

Blessed is the Peacemaker: The Religious Vision of Ramsay MacDonald

Tom McReady



On the 27th of February in the year 1900 James Ramsay MacDonald became the first secretary of the newly formed Labour Representation Committee. This was the result of a proposal by one Thomas R. Steels, a Doncaster member of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, who suggested to the Trades Union Congress that all left-wing organizations should unite in a single body to campaign for parliamentary representation for working-class people. After successfully electing 29 members of parliament in 1906, including MacDonald, the Labour Representation Committee changed its name to the Labour Party.

On the 27th February in the year 1935 Ramsay MacDonald stood up to make a speech to a hall packed with two thousand people who had come to listen to him. He had his notes in his hand, but the pain in his eyes from the glaucoma he had been suffering from was so severe that he could not read. So he laid down his notes and just started to speak. And something of the old spark and flow of his early days returned to the man his critics in the Commons had dubbed 'Ramshackle Mac' and he spoke passionately and eloquently in defence of his handling of the National Government. The venue for what was literally Ramsay MacDonald's swan song was the Corn Exchange, Doncaster. In June 1935 he went to see King George V and offered his resignation as prime minister.

In the 35 years between these two dates Ramsay MacDonald was one of the most scrutinized and criticized of all political figures: alternatively derided as a dangerous socialist who threatened to destroy the British nation and lauded as 'the mute hope of a whole class' who would raise the working people of Britain up to full participation in the life and governance of the country. He was demonised by the right for his principled, persistent opposition to World War One, an opposition that was as moral as it was political, which led to him being branded 'the most hated man in Britain'. He was despised by the left for agreeing to lead the National Government of 1931 and castigated as a shameless traitor driven solely by vanity and ambition. So thoroughly hated and reviled was MacDonald by the Labour movement that he did so much to create that a full 50 years after his death his name was still used as a deadly insult and his motivation is still the subject of perplexed and angry speculation.

In fact, much of the personality and history of Ramsay MacDonald and the motivations behind many of his actions and decisions remain mysterious. We are only at the foot of page 2 of the superb and definitive 1977 biography of MacDonald by David Marquand before we read: 'He emerges from the literature of the last twenty years as a bundle of contradictory attributes rather than as a credible human being.'

It is not entirely surprising that the picture of MacDonald that scholarship has so far produced is limited and incomplete; for an element that is indispensable to understanding the man and the influences that shaped his spiritual and political development has been previously hidden. Papers that have lain undisturbed in archives for 70 years or more show that Ramsay MacDonald was a passionate and prolific Unitarian preacher.

Between the first recorded instance of his leading worship in Canterbury Unitarian Church on the 8th of May 1892 and his final visit to Canterbury on the 18th of July 1900, he led worship regularly in Unitarian churches on at least 300 occasions, and there are indications that many more may have gone unrecorded.

The peak of his Unitarian preaching came in the year 1895, when he was appointed to a position of leadership of the emerging 'Margate and Ramsgate Unitarian Circle of Religious Fellowship'. This was covered in detail by the Unitarian publications *The Christian Life and Unitarian Herald* and *The Inquirer*, and by the local press *The Thanet Advertiser*.

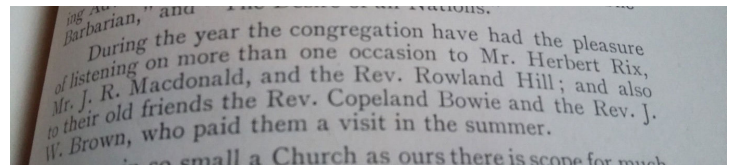
It is the archive that covers this period that has been discovered. It consists of 25 sermons; 22 of which are complete and intact; 3 have missing or damaged pages. There are 89 pages of sermon notes; many of which include longer paragraphs of related reflections; and 21 pages of original prayers. The total archive available to this writer consists of some 700 closely written A5 pages.

There are marginal notes in the title pages of the sermons giving the dates and the names of the churches where they were preached. Some sermons have been delivered as many as four times at various Unitarian churches between 1892 and 1900, and there are references in some of his notes that show that he did return to pay occasional visits to some of the churches where his preaching was particularly popular as late as 1903 and 1904.

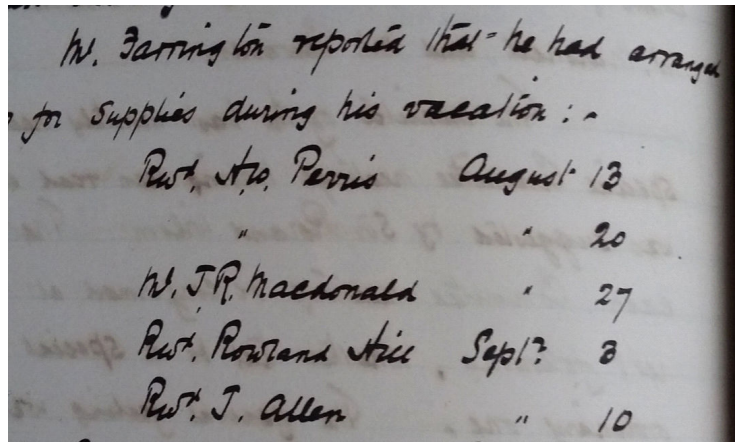
The central theological concern of these sermons is the attempt to express an authentic form of Christianity that is fit for the times, based on a reasoned refutation of the traditional understanding of salvation and the articulation of a credible alternative, one that is sustainable in the face of the massive political, social, philosophical and theological changes that were gathering at the time MacDonald was writing and preaching, at the hinge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Nowhere does MacDonald speak more convincingly to our contemporary theological concerns than in his understanding of God. Every page of his closely handwritten notes, prayers and sermons is imbued with his belief in the reality of the Sacred; expressed in his distinctive interplay of emotional solidity and intellectual subtlety, where the word 'God' is continually used, but every time his language takes the slightest step in the direction of description or definition he is dismissive of: 'the crude contemplation of God as a person dwelling in a place we call heaven' and uses phrases like 'the Unseen' and 'the Divine Mind' 'the spiritual ideal, the absolute idea, the indwelling impulse'.

MacDonald clearly identifies Unitarian Christianity as the highest form of Christianity of his times; he regards Christianity as the brightest hope in the history of humanity, and the driving passion in his preaching is to reclaim the essentials of Christianity from what he regarded as the stultifying results of its having been effectively colonised and corrupted by the intellectual imperialism of western materialism. He is ahead of his time and yet in tune with subsequent Unitarian thinking in foreseeing a vibrant spiritual humanism growing



Mentions of Ramsay MacDonald's sermons in the Richmond Unitarian Church records for 1892.



naturally and organically out of an authentic Christianity.

MacDonald regularly identifies himself as a Unitarian, but he seldom does he attack the doctrine of the Trinity directly. Indeed, he treats the relationship of Jesus to 'the Father' with profound reverence: he speaks of 'the Father manifesting his power in the Son'; and he uses phrases like 'the will of the Father' wherever he discusses the personal relationships and moral responsibilities of religion. All of his prayers are addressed to 'the Father' and wherever he uses the term 'Holy Spirit' or even 'Holy Ghost' he does so respectfully. Although Lord Elton's 1939 biography plainly states that in his boyhood in Lossiemouth: 'The doctrine of the Trinity is known to have troubled him', the evidence of these sermons would strongly suggest that his objections were not to the Trinity itself but to the way it has been used to legitimize the doctrines of atonement and of predestination; both of which MacDonald vigorously and uncompromisingly repudiates.

While this new material inevitably changes our perception of MacDonald's personal history and enhances our understanding of how his religious feelings would have influenced his political direction, does it help us in any way to understand his leadership of the National Government of 1931? More specifically, does it shed any light on why he struggled on as a Labour prime minister at the head of a Conservative government until June 1935, instead of standing aside, as common sense and political expediency might well have suggested he should do, in August 1932?



(Left) Ramsay MacDonald in 1892; (Right) Represented in a drawing in the Dover Express.

Indeed it does. For it shows that his anti-militarism and his enthusiasm for disarmament which was expressed with passion and energy in his Unitarian preaching as early as 1893 was a robust and enduring aspect of his Christian faith, and an infinitely stronger impetus for his politics than has ever been suspected. Remember that MacDonald vigorously opposed the Boer war and was notorious in his continuous opposition to and criticism of World War I. He not only risked career and comfort but regularly placed himself in direct physical danger whenever he braved the anger and the missiles of the mob in his determination to proclaim his opposition.

As Labour's first prime minister in 1924 Ramsay MacDonald produced the Geneva Protocol of 1924 (Geneva Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes); when he became prime minister for the second time in 1929 he took up the cause again, and delivered a pro-disarmament speech at Geneva that created a sensation. He continued to be one of the main driving forces behind the Geneva Disarmament Conference and the Lausanne Reparations Conference of 1932 and campaigned for disarmament until the final failure of the conference in 1934. Is it not entirely possible that this would have been a major part of the reason why he hung on to the premiership after 1932: to

have a greater chance to finish the work he started in 1914, and to bring to fulfilment the vision he articulated in 1924?

A fuller portrait of MacDonald emerges when his years as a Unitarian preacher are added to what we know of his history. But when we apply the knowledge of this earlier period to our assessment of the private feelings of the public man of the later period, the portrait that emerges is necessarily a somewhat more melancholy one; the shadow of failure and discouragement cast over his last years of public life a more bitter one. But if it is a more melancholy portrait, it is also a more morally upright one.

And we, in our time, have other and greater failures than MacDonald's to take into consideration when assessing the value of his contribution to the life of the nation. Any assessment would be farcical that failed to acknowledge that the arc of history from the fall of the Berlin wall to the publication of the Chilcot Report has transformed the moral and political perspective by which he must be judged. And any objective assessment will conclude that James Ramsay MacDonald, political theorist and theologian; Unitarian Preacher and Labour prime minister, was quite simply a better man and a more honest leader than history has given him credit for.