

That Great Victorian Unitarian: Martineau, the Moral Law, Sin and Conscience: Part Two – Reflections on the Distance between the Great Theologian and Churchman of the Nineteenth Century and one Worship Leader of the Twenty First Century, a Mere One Hundred Years Later

Let us begin with a sample of Martineau's writings from his Hours,ii, xxiv

SELF DISCIPLINE

This is the cross which almost daily, we are called to bear; notwithstanding the languid mind and heavy heart to maintain an even persistency of service, to go with patience on and on, assured that, if we will, we can always take just the next step well. When appetite has the keenest edge, it must be wielded, like a dangerous weapon, with the most absolute mastery. When the nerves quiver with irritable propensity, the will must lay a tranquillizing hand upon their trembling, forbid the lips to open but for quiet words, and compel the heart to live by the placid faith of happier hours. When coward inclination recoils from the austere simplicity of duty, shrinks from the hardness of its strife, grows sensitive to voices of derision, and obtuse to the whisperings of God, then inclination must be punished as a treacherous and wicked counselor, and all that it forbade be undertaken at any cost.....And if ever a sad, distrustful mind, producing timid and wavering steps, comes over us, and life appears too vain and death too awful a thing; it were false in us to submit to such delusion, and listen to such monotony of strain; and we must force ourselves upon the wing away, fly to the hills of high faith where dwelleth our help, lose ourselves in the forests of our deepest worship, where blessed birds will sing the songs of heaven to our weary hearts. This inward denial, this resolute self-mastery, is the peculiar service which, as human and not always inclined to the best, yet; as Christians, bound never to do the worse, we are expected to render. Our work must be achieved, if not from momentary love of it, yet from persistent love of God who gives it. Ay, and the burden must be borne, not with elaborate effort, and audible sighs, and pains that self-complacency takes care to reckon; but with a cheerful spirit, that can put the poor obtrusive self aside; with an unsparing mind, that never counts the cost at which a duty must be done; with entire relinquishment of rights, desiring only leave of service; with sedate and tranquil frame like that of Christ through his last day, which beneath a divine composure concealed a universe of thought.

James Martineau, Hours, ii, xxvi

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First impressions of Martineau rather repelled me. He came across as the very stereotype of a Victorian moralist, stern, humourless, ponderous in his self-expression in language. He could easily be seen as a bit of a moral, intellectual and spiritual snob, a relentless striver after a perfection which is more of a torment than a pleasure. I still imagine that in any relaxed gathering, he would be what the Australians used to call a Wowser, someone who puts a wet blanket over even the small innocent pleasures of others. We are told that he enjoyed a joke among friends but I suspect the range of humour was quite limited, probably to that of a vicarage tea party. I am not at all sure I like him and I imagine he would, if I told him so, tell me that mere liking is hardly worthy of concern. Yet liking helps love and although he talks a lot about love, I imagine him as being much more concerned with being right, with lofty ideals, with higher and higher levels of moral perfection (if that is not a contradiction in itself). I also sense a whiff of 'holier than thou' about him. In one place he actually does write openly about 'ranks of moral righteousness' and I often feel that he knows he ranks much higher than I. I am willing to give him his place as an athlete of self-restraint and discipline, which he seems to value more highly than I ever will. The parallel in my mind is with people who talk too much about refinement of manners, and behind

that talk is a secret pride in their own manners and a certain implied judgementalism about the lesser, or even inferior, manners of others. They irritate me and I want to say to them 'Never mind about the higher refinements. Let us just get the basics right and get on with improving the much more egregious other wrongs of this world'.

Within the last decade there has been much experimental work on self control. Better theories have been developed to explain the findings. It is even coming out now in popular paperback books such as the recent one by Baumeister and Tierney in the Penguin library. Other addiction psychologists have become more aware of people who delight in restraining themselves like some of the saints of legend. So we recognise anorexic eating disorders and sexual anorexics both of which groups put themselves deliberately in the way of temptation and derive repeated pleasure from not doing what they originally wanted. I am not saying that Martineau was necessarily a moral anorexic but he reminds me of these strange addictions.

Yet, as I learned more about this man, I began to realise that this is quite a giant, not only in his time, but for more than just that. I began to understand why, even more than a hundred years after his death, he seems still to be the brooding intellectual and spiritual presence, even, perhaps, the hero, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of the colleges training Unitarian ministers today. No one in UK Unitarianism, it seems to me, has surpassed his intellect, cohesion and eloquence since his time.

So there it is. It was only fair to have warned you about all my prejudices about Martineau before I start. But some of these prejudices grew as I learned more and I ended up seeing him as an athlete of self examination and self discipline and as a flawed human, as of course are we all, in our different ways, but of a kind that probably always was uncommon then but is even rarer today.

Now let us examine together a little of his thinking. I am going to try to relate Martineau's Nineteenth Century teachings to my own journey of discovery has reached just now as I journey into the Twenty-first Century. As I do this I invite you to relate both his views and mine to your own journey and then we will have a short period of discussion within the service – although there will be time for much more over coffee or later.

Let us begin with Martineau's idea of God. His God, he affirms, is the God that Jesus worshipped as a man. This, then, sounds rather Jewish, modified Old-Testament – Omnipotent, Omniscient, Just and Loving, but without the racist tribalism of the Jewish Old Testament and with rather more emphasis on the Loving than on the Just. He teaches that human nature is of the same kind as God's but different by degree and we are all a part of Absolute Mind. Absolute Mind is a Nineteenth Century philosophical concept of European idealist philosophers, now history. I would venture that, far from human nature being the same kind as the Judeo-Christian God's, it is better than Martineau's God. At least mostly it does not indulge in random and arbitrary acts of cruelty.

Martineau sees suffering inflicted by his omnipotent God as “a kind of chastening love”!! (PAUSE) I ask you, is a woman dying in childbirth merely subject to ‘a kind of chastening love’? Is a legless veteran of Afghanistan just ‘lovingly chastened’? I cannot relegate the suffering you and I know to this kind of low intensity of ‘chastening love’. True, suffering, to me (and this is worth another sermon in itself) gives contrast to our lives. Without it, our pleasures would be meaningless and we would all live in the kind of grey-green fuzzy cloud of flatness within which those addicted to our doctor’s tranquillisers exist. To me, that is about the ‘mostest’ that can be said in its favour. Martineau’s argument that reason, conscience, devotion and depth of love are greater goods than any pleasure, ease, absence of pain or even than rapture is a nobly alluring position for me – but it is only possible to maintain it just as long as I, like him, live now and here in the UK in a fantastically protected place and time compared with the length of all time and the breadth of global geography.

Martineau emphasises his belief in a personal God, which he sees as an essential for a divinely originated ethics. For many years I refused to believe in a personal god, partly because I could not see that God as a good person if he was responsible for this world. I still see that belief of Martineau’s and of so many others as an extension of the primitive desire to capture the forces of nature and of mankind, as friends, even as human persons who might respond to our requests and desires. I find it easier to believe in and wonder at a Supra-personal divinity, perhaps just simply in Existence, as it is beyond our puny human conceptions, neither moral nor immoral. I have to agree that many people like to have a man-made image of a subordinate part of that supra-personal existence that we might call God, it is certainly possible to speak to it all in prayer or curses. But I, like many Twenty-first Century Unitarians, doubt the speaker ever receives an answer that is not illusory or does not come from within his or her own self.

Martineau’s main concern in promoting the personal nature of God was that he did not see the possibility of an ethic based on any thinking which was not religious and that was not based firmly on the belief in an ethical God who was a person (who presumably ran Heaven and Hell or some substitute for them). Unlike Martineau, I do not begin with a concern with a moral law and some hopefully inevitable consequences from a just God of breaking it as the centre of my spiritual concerns with Existence. Personally, my Twenty-first Century religion is less concerned with being good and keeping other people good, whatever that may mean, than with appreciating and living life to the full.

Unlike Martineau’s views from his time, I am inclined to think so-called morals are more about the survival of the tribe (or even beyond that of the species) than about toeing a line of prohibitions and injunctions. I am likely to subscribe to a Dawkins evolutionary explanation of the underpinning of what the social scientists and biologists prefer to call ‘pro-social behaviour’. Fraser, in ‘The Golden Bough’, an early and flawed book on social anthropology pointed to a history of voluntary self-sacrifice in the repertoire of human behaviour. I think we can still see this voluntary self sacrifice to save the tribe in the surge of volunteers to fight in the First World War, in the willingness to fight in Afghanistan and even in the suicide bombings of Islam. E. O. Wilson, the Harvard socio-biologist in a recent book “The Social

Conquest of Earth” traces the evolution of what he calls ‘eu-social’ behaviour through the eons and across the species to where man is now, he suggests, at a turning point where he must move out beyond the morality of family and tribe to a global morality if he is to survive. I am with him all the way. Altruistic, helping, pro-social behaviour is certainly good for the family, the tribe and ultimately, the species and since it also exists to a lesser extent, as Wilson so carefully documents, in monkeys, spiders and others, and it does not appear to need a Conscience or a God-within to operate. That is a part of the distance between the Nineteenth century and Martineau and the Twenty-first century and you and me. Of course some of us are still stuck in what I call a Sicilian or Corsican morality in which you can do anything you like to anyone outside the family or the tribe as long as you support your own. I think Unitarians are in the vanguard of Wilson’s next stage of ‘moral’ evolution.

Also I have read too much social anthropology to be anything other than a moral relativist. I refuse to judge actions and situations by general principles without understanding the special, perhaps even unique, circumstances and actors. So, without being an out and out Utilitarian, often acknowledging that sometimes the ends may justify the means, I am as suspicious of absolutists in this area as in any other. I am sure that in the view of the absolutists, this is very wicked and quite dangerous to the stability of society.

About half a century ago Rex and Margaret Knight of the Department of Psychology in Aberdeen went wholly national, on Radio and in books, setting out their arguments as to why morality did not depend on religion. Even before them the existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich had convincingly decoupled the two from each other. The only possible connection between them now remaining is that if you believe in an eternity of heaven and hell and a last judgement it might make you good for a while until your next temptation after your last confession of sins, or your last salvation by evangelicals may put off ‘backsliding’ for a time. Now, in the twenty first century, Martineau’s views on the inseparable connection between religion and morality must be held by very few, even among the Christian Unitarians. This rejection of a fundamental element in Martineau’s beautifully integrated system means that probably most of the rest goes with it, but there are some gems I want to save.

Martineau taught that Jesus and all men and women are incarnated with the divine already living within. This sounds entirely in consonance with our Unitarians of today and matches our nearest friends, the Quakers, but also the Hindu’s (think of “Tat Twam Assi” – Hindu – “you are a part of God too”) – possibly others, of which I am yet ignorant.

Martineau taught that humankind is the arena in which there takes place a constant struggle between the physical and the spiritual, between the brute and the angel within us. This is an understanding of the striving for the good life which has been around from the times of Zoroaster about 4000BC and it was widely prevalent in its Christian form throughout Scotland well into the twentieth century - perhaps even today there is an implicit folk-belief in the Devil? It is the basis of much nineteenth century romantic German drama from which Freud derived his theory of the structures of the mind – the Superego, the Ego and the Id. I occasionally used to repeat someone else’s

irreverent description of Freud's view of Man as a gorilla in the basement and an angel in the attic refereed by a nervous bank clerk on the ground floor. It can be translated, again very roughly, into parent or Superego (attic), child or Id (basement) and adult (ground-floor- Freud's Ego) in many derivations from Freud's work. From my point of view, this view of humankind may sometimes be helpful but it has its limits. It seems to me to be starkly obvious that any theology of Humankind must offer a better psychology than that, and I believe that today we can do much better and can be much more subtle in our understanding of humankind in ways that will rest more obviously, and at the very least, on our biology on the operations of the brain and on what we now know of attachment theory and of the workings of groups. (Incidentally I wholly reject those pretentious pseudo-scientific words 'dynamics' and 'psycho-analysis' with which Freud originally sought to give an false aura of the more exact physical sciences to something which is far, far from that).

Martineau rejects the authority of the Church (Catholic), of the Scripture (Protestant) or of Reason (the Enlightenment) as the final authorities and makes the final authority for each of us as his or her own Conscience. Here is where I become, for a fleeting moment, a Martineau fan and I believe he bequeathed something, not unique (think of the Quakers), but inherently rare and very valuable towards the Unitarian identity. He put what he called Conscience (with a capital letter because he thought it was his God within) at the centre of his belief system and as the final authority on all questions of morals and religion. That was a position I am happy to acknowledge and I am seriously grateful to him for adopting and promulgating it from such an influential and prestigious position within Unitarianism. But I cannot see Conscience as a final authority for reasons which I shall explain in a moment or two.

First let us wrestle with Martineau's views on what he thought of as "the Moral Law" which he describes as 'THE supremely important reality' and as Absolute. I have not found, and cannot find, any major thinker known to me who writes about this Moral Law in the same way as Martineau. Back in what we would regard as medieval times, St Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, wrote about the Natural Law. That was the idea that if we abuse ourselves and the dictates of biology, we will suffer consequences, as when, for example, we defy our need for sleep. Immanuel Kant writes about 'the categorical imperative' and 'the moral imperative' in his 'Critiques', ideas which have the same emotionally demanding flavour as Martineau's Moral Law and were hugely influential. Martineau, as an idealist in the European tradition of Kant and Hegel, almost certainly was inspired by them.

The idea of the Moral Law bears, to my perception, a kind of family resemblance to the alleged 'Law of Karma'. Both of them are difficult to discern and heavily linked with an attempt to provide sanctions in an after-life against unwelcome behaviour which does not meet with the punishment in this life that the supporters of a particular kind of order believe it should. Perhaps this Moral Law is connected to the vague realisation that, as people sometimes say, 'What goes around comes around', a kind of folk-recognition of Kant's injunction that we should as we would wish all of us to do. There is

certainly no way in which 'law' bears resemblance to the precise and infinitely replicable laws of physics and chemistry as Martineau claimed.

But it seems Martineau wanted to maintain the belief in punishment. The old ideas of an afterlife in Heaven or Hell were, even in his time, fading away but he still wanted the idea to live on of punishment for wrong-doings beyond and above anything the state could do. So punishment in this life or in the next (which he believes in intuitively) is, he teaches, inevitable for our violations of our duties and for our sins, if not here on earth, then certainly in the after-life. For Martineau this punishment will take the form of our Consciences haunting and tormenting us until we acknowledge our sinfulness and guilt. This idea is, as far as I can discern, unique to Martineau.

Finally, there is Martineau's belief in Conscience as the permanent voice within us of an inherent intuitive human consensus about which acts are moral and immoral. He maintains that there is no difference on this between different people or cultures; that this Conscience is innate and comes directly from God and not from upbringing, socialisation, education or intellect. For Martineau that Conscience, guided by Reason, is the final authority through which God speaks to us and it reveals the eternal and unchanging Will of God. Although Freud had been practising for some twenty years before Martineau died, he did not begin writing about his finished conception of the Superego until the early nineteen twenties. And by the late nineteen thirties he had moved on to the analysis of the transference and beginnings of the Object Relations Theory which melds so creatively with studies in attachment and is now the basis of most psychodynamic counselling and psychotherapy. According to Freud and many early psycho-analysts the Superego was supposed to represent within the person the desires and requests of the parent figures, especially of the father in the case of the male and of the mother in the case of the female. Freud saw it as operating in ways very similar to the Protestant idea of the Conscience. This idea, of the Super Ego has some evidence to recommend it in the sense that most students of the psycho-social development of the individual today would recognise the huge importance of early relationships with attachment figures, especially parents and the likelihood that there are innate predisposing factors governing them. The Cambridge ethologists and even Freud recognised this in his concept of the imago. But even from the beginning, Freud recognised that this province of the mind, as he called the Super Ego, could be corrupt. Superegos could be tyrannical, demanding and restricting beyond reason. Later, Freud's his followers realised that some people's Superegos could even be criminal. The same applies to the idea of Consciences. Some are criminal. Even the positive aspects of Super Egos and Consciences can be perfectionistic making endless demands on those who possess them because nothing is good enough for them. I wrote a short poem myself in my youth called "Perfectionism: An Exorcism" repudiating the perfectionism within me which left me with no peace. And I will read it to you now.

Perfection: An Exorcism

False Light of False Life, You have blinded me;

Burned out sight's nerve and shrouded my sun.

Terrible concept of dazzling magnificence,

Awstruck, I followed your pitiless brilliance.

Harsh taskmaster, relentless, implacable,

Cold, inhuman and loveless –

Needle sharp and scalpel cruel.

Now, broken and weary I'll leave you;

Other beams come glancing through the gloom.

Too long you have tried me and wracked me.

Now go! Be gone to your doom.

A tad over dramatic, I think now, but I am glad to say that the false light went and has never shown much sign of returning.

So Martineau rejected the authority of the Church, rejected the authority of Scripture and accepted the authority of Conscience guided by Reason as the basis for our discernment of right from wrong. In the twenty first century now I cannot accept even the authority of Conscience. So how do I live? I think my answer has to be that I am guided by a process of triangulation.

When you climb many of the mountains and even many quite small hills you will find an Ordinance Survey triangulation point used by the cartographers to make their maps. As I walk through the contemporary moral maze in the absence of any single point of authority I think I rely on a process of triangulation which involves (first) seeking guidance from my conscience, yes, but not from it alone, (second) guidance from my reason, my intelligence and my store of learning and understanding, yes, but not from Conscience and Reason alone, and (third) guidance from trusted friends and even from consensus in a whole community, but not from it alone. No single point gives me my moral "fix", to use a navigational term, and sometimes they disagree seriously about where I am and about what road I should follow. That makes for slightly riskier and more interesting living. But together they are my best guide. I do not think I am alone in this way of living among the people in this church today.

We are the descendants of Martineau, in the senses that we reject the absolute authority of any church, or scripture; we prefer to be guided by reason and conscience; we see ourselves as being a part of our God, and perhaps as having something of God within.

So, as a fairly typical quasi-religious or spiritual denizen of the twenty first century (or at least I think I am) I can sometimes feel quite near to the traditional Christian Martineau of the Nineteenth century - and yet so far from him, so similar and yet so dissimilar. And I guess you will have some of the same mixed and ambivalent reactions too, but each in your own way.

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