

## *Introduction*

THE *Theological Essays* were first published in 1853, when the author, Frederick Denison Maurice, was forty-eight years of age and was already well known as a religious writer passionately concerned with social and educational problems. He was the son of a Unitarian minister, and had grown up in a home which was as intellectual in character as it was religiously intense. Maurice was, as a consequence, early forced in upon himself, and became a prey to morbid fears, confessing that he 'did not know the note of a single bird'. His going up to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1823, where he fell under the influence of Julius Hare, a young lecturer in classics, and with a friend, the cultivated John Stirling (later the subject of a famous biography by Carlyle) joined the 'Apostles Club', began the process of liberation. Since he intended to go to the bar, Maurice transferred himself to Trinity Hall, but not being a member of the Church of England, he was unable to take his degree. There then followed, against the background of family misfortune, a period of hard, and in some ways unrewarding, literary work in London, during which time Maurice struggled with the overriding problem of his own religious faith. The outcome was his going up to Exeter College, Oxford, in 1830, and his ordination, in 1834, to the curacy of Bubbenhall, which he held for some two years. In 1836 he was appointed Chaplain to Guy's Hospital, where the experience of ministering to the sick and dying developed his natural gifts of sympathy and understanding. It was while he was so engaged that he wrote his *The Kingdom of Christ*, in the course of which he examines the various 'denominations' and maintains that each has made a contribution, not through its denials, but through its affirmations. As he wrote in another context: 'Truth, I hold, not to be that which every man

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troweth, but to be that which lies at the bottom of all men's throwings, that in which these throwings have their only meeting point.'

In 1840 Maurice was appointed Professor of English Literature and History at King's College in London, and when a theological school was created there in 1846 he became its first Professor. In the same year he was made Chaplain of Lincoln's Inn. Meanwhile Maurice was becoming increasingly interested in the social problems of his day and viewed with alarm the embittered disillusion of the industrialised working classes at the meagre results accruing to them from the Reform Bill of 1832. He deplored the gulf which separated Disraeli's 'two nations', and he sympathised with the Chartist leaders though he did not necessarily approve their methods. Maurice's intense hold on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, pointing to the truth that co-operation not competition was the basic law of creative life led him to take the lead in what was called 'The Christian Social Movement', and to protest bitterly against the current economic gospel of *laissez faire*, which, so he maintained, expected 'universal selfishness to do the work of universal love'. He gathered around him a group of young and able men, for the most part convinced Christians—men such as Charles Kingsley, J. M. Ludlow, and Thomas Hughes—all of whom looked to him as a prophet and the inspirer of a new social order. Maurice courageously accepted for himself, in spite of his lifelong distrust of labels, and the ambiguous associations of the designation in view of what had happened on the Continent, the description of 'Christian Socialist'. 'I seriously believe that Christianity is the only foundation of socialism,' he wrote, 'and that a true socialism is the necessary result of a sound Christianity.' With his friends he founded a newspaper, *Politics for the People*, which soon gave place to *The Christian Socialist*.

Maurice now turned his energies—he had founded Queen's College for Women in 1846—to the establishment of industrial 'associations of workers', which institutions, he believed, would translate into practical realities the truths implicit in his Trinitarian theology. Such social experiments, however, coupled with the fact that his religious position was not understood, aroused the suspicion of not a few of his Anglican contemporaries. The

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consequent vilification to which Maurice was subjected by the religious press of his day, in particular the *Record* and the *Church Quarterly Review*, undoubtedly wounded his sensitive spirit, though its practical result was to incite him to furious controversy and to make him resolute in the defence of his principles. In 1851 Dr. Jelf, the unimaginative Principal of King's College, became alarmed at the utterances of his Professor of Theology, and Maurice was forced to clear himself before a committee of inquiry.

Such is a brief sketch of Maurice's life up to the time that the *Theological Essays* were published in 1853. There can be no doubt that he intended this book to be a formal and mature statement of his theological beliefs, from which all his other activities, educational and social, necessarily flowed. Writing to his sister, Maurice said of the Essays that they expressed 'the deepest thoughts that are in me and have been in me, working for a long time'. 'God will do with it what he sees fit,' he added later in the same letter, 'but I sometimes feel as if the publication of it would be a great crisis in my own life, if it effects no other people. There is more solemnity to me about it than about anything else I have done. Perhaps I have said most of what I want to say in it.'

Maurice's words certainly proved to be prophetic so far as his own future was concerned, but Charles Kingsley felt that the publication of the Essays might also 'make an era in ecclesiastical history'. Such a claim may seem grossly exaggerated, but the revival of interest in Maurice in our own day, together with the growing appreciation of his theological position generally, may encourage us to regard it more seriously.

It must be frankly admitted, however, that the style of these Essays is in parts obscure, for their author had little of the literary skill which woos the reader in the works of John Henry Newman—a fact to which Kingsley called Maurice's attention, and which he tried to deal with in the second edition. Yet such a defect does not in any way alter the essential fact that these Essays are impregnated with a living experience, and that they result from the honest and profound outpourings of a dedicated person wrestling in himself with the abiding problems of man's nature and destiny. Such indeed cannot be said of most theological works of the mid-

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nineteenth century, as anyone who has tried to read the numerous pamphlets produced in connection with the Gorham controversy knows painfully and only too well. So far as this Introduction is concerned it must suffice if we suggest one or two reasons why Maurice is attracting interest again in our own day.

First, the subject matter that Maurice consistently handles in his theological writings has gone through the mill of his own experience. True, the Essays were avowedly written with the Unitarians in view, yet essentially they answer the writer's own questions; they are directed towards his own difficulties. He himself is only too conscious of the problems inherent in faith, and it is this fact which leads him to state the objections to his own argument and to proceed to deal with them.

Secondly, Maurice uniformly endeavours to keep close to, indeed to build upon, common human experience. He had a horror of systems—the systematizer, he thought, was ‘of the devil’—and his starting point is always the response which men must necessarily make to the world in which they live. For example, when dealing with the problems which arise from conscience, he writes: ‘They do not exist in a volume of sermons at the Rolls, or of lectures on moral philosophy. If you have not a conscience, Butler will not give it you. If you have one, Paley cannot take it away. They can only between them set you on considering what it is, and what it is not.’ Such a way of approach is typical of the man and fundamental to his theology. It may be seen in his attitude to education, the purpose of which is to draw out what is implicit in men, and to interpret their present experience by suggesting its ‘ground’. In this respect Maurice thought of himself as a ‘digger’, plumbing the depths of the human soul.

So it must always be, Maurice claimed, with the theologian. His first task, and here he believes him to be at one with the scientist in another field, is not to tell a man what experience he ought to have but to become sensitive to what is already going on within him. Such an emphasis on common experience may be seen in his handling of the grim fact of sin, a sense of which, he writes in one of the following Essays, ‘intricately, inseparably, interwoven with the very fibre of their being, of a sin which they cannot

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get rid of without destroying themselves, does haunt those very men who you say take no account of it. This is not the idiosyncrasy of a few strange inexplicable temperaments. It is that which besets us all.'

It is, we repeat, this sensitivity to basic and essential human experience, itself bearing witness to the Christ within, that makes the Bible, to Maurice, such a living book. It is true that he still thinks in terms of some 6,000 years of human history, and that he could not go all the way with such men as Bishop Colenso. Yet this is not so important as is the fact that to Maurice the Bible enshrines a vital experience given to men in response to the redemptive energy of the God and Father of us all. The revelation contained in the Bible is not propositional in character, nor can it be logically deduced from the written script. God is revealed in it not through the communication of religious 'ideas', but through 'facts'. 'God is teaching his creatures induction by setting them an example of it. Nothing is taught by decree, everything by life and experiment.' Had he been living to-day, Maurice might have said that the revelation is 'existential' in character.

But Maurice is not only alive to the significance of a man's immediate and private experience: he also sees significance in the religious beliefs, and the patterns of social behaviour, among races wholly, or in part, untouched by the Christian Gospel. The Greek myths, as well as the behaviour codes of primitive peoples, bear with them intimations of man's age-long quest for a saviour, and his longing for release and salvation. It is for this reason that there is a more subtle maturity, and a greater psychological insight in the thought of Maurice than can be found, for example, in Paley or Mansel, the latter of whose Bampton's Lectures Maurice attacked with such vehemence. Older systems of belief are never for him just superstitions. His conviction that all goodness must come from the spirit of God, and that all men are indwelt by the Word, prevented him from interpreting human experience either mechanically or juridically.

Thirdly, Maurice recognised the unique character of the Christian faith as a historic religion, and this necessarily led him to give significance, in spite of his Platonism, to the process of history.

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He had a real sense of its stresses and strains ; he realised only too acutely that progress was not automatic. History was meaningful because God was at work within it. This conviction enabled him to see its tragedies and to avoid the complacent and superficial optimism of some of his contemporaries. The struggles of men and nations were brutally real as the Incarnation and crucifixion were real. Thus Maurice was horrified when Benjamin Jowett remarked, maybe somewhat flippantly, that 'the idea that a fact has occurred might possibly be of the same use as the fact itself'. 'The vesture of God's own ideas', he protested passionately, 'must be facts. I accept the revelation recorded through the Scriptures as a revelation of the Divine Mind through facts. I believe the modern process of idealising tends to destroy ideas and facts both. All historical criticism is good, it seems to me, just so far as it tests facts in love and reverence for facts, and for what facts contain. All is bad and immoral which introduces the notion that their reality in fact depends upon certain accidents in the relation of them.' Indeed theology was 'a declaration of His will and His acts towards us'.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Maurice read the signs of the time with awe and reverence, and that he conceived of 'judgment' not simply as a far-off divine event, but also as a process continually going on in the present. 'I believe the trumpet of the Archangel', he wrote, 'has been sounding in every country of the modern world, that it is sounding now, and will sound more clearly before the end comes.' Yet this did not prevent him from rejoicing that he lived in the age of Victoria and not of Elizabeth.

Such an emphasis on, and concern for, the life of man in society, with its recognition of the place of the nation (and the Church) show how Maurice had emancipated himself from the atomistic individualism which bedevilled so much economic theory and practice in his day.

Fourthly, it was this reverential awareness of a God working through history and sustaining the universe in which man lives and moves and has his being that encouraged Maurice to welcome rather than to retreat from the new science as unhappily did Wilberforce and too many of his theological contemporaries. Maurice was prepared to accept gladly whatever proved itself to be true.

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A quotation from a later work will serve to show his fearlessness before facts—when they were seen to be facts—and his willingness to find God at work throughout the whole of the created universe. ‘I have myself little hope’, he writes, ‘that we shall become fully aware of our relation to One who is above us, if from any cowardly self-glorification we shrink from confessing these baser affinities. The more thoroughly we accept the facts which attest our humiliation, the more overwhelming will be the force of the facts which attest the glory of our human parentage. If Mr. Darwin has added new strength to the one kind of evidence—whether he has or has not, as I told you before, I have no right to affirm or even to guess—I can have no doubt whence the discoveries have come or by whom that search has been prompted. . . . Let them say what they will about the origin of man, it is about *his* origin that all their faculties are chiefly exercised. Whatever may have been his starting point, here he is. Show what atoms he comes from, if you will, and if you can; let any creature you like have been his progenitor, still the diapason closes full on him. More than ever it becomes necessary to look into his actual history; out of whatever egg he has issued, we try to acquaint ourselves, not so much with the process of his incubation, as with the kind of creature he has become since the shell was broken, and he has acquired a distinct existence.’

The theological ground upon which Maurice firmly stood—it was based on the related doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation—thus enabled him to be loyal to truth, confident that he could not in so doing be disloyal to his faith. The *Theological Essays* are the expression of this confidence. They represent an effort by Maurice, in the full maturity of his powers, to justify and to ‘explicate’ the faith that was in him. He digs deeply into his own experience; he turns his back on no difficulties; he is honest both with himself and his reader. These Essays, though they are directed to the contemporary situation—a situation dominated by the explosive forces of industrial unrest, by the rise of militant materialistic ideologies, and by the undermining of traditional beliefs through the new biological sciences—are yet relevant to-day because they are based on a profound analysis of the human scene.

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A short introduction of this kind is not the place to embark on a criticism of Maurice's theology, but rather to suggest its significance to the reader, and to encourage him not to be put off, by the occasional obscurity of the style, from finding illumination in the light of Maurice's own prophetic vision. If criticism were to be offered, it would need to ask how far Maurice really harmonised the Hebrew emphasis on brute facts with his own natural Platonism; and also whether Maurice succeeded in discovering certain patterns in human experience because he has first encountered them in the scriptures.

Certainly Maurice had critics in his own day. The last Essay on 'Eternal Life and Eternal Death', because it seemed to cast doubt on, or at least not to affirm, the doctrine of eternal punishment, led to his being dismissed from his professorship at King's College, London—an event which proved to be important in English educational history since it led to his founding the Working Men's College in 1854. Such treatment from the Council of King's College, though the dismissal was carried out in the most courteous manner, was at one with the treatment that Maurice received from the religious press. This sustained opposition was due to a suspicion of his political activities, as well as to a failure to understand the depth of his theological insight. Also it must be admitted that the passion with which Maurice himself sometimes engaged in religious controversy did not make things easier.

Others of his contemporaries, particularly those who were not Churchmen, but who yet respected his integrity and were at least sympathetic to his social aims, failed to understand how a man of his undoubted gifts could remain a loyal member of the Church of England. Matthew Arnold described Maurice in his *Literature and Dogma* as that 'pure and devout spirit—of whom, however, the truth must at last be said, that in theology he passed his life beating the bush with great emotion and never starting the hare'. Equally damning with faint praise is the judgment of John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography*: 'I have so deep a respect for Maurice's character and purposes, as well as for his great mental gifts, that it is with some unwillingness that I say anything which may seem to place him on a less high eminence than I would be gladly able



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to accord him. But I have always thought that there was more intellectual power wasted in Maurice than in any other of my contemporaries. Few of them certainly have had so much to waste.'

The explanation of these judgments lies almost certainly in the fact that Maurice, despite his wide philosophical reading, and his extensive knowledge of English literature, was essentially, as he himself maintained, a theologian. The supreme purpose of his life—we quote his own words—was 'to assert for theology its place as the science whose business it is to assign to all other sciences their proper place; (not as) the climax of all studies, the Corinthian Capital of a magnificent edifice composed of physics, politics, economics and connecting them as parts of a great system with each other, but (as) the foundation on which they all stand'. It is not surprising that neither Mill nor Arnold, nor most of those writers who regarded themselves as 'progressive' thinkers conceived of theology as occupying such an exalted station.

Yet among fellow theologians Maurice was regarded with equal suspicion: by the conservatives as too liberal (though he himself disowned the description) and by the liberals as too conservative. It was only among his own friends, which included many a humble working man, that he felt himself understood, and was regarded with deep affection, not unmingled with awe and veneration. Kingsley, Ludlow, Hughes and a host of others acknowledged that his was the greatest and most formative influence upon them.

The rest of Maurice's life after the publication of the *Theological Essays*, which led to his leaving King's College and to his becoming the first Principal of the Working Men's College, may be briefly summarised. He was appointed minister of St. Peter's, Vere Street, in 1860, and went to Cambridge as Professor of Moral Philosophy in 1866. He became incumbent of St. Edward's in 1870, and died some two years later.

The personal influence of Maurice remained an abiding inspiration in the lives of those who had known him, and in the institutions which he had founded: but his theology soon lay, if not forgotten, certainly neglected. He had belonged to no school, and the expansionist phase of English life characteristic of the

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closing years of the reign of Victoria made his prophetic voice seem strangely discordant. It has taken the tumultuous years of the present century to redress the balance and to make his message again urgent and relevant. Though the *Theological Essays* may not, perhaps, be the best of his works, yet none more powerfully shows the man.

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