of a so-called evangelical nature. No sooner did affliction come upon her, than these teachers came about her, wrote, and in short, kept her in a state of high nervous excitement. This will not do for everyday "wear and tear", and for the last three years she has been in a constant alternation of feeling, obliged from position and circumstances to be always in society, and all the time fearing that she is falling from God because she can no longer find in herself the highly wrought emotions which existed when she was in stronger health. Loved by all who come near her ... devoted to her poor ... she is thoroughly unhappy from the constant fear of the wrath of this inexorable Judge.'

Yet Charlotte, it's claimed, was miraculously cured by being given to read a volume of Maurice's sermons with their confident reassurance 'that God is a God of love, and that He does not punish in anger'.

Incidentally, I think women were the more weighed down by the burdens of a religion which not only threatened the most ferocious punishments for backsliders, but allowed one no spiritual time off. The faithful were urged to ruminate on their spiritual state 24/7, as we might say today. It was a type of religion that, in G.M. Young's words, 'pursued its rigorous, remorseless, and

logical argument into the recesses of the heart, and the details of daily life, giving to every action its individual value in this life, and its infinite consequences in the next'. But whereas men had too many distractions for it to work out like that in practice, I think that Angels stuck in the house (I know I'm opening a can of worms here) Angels stuck in the house felt the pressure of the 'eternal microscope' pointing at their hearts more remorselessly than men did. And certainly women flocked out of evangelicalism in droves in mid-century, some like George Eliot to scepticism, but many more to the type of faith that Maurice was offering them.

Let me turn to Heaven. Under the old evangelical system, Heaven had been regarded in the same literal and fabulous way as Hell: as an unimaginable pagoda of jewels and hallelujah choruses. Maurice said, it's not like that. Those who are bound for Heaven are already in Heaven because they love God. And so Heaven too was re-conceptualised, no longer a box of Turkish delights but instead – I'm going to caricature now: what follows isn't remotely in Maurice but it is what Maurice led people to think – Heaven was re-conceptualised as a cosy domestic Dickensian fireside where the dead are reunited with all their old chums. Even the favourite old sock that they'd eventually had to throw away would be there awaiting them in its pre-darned state.

Now, I've only time to make three points in conclusion. It wouldn't have been possible to reconfigure Heaven as merely an extension of a very happy earthly existence, if people hadn't felt that earthly existence was happy. If Maurice had simply said, 'Hey you've got God all wrong, he's different from what you think', few people would have taken much notice. The key point is that after 1848 there was a *sudden* burst of euphoria, a millennial moment, an epiphany. John Morley remembered the early 1850s as 'the golden trumpet notes of a new dawn. G.M. Young called those few years 'the Maytime of Youth revisited'. The passage from 1848 to 1851, he said, was like



'the opening of the city gates after a long and wintry siege'. In 1848, instead of the anticipated revolution Britain was the only big country *not* to have one. The sudden collapse of Chartism showed the British people to be loyal and patriotic. Britain was top nation militarily, and economically. In 1851 the Great Exhibition triumphantly demonstrated that Britain was the workshop of the world. When you listened to 'Ring Out Wild Bells', some of you may have thought that Christmas was coming earlier than ever this year. But I wanted you to hear those lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, a poem that oscillated between doubt, despair, and hope, because those lines, written in 1848 or 9, capture the mood of epiphany I've been talking about: 'Ring out the darkness of the land, Ring in the Christ that is to be.'

So my first point is that Maurice's consolatory theology only took on so quickly because of this mood. It's a question of conjuncture. He said what people were disposed to believe.

My second point is that, although Maurice was never a Fellow of Trinity, he was actually more important than that. He was an Apostle, meaning that he was a member of a secret debating society of undergraduates and ex-undergraduates. Some of *you* may be Apostles. I was never willowy enough to be invited. If they still exist they're probably based in King's, but they really began in the 1820s and 30s in Trinity, where Maurice, Sterling, Hallam, and Tennyson nurtured an ideal of the messianic undergraduate, capable of redeeming a lost nation. That was what I meant by Maurice's quality time at Trinity. Remembering his dead beloved friend Hallam in *In Memoriam*, Tennyson described how their 'band of youthful friends' would debate into the early hours, but whatever the issue under discussion it was always settled by Hallam, as the rest of them

... Hung to hear

The rapt oration flowing free

From point to point with power and grace  
 And music in the bounds of law,  
 To those conclusions when we saw  
 The God within him light his face.

The conceit here was that a fallen society like Britain's in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, facing economic and social and moral dislocation and political revolution, could *only* redeemed by heroes, and through hero-worship, faith in heroes mirroring faith in Christ. Christ was described by Maurice's friend Tom Hughes as 'the Lord of heroes'.

And so to my final point, which is a defence of Maurice's prose style. The prevailing philosophies of the first half of the nineteenth century weren't just cruel, they were very mechanical and systematic. Evangelicalism was a mechanical religion, Heaven and Hell were goal posts, sin dragged you down faith raised you up, according to what was called 'the economy of redemption'. The prevailing secular philosophy, utilitarianism or Benthamism, was also very mechanical. I think, because the French revolution had challenged all traditional verities, and the industrial revolution was doing the same, and Romantic subjectivity had challenged notions of objective truth, in the first half of the nineteenth century British people, knowing that God was under attack from French scientists and German philosophers, but desperate to go on believing, I think they found it hard to believe anything that did not seem coherent and logical and therefore mechanical. They couldn't take in contradictory truths. And therefore, as someone said in 1825, 'love of system prevails over love of truth'.

A lot of what Maurice wrote seems nonsensical, but as with Thomas Carlyle the mysteriousness of his prose was central to the message. Don't look for truth in outward or surface meanings, what Carlyle the 'husks'. Seek those inner truths which, by definition, cannot be reduced to syllogisms. If you know Dickens's *Hard Times*, 1854, there is a similar call for fancy, not fact. Perhaps we need to think of Maurice as a theological Lewis Carroll, without

the humour. His muddy mysticism acted as spiritual chloroform – in the very same years when real chloroform was reducing the terrors of daily life, and so perhaps helping to create that sudden sense of a happy earthly existence that I mentioned earlier.

I also think we have to see Maurice as following in the wake of Carlyle. You may know the famous painting *Work* by Ford Madox Brown in which two brain workers watch navvies and coster mongers and various other types of plebeians at their labours. The two brain-workers are Carlyle and Maurice. Carlyle too had the power to 'magnetize' the young – Froude's word 'magnetize' reflected the current craze for mesmerism and signals a powerful 1850s belief that great men can influence others: Newman and Ruskin also had the power to magnetize on a personal scale, but only Carlyle and Maurice managed to touch the millions.<sup>2</sup>

Carlyle's messianic appeal to young persons is better remembered than Maurice's, but perhaps of his secularism he conveyed no positive message. He sounded the bugle and called them to battle, but, as a disillusioned Clough complained, 'Carlyle has led us into the desert – and has left us there'. Somehow it was Maurice who performed what Tennyson hoped Hallam would do had he lived; he found the words of spiritual refreshment that watered a whole generation; and helped the make the 1850s, in G.M. Young's words, 'the best generation in the whole of English history to have been young in'. Which is why so many contemporaries thought he was a great man.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Underlying this conviction was a rejection of the 'free-will individualism' that had buttressed previous religious perspectives, such as evangelicalism. 'For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it' (George Eliot).

<sup>3</sup> In *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), a hugely influential story by Maurice's friend Tom Hughes, there was an attempt to portray 'Dr Arnold' (based on the late headmaster of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold) as a similarly messianic influence. For example, the description of Arnold in the pulpit bears some resemblance to Owen Chadwick's depiction of Maurice (quoted above): 'The tall gallant form, the kindling eye, the voice ... clear and stirring as the

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call of the light infantry bugle... The long lines of young faces rising tier above tier... the candles and the twilight. Very few boys understood what Arnold was talking about... But we listened ... to a man who we felt to be with all his heart and soul and strength striving against whatever was mean and unmanly and unrighteous in our little world. It was not the cold clear voice of one giving advice and warning from serene heights, to those who were struggling and sinning below, but the warm living voice of one who was fighting for us and by our sides, and calling on us to help him and ourselves and one another' (Part I, Ch. 7). The book closes with a paragraph whose Broad Church, Christian Socialist, incarnationalist perspectives express in words much clearer than Maurice's what his faith was largely about. 'Here [in Rugby School Chapel following Dr Arnold's sudden death] let us leave him – where better could we leave him, than at the altar, before which he had first caught a glimpse of the glory of his birthright, and felt the drawing of the bond which links all living souls together in one brotherhood... And let us not be too hard on him, if at this moment his soul is fuller of the tomb and him who lies there, than of the altar and Him of whom it speaks. Such stages have to be gone through, I believe, by all young and brave souls, who must win their way through hero-worship, to the worship of Him who is the King and Lord of Heroes. For it is only through our mysterious human relationships, through the love and tenderness and purity of mothers, and sisters, and wives, though the strength and courage and wisdom of fathers, and brothers, and teachers, that we can come to the knowledge of Him in whom alone the love, and the tenderness, and the purity, and the strength, and the courage, and the wisdom of all these dwell for ever and ever in perfect fullness.'