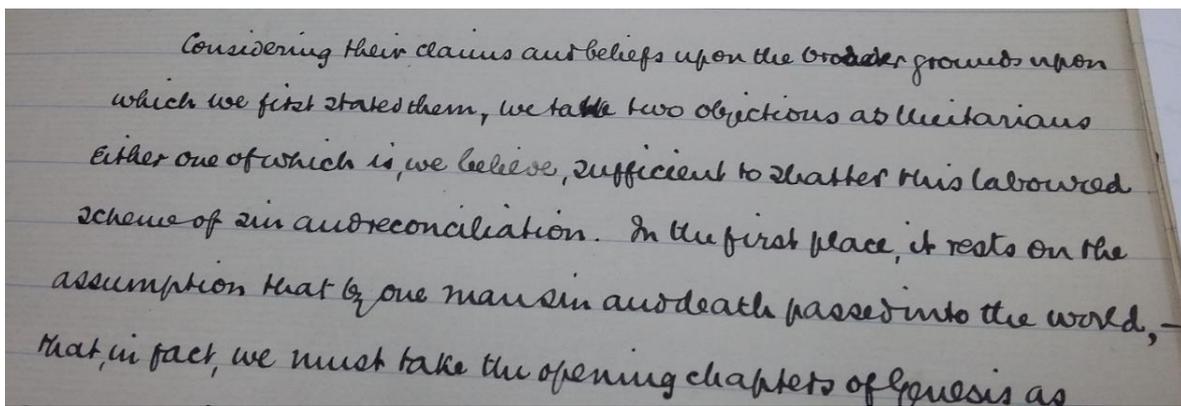


A Socialist's Salvation

A Theological Reflection on the Unitarian Sermons of Ramsay MacDonald

The main theme in Ramsay MacDonald's Unitarian preaching and the one that he most frequently returns to is that of salvation. A fervent moral rejection and intellectual refutation of the conventional version of salvation embodied in the doctrine of atonement and an impassioned articulation of an alternative theology of salvation is a subject he continually returns to and constantly refines.

From his sermon 'Behold the lamb of God', which was originally preached at Canterbury Unitarian Church on March 17th 1895 there are the words: "We take two objections as Unitarians, either one of which is, we believe, sufficient to shatter this laboured scheme of sin and reconciliation. In the first place, it rests on the assumption that by one man sin and death passed into the world – that in fact we must take the opening chapters of Genesis as accurate scientific fact. That is now quite impossible."



He continues in the same sermon: "But our second objection to the theology of salvation is still more fatal, at any rate to those who accept Christ as the founder of Christianity. There is nothing in the gospels to support this theology."

In an earlier sermon 'Abide in me', delivered in Canterbury on the 4th June, 1893 he offered this summary: "I denied that salvation was the result of an acquiescence of the reason and will in any dogma. I denied that we needed it on account of any sin of any forefather or that it came to us through any one life; I denied the truth of the whole fabric of orthodox salvation dogma. I asked you to regard the universe as a life which from generation to generation and from epoch to epoch has been developing higher and higher forms of life and higher and higher forms of consciousness.

Now salvation is living in that progressive life. To adore God through his creation particularly his creatures, to praise him by cheerfully helping to leave

creation better than we found it, to believe in him by believing in the triumphant end of all those are made in his image. This is saving faith, this is salvation.”

For someone who was born the illegitimate son of a farm labourer and a servant girl on the North Coast of Scotland in 1866; who never met his father (alleged to be John MacDonald, a cattleman) and grew up in the house of his mother and grandmother, Annie and Isabel Ramsay, he would have been vulnerable to the scorn and condemnation of Calvinism with its particularly harsh, judgemental version of salvation. His mother and grandmother were both formidable women, arguably more able to withstand public disapproval and to provide the growing boy with emotional stability than many women of their times in the same position might have been; but it is no surprise, given the fact that the only model of salvation on offer during his childhood was one that was intellectually vacuous and morally abhorrent, that the most vigorous theological challenge he choose to issue from the freedom of the Unitarian pulpit was on the question of salvation.

His view of Jesus is of course inextricably interlinked with his view of salvation. This is from a sermon preached in Canterbury on June 4 1893: “And what of Christ? Never did he say “I am suffering in your place”, his message was “I am suffering because ye must suffer to be like the Father. When I am dead you will remember me, and that remembrance will lighten your burdens. I have shown you the way. No man shall henceforth have to walk this way alone. He shall find my footsteps and they will guide him. He will find that someone has suffered before him, and that will give him consolation and inspiration. What Christ did, we can do, what Christ felt, we can feel.”

And this is from a sermon preached in Eastbourne 7 9 1895 “In this light we regard Jesus of Nazareth – in one sense the last, in another the first, of the prophets. He did not come to appease the wrathful displeasure under which a violated law is supposed to have held us; he did not come as a scapegoat upon whose head we laid our sins. The atonement which is ours through him is one in which we ourselves take part. He came on the one hand to show us the Father and on the other to show us ourselves.”

And in an earlier sermon in Canterbury on the 19th of March 1893 he said: “Christianity is true freedom. . . It is clear in its doctrines that all men without distinction are part of a common humanity, are born into the same life, endowed with the same Divine parts, partaken of the same fate, beset by the same ills, though they may vary in kind and degree, and it thus supplies that bond of kinship which is the keynote in the life of every truly living human being.”

His view of God is more complicated. At times, particularly in his prayers he addresses God directly as 'Father' in uncompromisingly personal terms. 'Our Father', 'Almighty Father' or 'Almighty and most merciful Father'; at other times in his prayers he is more philosophical, using terms like 'Divine Spirit of love and Purity', 'Giver of joy' or 'God eternal and unchangeable'. In his sermons he uses more theological subtlety, addressing God in personal terms and speaking of 'The Father', while discussing God in more abstract contexts. From the earliest sermon in the archive, preached in Canterbury on the 14th of February 1893: "It is God in humanity, not God in heaven who gives us these visions. Faith cannot therefore mean for us belief in a self-existent perfect God with a will that interferes with the human conscience, but a belief in spiritual growth"

This is from a sermon delivered in the same church two months later, on the 16th of April 1893. "For practical purposes we must abandon the thought of God as a person like ourselves removed from the world in another sphere which has an existence peculiar to itself. When we think of God we no longer imagine some mysteriously perfect man. We can only conceive of him as a perfect mind upon which our imperfect minds are based and which reveals itself to us in various ways in various ages. This conception of God is infinitely more spiritual, infinitely more worthy than the old one."

In his speech to the League of Nations in Geneva, September 4th, 1924 he refers to God as 'the Divine Mind': "The late war was commended in my country as being a war to end all wars. Alas! The human eye sees but few prospects that that hope and that pledge are to be fulfilled. I do not know what the Divine Mind sees, the Divine Mind that sees the future as clearly as you and I can see the present; but I hope it sees more calm confidence in the future and more happiness in it than the human mind, which has to nourish its faith upon appearances"

And from one of the later sermons, this one preached in Southampton on the 18th of June 1897: "God is no mere large person sitting outside the earth, imposing a law and an order upon creation. God is a power moving in everything, but especially in society. The Creator, the Power which is moving in us as the sap and the spring sunshine moves in the brown bud"

In a study entitled 'J. Ramsay MacDonald in Thought and Action – An Architect for a Better World' American scholar Sacks includes a passage believed to be a fragment of a longer meditation in which Ramsay Mac refers to God as 'the Unseen' "The unseen walks with us from birth to death. To some of us it is closer than to others, and those to whom it is closer reveal it to the rest.

But to the most earthy of this earth earthy, it is the unseen itself that speaks. It has many voices, many interpreters. The Heavens, the Earth, man join in testimony of that mysterious power, the fashioner of all things, the purifier of all things.” “The unseen is a presence in every human heart by reason of its humanity. . . . the presence of the unseen within us gives us an ideal of purity and justice, this energy in our pilgrimage comes to us, not because we imagine God sitting in the heavens approving of our work but because we have within us a never tiring undying spiritual energy creating for us dreams and visions of the days that are to be. It is the unseen revealing itself to us in a conviction that the world can be founded on righteousness.”

Sacks dates this passage to 1900 – 1910 which falls well within the scope of his period as a Unitarian preacher, and the language of this piece resonates clearly with the language of his Unitarian sermons.

In balancing the paradox involved in relating to God in personal terms as an emotional reality while discussing God in abstract terms as an intellectual mystery, Ramsay Mac presages later developments in theological thinking about the nature of the Sacred. To describe God wholly or mainly in personal terms is entirely inadequate; but to leave the personal out altogether is deeply misleading. It is perhaps appropriate to consider God as neither personal nor impersonal but transpersonal; impersonal in relation to himself, but personal in relation to us.

My own preferred method of expressing this is to say that while I do not believe in a personal God in the sense that I do not believe that God is a person, I do believe in a personal God in the sense that I do believe that everything we have that is personal, everything that makes us persons, we get from God.

The thinking of the German Jewish theologian Martin Buber, especially in ‘I and Thou’ is relevant here; as is that of the British philosopher John MacMurray, especially in ‘The personal Universe’, but the simplest and most succinct articulation of this principle comes from the former Chief Rabbi of the UK, Dr. Jonathan Sacks: “God is the objective reality of the personal.’

The sense of God being explored and expressed here is not a theological construct of a Supreme Being above and beyond the world; or of the creator and controller of the world, but of a felt presence embedded in the world and experienced as a transformative depth or dimension with human consciousness.

God may therefore be explored and expressed, not as a ‘being’; nor indeed as an object or a ‘thing’ in any sense that language can contain, but as an event or encounter, where ‘God’, or the ‘Holy’ is both the event and the space where the

event occurs. ('The ground of our being' in the memorable phrase of Paul Tillich.)

(For those uncomfortable with any Deist or Theist language, this may be expressed as the transcendent dimension of human experience being realised when consciousness is the subject of its own object; or when we become conscious *of* that which we are conscious *with*.)

As such, these ideas are entirely compatible with the varieties of spiritual or transcendent humanism that Ramsay Mac embraced in his Unitarian preaching, although the purely rationalist humanist or dedicated materialist may well reject them. Just as the dedicated materialist, those who object to politicians having religious opinions, and those who are automatically cynical about every sign of integrity in a politician would be likely to cast doubt upon his sincerity and challenge the validity of his Unitarian preaching, convincing themselves that he only did it because he saw a personal advantage to be exploited, or that he was only in it for the money.

Entries in his diaries show that he was paid as much as fifteen shillings for his preaching in Ramsgate and Margate; this would have been for conducting two separate services of Sunday worship and also for holding conferences. Sometimes he was paid as little as seven shillings and sixpence, and more often his fees would be a flat ten shillings. Compared to what a labourer would earn, this was well paid work. To contrast this: his first paid work in London was a temporary clerical job at the National Cyclists' Union for which he received ten shillings a week. After a period of unemployment he secured a more permanent job as an invoice clerk at a warehouse run by Cooper, Box & Co, where he began at twelve shillings and sixpence a week, which was soon increased to fifteen shillings.

This would represent the lowest rung of the clerical ladder and would broadly compare with that earned by an unskilled labourer, with a skilled craftsman or artisan earning twice as much.

So; was he only in it for the money?

The Ramsgate and Margate Fellowship thanked him for his services in terms that were reported in *Christian Life and Unitarian Herald* April 27 1895: "The Unitarian Congregations have conveyed to Mr MacDonald their thanks for his three months of services, and for all the good work done by him, and also assured him of the very high appreciation of his talents, which have made both his sermons and his lectures an 'Intellectual Treat'; also the high tone of his teaching and of the ideals he has set before them; and further, of the uniform

help, courtesy and forbearance he has shown them in their difficulties.
“Uniform help, courtesy and forbearance in difficulties.” That does not sound like someone who turns up, does a cosy little service, pockets the fee and says goodbye. This is someone who gives of his utmost not only in time and energy but also in passion and inspiration.

Examine this advert from the ‘Thanet Advertiser’ of March 2nd 1895:

UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY.

SERVICES are held EVERY SUNDAY at 3
MARINE TERRACE, MARGATE, at 11.15 a.m.,
and in the ROYAL HOTEL, RAMSGATE, at 6.30 p.m.
Preacher To-Morrow, March 3rd,
MR. J. R. MACDONALD.
Morning subject : “The Nature of Religious Proof.”
Evening : “The Dominion of Man.”

A CONFERENCE

Will be held NEXT MONDAY EVENING, MARCH
4th, at Eight o’clock, at 3, DANE JOHN TERRACE,
Grange Road, Ramsgate.
Subject : “THE BIRTH OF JESUS.”
MR. J. R. MACDONALD will preside.
A Welcome to all.

MR. J. R. MACDONALD will LECTURE in
the ASSEMBLY ROOMS (Balcony Room),
MARGATE, NEXT TUESDAY, MARCH 5th, on
“*Unitarianism and a State Church: A Plea
for Disestablishment.*”
ADMISSION FREE. Reserved Seats, 6d.

Two services (different subjects; different services: two different sets of worship preparation) on the Sunday; a conference on Monday and a lecture on Tuesday. He certainly put in the hours.

Was he sincere in his preaching? In the late 19th century Unitarianism in England was at its peak of influence; and although small in numbers compared to the Anglican Church and to other Non-conformist churches, Unitarians made a contribution to the intellectual and artistic life of the nation out of all proportion to their numbers. Unitarian congregations demanded high standards from their preachers and made their displeasure known if they did not deliver.

The short answer is that he must have been sincere because he simply would not have got away with it if he had not been.

My opinion is that this is his voice at its most authentic and these sermons represent the most heartfelt and sincere of all of his writings. His political writings were lightweight and theoretical by comparison.

In his political writings he was formulating his opinions: in his religious writing he was pouring his soul and working out his own salvation.

(there is only one reference to the Labour Party in the entire archive. It is in a piece entitled 'Sign of the times' that was presented in Croydon on December 4th 1898: "For the first time these many years may we hope to see our religious faiths take shape in our political work. The rise of the Labour Party marks a definite attempt to improve the social condition of the people, to give them more freedom and consequently to give them new interests and to enrich their lives;")

In his Unitarian preaching in the closing years of the 19th century Ramsay MacDonald was preaching the 'New Theology' 10 years before R. J. Campbell in the 20th century; he was producing ideas about God and Jesus that shook the comfortable ecclesiastical world to its core when bishop John T. Robinson produced similar ideas in the 1960's with 'Honest to God'. Ramsay MacDonald was preaching non-violence 50 years before Gandhi and 70 years before Martin Luther King.

Unitarians were still catching up with his analysis of salvation 50 years later. In 'Faith and Understanding, Critical Essays in Christian Doctrine' in 1963 Arthur Long wrote: "Most Unitarians, if they use the word 'salvation' at all, understand by it the attainment of moral and spiritual wholeness. (p. 48) According to orthodoxy, salvation is secured for us in advance, by an almost mechanical supernatural scheme – Unitarians, on the other hand, feel that salvation demands an act of will and constant striving on our part."(p.49)

MacDonald identifies Unitarian Christianity as the highest and purest form of the Christianity of his times, but he is ahead of his time and yet in tune with subsequent Unitarian thinking in foreseeing a vibrant spiritual humanism growing naturally and organically out of an authentic Christianity.

He refers to Jesus in this form in one of his later sermons "When in his later days he passed from Judaism into a universal humanism, he was setting an example of the last attainments of the religious spirit." 18 6 1897

In a contribution to 'Essays in Unitarian Theology: A Symposium.' in 1959, Gordon Bolam wrote: "The ideal for the individual has its roots in the Old Testament, where the humanism of "Son of Man, stand upon thy feet" (Ezekiel 2:1) becomes actualized in Jesus and henceforth presents the type-figure of Christian Humanism." (p.134)

Judging by these sermons, it would be reasonable to say that Ramsay Mac was, essentially, a generation ahead of most of the Unitarian and Progressive Christian preachers of his time. How he would relate to the Unitarianism and Progressive Christianity of our time is a little more complicated.

He did, as has been stated, foresee a vibrant spiritual humanism emerging from Unitarianism's emphasis on the primary humanity of Christ. He is perhaps unlike some of today's Unitarians in his belief that this would be more effectively and credibly achieved by retaining its links with and roots in the Christian tradition than by abandoning them.

My own opinion is that the situation that pertained to the Unitarianism of the nineteen fifties and sixties where the Theist proposition was the safe, comfortable, conservative perspective and the Humanist proposition was the radical, challenging, creative perspective has now been reversed, and today it the Humanist proposition that is the safe, comfortable, conservative perspective and it the Theist proposition that is radical, challenging and creative.

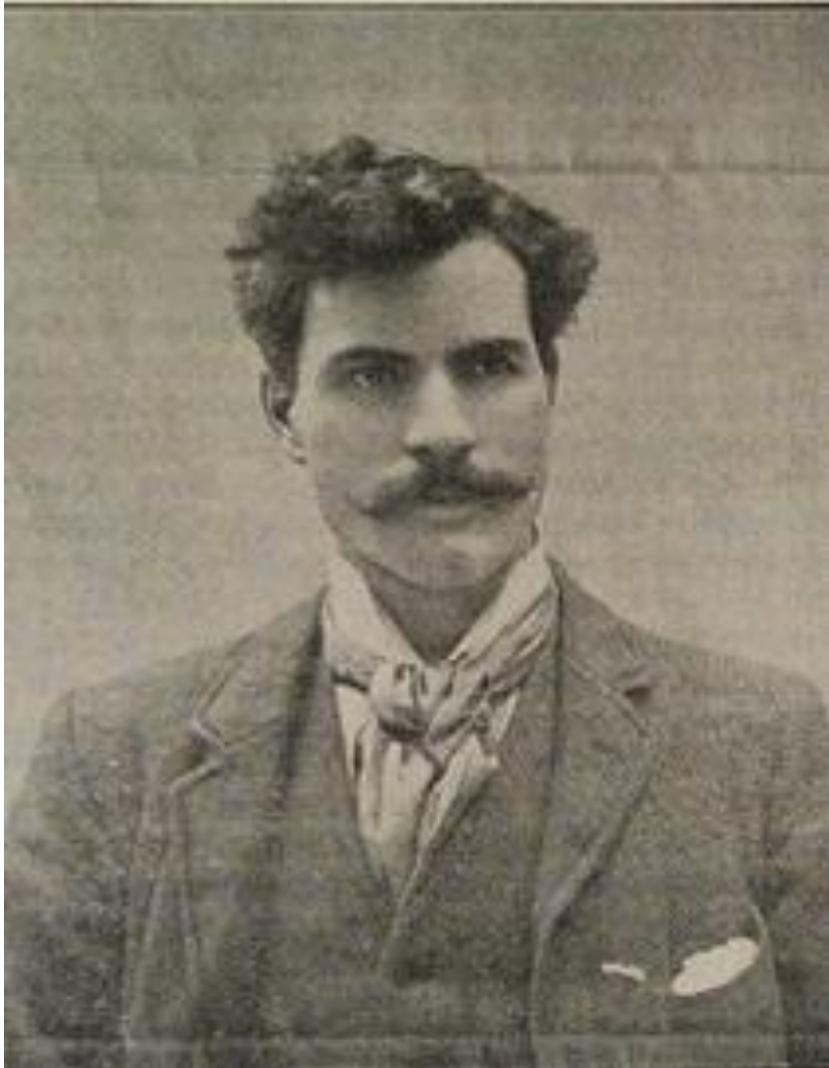
The strength of Unitarianism has always been its willingness to embrace and encourage differing theological perspectives and to give them the space and the freedom to connect with each other in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect. But the rest of the world has not stood still while Unitarianism contemplates its former glory, and progressive elements within mainstream Christian denominations have caught up with Unitarians in many aspects and may have overtaken them in their commitment to bringing the perspective of radical theology to bear on the perennial problems of poverty and inequality.

The decline of Unitarianism was foreseen by Ramsay MacDonald preaching in Canterbury in March 1894: "Christian theology has been transformed, and the transformation of theology is what Unitarians have so long been striving for, and now that they have succeeded, strange to say it is that from which they suffer most. It is interesting to examine into the causes which have been at work determining that the result of Unitarian propaganda should be, not that it built up the Unitarian Church of ever increasing strength but rather that it converted

other churches without decreasing their membership. The reasons are to be found in connection with every motor of the human mind, good or bad, and Unitarians themselves may be a little to blame. But the fact however remains that the churches are quickly becoming converted to our intellectual position, and should it be that in years to come our body dies for want of support, its death will not be that of one who has been a failure and who found no place in the world, but of one who accomplished his work and that work being limited, died of their own success. Time has set its stamp of approval upon us, inasmuch as our opinions have prevailed."

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He went on to say: "We are not small because our opinions are those of but a peculiar people, but because they have become the general beliefs of Christians; we are not quiet because the opposition with which we meet is too powerful, but rather because it is no opposition in principle at all; we have not stopped an active propaganda because our creed has been despised and rejected of men and refused by maturer wisdom but rather because we have now to reason with the already converted and dispute with the already convinced." Canterbury Unitarian Church 11. March. 1894



“The church must drift from its dogmas. She may preach against us, but she is becoming like us. She makes her protests and accepts our position. She pours her curses upon us and borrows our ideas.”

Ramsgate Unitarian Fellowship 31st March 1895