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CHAPTER TWO

MacDonald's Metaphysical Foundations

Introduction

The fact that the philosophy of MacDonald has rarely been researched is not due to a lack of willing hearts or due to uneducated researchers. It is likely due to the fact that even a tertiary student of MacDonald recognizes that he had a negative attitude toward the discipline. Bruce Hindmarsh stated that the “One thing he [MacDonald] never claimed to be...was a theologian.”² Hindmarsh is correct, but in addition, MacDonald also ignored the title of “philosopher” for the same reasons. It’s possible that the reason for which MacDonald disliked both labels was not due to the disciplines in-and-of themselves, but rather the outworking of these fields of study on the religious culture and the personal spiritual lives of those who lived in the Victorian era. MacDonald’s reasons for disregarding these disciplines will be explained, as well as his belief that there is, in fact, a correct theology and philosophy.

MacDonald never publicly placed himself into any theological or philosophical system, and his reasons for doing so were primarily preventative and reactionary. MacDonald himself said in a letter to his father, “I am neither Arminian or Calvinist. To no system could I subscribe”³ as well as saying “Jesus Christ is my theology, and nothing else.”⁴ One of the reasons why he never sought to proclaim his systematized theology was that he was worried about being pigeonholed into one system of belief. He writes in his sermon entitled “Light,” “But if one happens to utter some individual truth which another man has made into one of the cogs of his system, he is in danger of being supposed to accept all the toothed wheels and their relations in that system.”⁵ MacDonald was concerned about being

2 Douglas Bruce Hindmarsh, “George MacDonald and the Forgotten Father” in *North Wind* Vol. 9, 1991, 55.

3 Beinecke Collection, The George MacDonald Collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 1830-1890, letter dated April 15, 1851.

4 Anonymous, “Dr. MacDonald’s Testimony” in *Wingfold: Celebrating the Works of George MacDonald* (Vol. 87, 2012), 31. Originally published in *Christian World*, July 20, 1882.

5 George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, “Light,” (Memphis: Bottom

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misconstrued and misinterpreted, and encouraged others to also eschew choosing a system of belief, “Therefore, if only to avoid his worst foes, his admirers, a man should avoid system. The more correct a system the worse will it be misunderstood; its professed admirers will take both its errors and their misconceptions of its truths, and hold them forth as its essence.”⁶

Philosophy and theology did much during the Victorian period to divide and dis-unify the church until the body of Christ was barely recognizable. MacDonald contends:

All those evil doctrines about God that work misery and madness, have their origin in the brains of the wise and prudent, not in the hearts of the children. These wise and prudent, careful to make the words of his messengers rime with their conclusions, interpret the great heart of God, not by their own hearts, but by their miserable intellects; and, postponing the obedience which alone can give power to the understanding, press upon men’s minds their wretched interpretations of the will of the Father, instead of the doing of that will upon their hearts. They call their *philosophy* the truth of God, and say men must hold it, or stand outside. They are the slaves of the letter in all its weakness and imperfection,— and will be until the spirit of the Word, the spirit of obedience shall set them free.⁷

MacDonald concluded that to choose and broadcast a specific system or denomination would simply cause more division and detract from the Gospel and the mere Christianity which he advocated. MacDonald argued that, “Division has done more to hide Christ from the view of men, than all the infidelity that has ever been spoken.”⁸ He specifically pointed out the issue of divisiveness within the church: “The real schismatic is the man who turns away love and justice from the neighbour who holds theories in religious philosophy, or as to church-constitution, different from his own; who denies or avoids his brother because he follows not with him; who calls him

of the Hill Publishing, 2012), 250.

6 George MacDonald, *Weighed and Wanting* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1882), 332.

7 George MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospel*, “The Yoke of Jesus,” 69, emphasis added.

8 George MacDonald, *Paul Faber-Surgeon* (Whitehorn: Johannesen, 2009), 192.

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a schismatic because he prefers this or that mode of public worship not his.”⁹ This concept struck close to MacDonald’s heart, for in the middle of the nineteenth century a small schism in his church in Arundel had charged him with heresy that eventually caused him to resign.¹⁰ Rolland Hein summarizes succinctly, “MacDonald, who would ally himself with no system, scorns the sectarian mentality that so vehemently expends its energies in futile clashes with those of opposing opinions.”¹¹ MacDonald was simply concerned that by proclaiming a philosophical or theological system, he would have been throwing fuel on a fire that he longed to extinguish.

Third, MacDonald truly believed that certain theologies, as well as an obsession for theological deliberation, could actually detract from one’s relationship with the Father and one’s duty to serve him. He argued that men have a habit of spending too much time focusing on their theology, and not enough on loving God and his fellow men: “Zeal for God will never eat them up; why should it? He is not interesting to them: theology may be; to such men religion means theology.”¹² MacDonald went so far as to specifically state, “I firmly believe that people have hitherto been a great deal too much taken up about doctrine and far too little about practice.”¹³

Not only was MacDonald worried that an infatuation with theology could poorly affect our praxis, but the theology itself could be faulty, and consequently one’s view of God could poorly influence our relationship with him. Rolland Hein explains, “In many novels the chief deterrent to a successful journey toward a spiritual maturity is contact with false ideas about God’s character and manner of working in the world, particularly those fostered by mean and popular versions of Calvinist doctrines.”¹⁴

George MacDonald did not pull punches when it came to certain theological beliefs; for instance, he goes so far as calling the doctrines of the atonement and eternal torment, “doctrines of devils.”¹⁵ In *Robert*

9 George MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospel*, “The Salt and Light of the World,” 80.

10 William Raepur, *George MacDonald*, 90.

11 Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within*, 98.

12 George MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospel*, “The Yoke of Jesus,” 68.

13 Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 155.

14 Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within*, 120.

15 George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, “The Truth in Jesus,” 179.

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Falconer, MacDonald took aim at Federal Calvinism, the creed of his youth: “For now arose within him, not without ultimate good, the evil phantasms of a theology which would explain all God’s doings by low conceptions, low I mean for humanity even, of right, and law, and justice, then only taking refuge in the fact of the incapacity of the human understanding when its own inventions are impugned as undivine. In such a system, hell is invariably the deepest truth, and the love of God is not so deep as hell. Hence, as foundations must be laid in the deepest, the system is founded in hell, and the first article in the creed that Robert Falconer learned was, ‘I believe in hell.’”¹⁶

It is also an established fact that MacDonald sought to question the prevailing systems of his day. One of his purposes was to “... deliver the race from the horrors of such falsehoods, which by no means operate only on the vulgar and brutal, for to how many of the most refined and delicate of human beings are not their lives rendered bitter by the evil suggestions of lying systems — I care not what they are called — philosophy, religion, society, I care not! — to deliver men, I say, from such ghouls of the human brain, were indeed to have lived!”¹⁷ He simply believed that strict Calvinism was a barricade to one’s relationship with God, even going so far as to write “To have to believe in the God of the Calvinist would drive me to madness or atheism.”¹⁸ The following assessment will be helpful in understanding the spirit of MacDonald’s stance. This review of one of MacDonald’s lectures in London from a direct, albeit anonymous observer, was originally published in *Christian World* in 1882:

It is the breaking up of old habits of theological thought, or the exercise of a happy liberty in regard to it, that has prepared the way for a preacher who avows himself, as Dr. MacDonald did on Sunday, to be no theologian, but who feels that the truth of God is to be reached in other ways than by a theological key. There ought, indeed, to be nothing startling in this, for it is evident that souls did somehow find the truth of God before Christianity knew anything of scientific theology. That the formulating of the truth of the New Testament into a system has been helpful to some minds, there can be no doubt. But the transposing of ‘truth as it is in Jesus’ into a system has also

16 Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 98.

17 George MacDonad, *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (Whitehorn: Johannessen, 2002), 38.

18 Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker* (Whitehorn: Johannessen, 1999), 497.

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hindered some minds from getting at Christ Himself, they having rested in the system, and only comprehend as much of Christ as they could see through the system.¹⁹

Thus, theological systems could cloud the lenses of one's faith in Christ and MacDonald could help to clean the lens.

While it is obvious that he spoke negatively about these disciplines, and even claimed not to espouse a particular theological system; his claims that he publically dismissed systems didn't mean that he didn't have a systemized theology and philosophy. Just because MacDonald did not like the title of "philosopher" or "theologian" does not mean that he was not one. If we are to take the words of Francis Schaeffer seriously, we should argue that all rational beings are philosophers: "No man can live without a worldview; therefore there is no man who is not a philosopher."²⁰ The central difficulty with arguing that MacDonald was not a theologian resides in the fact that in order for him to be able to point out the falsity of any system, which he did on many occasions, he must purport to know the truth. MacDonald argued this point himself in his sermon "The Last Farthing": "Any system which tends to persuade men that there is any salvation but that of becoming righteous even as Jesus is righteous; that a man can be made good, as a good dog is good, without his own willed share in the making; that a man is saved by having his sins hidden under a robe of imputed righteousness — *that system, so far as this tendency, is of the devil and not of God.* Thank God, not even error shall injure the true of heart; it is not wickedness. They grow in the truth, and as love casts out fear, so *truth casts out falsehood.*"²¹

This casting out of falsehood was the first step to replacing the erroneous view of God with the truth. The difference between MacDonald and his counterparts is that he would rather the reader seek the truth on his own, rather than have MacDonald force-feed them his own personal views. It is no surprise when he writes, "I know, however, that there were words in it which found their way to my conscience; and, let men of science or philosophy say what they will, the rousing of a man's conscience is the greatest event in his

19 Anonymous, "Dr. MacDonald's Testimony," 30-1.

20 Francis A. Schaeffer, *He is There and He is not Silent* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 2001), 4.

21 George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, "The Last Farthing," 125, emphasis added.

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existence.”²² But for MacDonald himself, his conscience had been raised, and he did, in fact, purport to have a proper philosophical and theological underpinnings. The simplest way of reporting this fact is to recognize when he, in fact, agreed with certain scholars’ points of view. He states succinctly in the *Tragedie of Hamlet*, “Note the unity of religion and philosophy in Hamlet: he takes the one true position.”²³ Now he does not argue this fact because he merely believes that Shakespeare’s Hamlet is correct because he aligns with MacDonald, but even more importantly, he believes that Hamlet aligns with God’s own philosophy. MacDonald stated, “Matter, time, space, are all God’s, and whatever may become of our philosophies, whatever he does with or in respect of time, place, and what we call matter, his doing must be true in philosophy as well as fact.”²⁴ Therefore, God has a philosophy, Hamlet aligned with this philosophy, and MacDonald understands and agrees with this alignment. But in order to make this assessment he must have concluded that he had the correct philosophical and religious position in the first place.

To give another example of MacDonald’s affirmation of a philosophical position, take this passage in *England’s Antiphon*: “Dr. Henry More was...[c]hiefly known for his mystical philosophy, which he cultivated in retirement at Cambridge, and taught not only in prose, but in an elaborate, occasionally poetic poem.... Whatever may be thought of his theories, they belong at least to the highest order of philosophy; and it will be seen from the poems I give that they must have borne their part in lifting the soul of the man towards a lofty spiritual condition of faith and fearlessness. The mystical philosophy seems to me safe enough in the hands of a poet: with others it may degenerate into dank and dusty materialism.”²⁵

In the following pages, we will proceed with the same spirit as MacDonald in his elevation of Dr. More’s mystical philosophy. Even while MacDonald occasionally downplayed the role of philosophy, he absolutely asked and discussed questions of a metaphysical nature. Adelheid Kegler goes so far to say that “MacDonald’s oeuvre is conceived in a dynamic and dialectic analysis of the central problems

22 George MacDonald, *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (Whitehorn: Johannessen, 2009), 173.

23 George MacDonald, *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885), 265.

24 George MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*, 424.

25 George MacDonald, *England’s Antiphon*, 223.

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of modern philosophy.”²⁶ MacDonald elucidated his philosophical positions on reality, truth, and knowledge, specifically discussed in his *Dish of Orts*, as well as interweaving these ideals in his fantasy works and novels. Richard Reis summarizes, “MacDonald’s philosophy is, for one thing, the very foundation upon which his works of fiction are laid. Most writers of fiction, perhaps, are chiefly interested in telling a good story with skill, discipline and art.... But there have been plenty of great writers...to whom their private vision of truth is primary, and who use their art as a means to expression of that end; and MacDonald belongs clearly with this group. Although MacDonald himself never really put forward his ideas as a coherent system, a close examination of his scattered philosophical remarks has convinced me that they all arise from a systematic, consistent set of beliefs.”²⁷

Living in a Shadow World: Examining MacDonald’s “Temperamental Platonism” — Under the Shadow of Platonism

It is a habit of many scholars, no matter the field, to take the individual which they are researching and categorize their thought under the auspices of one of the great thinkers of history. This tendency is no different with those who study George MacDonald. Most MacDonald scholars place him under the umbrella of the teachings of Plato. This comes as no surprise, since this is one of the few philosophers that MacDonald ever mentioned in his novels. It is no shock for a reader of MacDonald’s to stumble on a passage in which one of the main characters picked up a copy of Plato and read it as a source of truth. For instance, in *Wilfred Cumbermede*, the narrator states that the main character sat “down to my books, and read with tolerable attention my morning portion of Plato.”²⁸ Yet, in the body of his fictional works you will never find mention of Aristotle or Augustine, Plotinus or Schleiermacher, with each of whom he shared similarity and held in high regard.

Most scholars conclude that MacDonald, while he never agreed with Plato’s philosophy as a whole, had placed Plato on another plane of authority. Most notably, Stephen Prickett states directly,

26 Adelheid Kegler, “Some Aspects of the Oeuvre of George MacDonald in a Curriculum of Philosophy Courses and in the Production of a Play at a German Gymnasium” in *North Wind* Vol. 22, 2003, 19.

27 Richard H. Reis, *George MacDonald’s Fiction*, 31.

28 George MacDonald, *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, 232.