

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

FENTON JOHN ANTHONY HORT.

THE Biography recently given to the world under this heading, whatever else it may have brought its readers, has vividly revived, for some of them, one of the most indelible and distinct impressions of past life. How tantalizing at times is the endeavour to transfer such impressions! They are as real, as vivid, as the things we see or the sounds we hear, but the endeavour to clothe them in words is like breathing on the crystals of a frosted pane. The consciousness that the needed background of interest may be taken for granted in any reader of this periodical makes it impossible to refrain from an attempt which otherwise it would be impossible to make, but does not remove its difficulties, which indeed spring from its special interest. For those old enough to recall that social and spiritual awakening which coincides with the stir of 1848, and partly marks its reverberation on our shores, the biography of Fenton Hort revives so vividly the sense of standing on the threshold of a new world that such a one hardly knows whether it be created by the record, or recalled by a name and a date. In such circumstances criticism is impossible, and egotism but too likely. If the excuse that the memories which intrude themselves are almost contemporary with those which the book recalls be not valid, the critic has no other.

No group is more accessible to posterity than that to which Fenton Hort belonged. The readers of to-day may know all that a biographer can tell about Frederick Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and the men who surrounded them. The world was, when they began to influence it, more moved by strong personal influences, more divided into groups of disciples, than it is now. We were less arrayed in serried ranks of "classes and masses"; we were

rather clusters of listeners, or would-be listeners, to this or that prophet or preacher. The influence of one such teacher, round whose brow the aureole does not fade, is felt in reading Hort's biography perhaps more vividly than in reading his own. In 1851, when Hort took his degree, the Church of England, just abdicating her "high" pretensions and preparing to be known as a "broad" Church, was centered for many eager and thirsty listeners in the person of Frederick Maurice; and an account of a Sunday afternoon at Lincoln's Inn Chapel given here will recall to a few survivors some of the best hours of their lives. Those tremulous, penetrating tones, which seemed to hurry on to some newly heard message full of blessing for mankind; that pale face, to which the "storied windows," fading with the daylight, seemed to transfer their illumination; those eyes, looking as it were into "the thick darkness where God was"—as we turn the page they recur, and with them that sense of the dawn of a new day which marks the voice of the prophet in every generation, and must not be considered illusory because, as we look back, the dawn seems to pass into the twilight. I recall a specially vivid emergence of that hope in my own mind when walking home with one dear to Maurice—Thomas Erskine, of Linlathen. "Should you say," he asked, turning to another friend, "that there has been much rejection of the message of Christ among working men?" "I should say there was now no acceptance of it." "I do not wonder; it has never hitherto been set forth otherwise than in an immoral form." The reminiscence recurs with Hort's biography, as expressing, with a certain exaggeration which was characteristic of the speaker when strongly moved and words seemed inadequate, our vivid belief, under that influence, that the message of Christ only needed to be set forth as we had just heard it, or with some added elements which seemed close at hand, in order to repeat the victory of the first days of Christianity.

A great disappointment generally follows hopes initiated by a great surrender. An utterance of Fenton Hort's, given the world since his death, seems to me so adequately to meet that disappointment, that at the risk of transcribing words with which all readers of this notice will be familiar, I will copy from his Hulsean lectures the paragraph in which he attempts to gather up the lesson of the bereaved disciples, and bring it home to those who, at a later date, experience something like a repetition of that bereavement in the obscuration of their faith.

“The eve of the Passion is not the only time when Christ has seemed to His Church to be departing from the earth of which for a while He had been a denizen, and when those whose course has been in great part shaped by the discipleship to Christ which surrounded them have felt with dismay that the sustaining habitudes were passing away. His own palpable presence in the flesh has its counterpart, at least as regards the sense of security which it afforded, in a ‘Christian world,’ an assemblage of nations where deference to His Name and acquiescence in His authority receive full public and private recognition. When it becomes manifest that a Christian world in this sense is ceasing to exist, either because Christ's authority is becoming limited to a single narrow department of individual life, or because His right to authority is questioned altogether at its fountain-head, then the band of His disciples may naturally feel as though He were once more leaving them to themselves. They cannot go backward; if discipleship has not yet taught them the way, it has at least disabled them for ever from resting contented without a way, and convinced them no less that elsewhere it is not to be found. Yet it is hard to see either whitherward the Lord is departing or after what manner the original command to follow Him is henceforth to be obeyed.”

No words, to my mind, describe more perfectly what

some of us who remember those services in Lincoln's Inn recall of struggle and despondency between that time and this. Nor do any words more suggest all that would rebuke that despondency. It seems strange that the little volume from which they are taken is almost the only record of such a faith and such a clear discernment of all at a particular epoch that opposed faith. It is pathetic to remember that one who had so much to say was never enabled, in the full sense of the words, to break silence.

To break silence! the very expression is significant. A barrier has to be broken before one who waits to gather up the conflicting testimonies of life's experience can find words for his thoughts. A large part of the remembered conversation with such a one seems to consist in some check on hasty statement or rash assumption; and when one would recall what was most individual, it seems to have been all negative. It would be truer to say of Hort that all his utterances were positive, but it is just these which are apt, in contact with hasty criticism, to take a negative aspect. "There is much to be said," he wrote to me in 1877, in answer to some expression of my hope for his future which I have forgotten, "for refraining from correcting impressions which are not substantially incorrect. . . . What I feel most is the sense of the undoubted and actual unproductiveness, when so much craves to be produced." The sentence, with its guarded carefulness, seems to me to sum up his life. So much in him *craved* to be produced. His influence, as I recall it, seemed to open a vista; there was sometimes disappointment in its not being followed up, but the opening was there. I remember feeling it a vivid and permanent influence after a conversation of which I can only remember the sentence, "No one did any one thing well who tried to do only that one thing." The words as I recall them, and as they are expanded by many passages in his biography, gather up a

sense of life as a whole, of *the beyond* as supplying a needed background and atmosphere to the present, which often expresses itself in the stress and strain of human intercourse as the negation of a negation, but which, in its impartial receptiveness, disentangled from the premature exclusions of logic, is actually the subjective side of what we mean by truth.

But one sometimes doubts whether something which (to save a lengthy paraphrase) may be presumptuously termed *error* be not almost a necessity for much achievement in the way of obvious and tangible memorials of a teacher. With a clear consciousness of the seeming arrogance and exaggeration of such a statement, I should yet say that none of the elder contemporaries whose names give interest to the pages of his biography seem to me to have seen life from points of view as opposite—in other words, with a balance as true—as he did. As one looks back toward the years recorded in the earlier part of his biography one seems to recall chance intercourse with fellow travellers in a crowded railway carriage, which some of its inmates had entered by mere mistake. This one was starting for India; that one was to find his destination in an hour; another was anxious to retrace his steps at the very first opportunity. We were in close community for a moment; but the goals of some fellow travellers then were remote as the poles. In that motley throng I recognise few who, knowing their own aim as clearly as Fenton Hort, could have gone so far with their neighbours. A perusal of his biography, interrupted at the account of his welcome to the Darwinian theory, might lead to a strangely mistaken view of his deepest sympathies and his ultimate position. He was not capable of taking up the position, soon so surprisingly common, and epigrammatically commemorated by Mr. Max Müller, as a belief that the world was created twice, the first time according to Moses, and the second

according to Darwin. He could never have felt, with many devout and earnest persons, that it needed only a true apprehension of both authorities to reduce their antagonism to insignificance. But he seems always to have felt it waste of time to criticise the part of a message—whether bad science associated with theology, or bad philosophy associated with science—on which the messenger has nothing to teach us. For such minds a blank often records the truest vision of the Divine parable of the ages. That embodiment of the eternal in the temporal which makes up the course of human development is least readily paraphrased in human utterance by those who most adequately discern both its elements. Those who would obliterate either the indications which lead men from the natural to the supernatural, or those which form a barrier in that path, have in either case much to utter. Those who discern both in their true proportion know but little stimulus towards that one-sided expression which is all that seems possible. The thing is *there*; why try to have it elsewhere?

This silencing influence, I suppose, must have been felt by all who had much intercourse with him. Certainly he felt it himself when he spoke of the “unwholesome reserve” which had kept him even from intimacy with his children; and, though one would not have used that epithet, one felt his reserve sometimes disappointing in the midst of ready and ungrudging intercourse, when one sought to enter on the realms of deepest import. To turn to him for literary help was to meet immediate, eager, adequate communication. His library contained just such a book as you wanted—there it was, there was his account of it, precise, clear, perfectly satisfying. How gladly would his grateful hearer have gone beyond the question of texts and authorities, and sought his views on the fundamental realities which underlay all the criticism and scholarship! There one seemed to enter the realm of silence. Such

reminiscences, perhaps, do something to explain the contrast between the list of his literary projects and that of his printed work. What influence would have bridged the chasm between them? Better health, more leisure, longer life? Yes, all had doubtless their part, the first especially, but even the lack of this seems less important than that double-edged discernment which, in such a time as he lived through, loads utterance with a weight under which it can hardly move.

He lived through a great revolution in the spiritual environment of man. The background of assumption and feeling which to us who remember that earlier world seemed as solid as a row of mountains, now appears as evanescent as a wreath of clouds. Decisions which encompassed us then like the atmosphere we breathe now seem as much a part of individual selection as the food we swallow; those who believe the very things that ordinary people believed sixty or fifty years ago, believe them now in a different sense, and with a quite different feeling. It now requires some courage to assert what then it required much courage to deny. If any one now pays that homage to the Invisible then paid by most people, it is one to whom the Invisible is the keynote of life. The things of sense were as importunate half a century ago as they are now, the promises of Faith as forgettable. But while the ideal of a Christian *nation* was dominant, the indifferent were ranged with the sympathetic; and now that it is discarded, the indifferent are ranged with the hostile. The change seems to take place in a moment. Yesterday the world seemed with us, to-day it seems against us. It is natural; the world does but echo the accents of authority. When they were found on the side of theology, the world was quasi-theological; when they changed to the side of science, the world was quasi-scientific. The change was momentous. But it was only to a minority that the renunciation was great.

The party which commemorates this transition, and aims at bridging the interval between the old condition and the new, is known as the Broad Church. That might always have been the title of the Church of England. The aim of compromise, or of comprehensiveness (according as we describe that aim in hostile or in friendly terms) is incorporated in its very essence. And the antagonistic interests which it would reconcile in our day, those respectively of Science and of Theology, being as remote as possible, the title might seem in our time peculiarly appropriate. Yet I can never use it without reluctance, so unsuitable does it appear to me to describe the character and belief of the one who gave the movement its depth, its volume, and its momentum. The antagonism between Science and Theology is one Frederick Maurice never discerned; the change by which "the religious world" should vanish, and be replaced by the scientific world, would have seemed to him a very unimportant disadvantage, if he considered it a disadvantage at all. An epithet which has been applied to Spinoza seems to me applicable to him: as some men are atheists, Maurice might be called an acosmist. No phrase could be more unjust if it were supposed to imply an indifference to the secular interests of his countrymen; he did more for them than some who have attended to nothing else. He was among the first to develop the education of women and the working classes, and to set on foot that co-operative movement which has since his time made such vast strides. But with all this, he was yet as blind to that in the world which conceals God as an atheist is to that in the world which reveals Him. And surely not to see this is not to see the world at all.

To think this of any teacher is to deny his position in a *broad* Church, and, in fact, Maurice himself would never have accepted such a description. He disliked and rejected all such names, but I think actually he was not so far from

either of the other parties in the Church as from that heterogeneous group which finds its coherence only in what it denies. Nevertheless some of its denials were so important, so needed, and so emancipating, that for the moment they were more uniting than a more positive creed. It is difficult now to realize the sudden sense of emancipation which came with a corporate disbelief in an endless hell. Those who had never believed it, yet found a vast release of spiritual force when they were enabled to disbelieve it in company with teachers for whom holiness and sin were words of vital significance. Most people, when they read the *Inferno* of Dante, say to themselves that these were always nightmare fancies, used by the poet as mere symbols. And yet if you opened almost any religious book current fifty years ago, you would find something like that in the background. "No doubt," says Dr. Arnold in one of his sermons, "there will only be two divisions at last—the lost and the saved." I shall never forget the shock with which I came upon those words, not many years before the letter on this subject from Hort to Maurice which led to their acquaintance, and which was not without influence, it seems to me, on that controversy which dismissed the superstition for ever from the belief of Christian England. Any one who will peruse that appeal, and the interesting fragment of biography which it elicited in reply, will realize that less than two generations ago we did need to be assured that the Father in Heaven was not as cruel as the worst of earthly parents, and more capricious than any conceivable human being. I date my own emancipation to contact with the anguish of a mother whose son was drowned in seeking to save a life. It was possible then to fancy that while selfishness might have secured heaven, one who laid down his life for a fellow creature was requited with hell. Of course, many disbelieved it then, and taught their children to disbelieve it. Maurice's own parents had done so. But

he recoiled as much from "the belief in universal restitution" which had been the lesson of his youth, as Hort did from the belief in an eternity of torment. "I had a certain revolting, partly of intellect and partly of conscience, against what struck me as a feeble notion of the Divine perfections, one which represented *good nature* as the highest of them. . . . I found it more and more impossible to trust in any being who did not hate selfishness, and who did not desire to raise His creatures out of it." I give this extract from Maurice's letter to the young Cambridge student of 1849 partly because it seems to me to show why we needed a Maurice to deliver us from a superstition which a rational mind could entertain only by forgetting its meaning. There was not another teacher gifted with his power of utterance who saw the truth in the neighbourhood of that superstition to which he gave its death-blow. Perhaps some of the vehemence which came out in him at certain stages of the controversy were the result of that agitating emotion which all must feel who aim, like William Tell, at an object narrowly bordering on a precious life.

But that extract is made mainly in order to show what Maurice recognised in the appeal which drew it forth. The letter from the youth of twenty-one is actually the earliest expression bearing on the controversy in accessible print, and had, we cannot doubt, some influence in giving it shape. To my mind that letter exhibits much of the strength we find in the answer, and also some which we do not find there. Hort revered truth as his teacher did, but he respected fact far more. If any one deems that reverence for truth is respect for fact, let him beware how he deny it to Frederick Maurice. But the memory of the disciple and the master side by side is to my mind a vivid exhibition of the difference between the two qualities.

Fenton Hort was, in the deepest sense of the word, a broad Churchman. It was not perhaps a sense which can

be largely illustrated for any one who never knew him. The Hulsean lectures, with an extract from which I will conclude, as I began, this imperfect sketch, do indeed express the thing I mean: they seem to me to echo the stately and temperate measure of that seventeenth century English theology which may be taken as the perennial type of all Broad Churches. From the causes I have mentioned, Hort always seemed to me (of late years I saw him but little) to avoid any allusion to the controversies of the hour, and it is only from these that we can bring home the notion of a Broad Church to the popular imagination; but he manifested to all who knew him a living sympathy with feelings and beliefs ordinarily ranged in the sharpest antagonism, and apparently dividing between them the whole world of thought. His life-work—a formation of the text of the New Testament—was executed in the same spirit which was exercised and developed by that love of botany attested by actually the preponderance in the list of printed works given at the end of his biography. Here we find the influences which gave his mind its peculiar equipoise. His interest in science secured him from the influence of that superstition now so fast vanishing—the opinion that a narrative of supernatural events must be supernaturally secured from error. His still deeper interest in theology held at bay the strange and dominant inversion of that superstition—the opinion that a record in which there is nothing supernatural cannot commemorate supernatural events. I know no words which have so recalled Maurice's voice to me as those in the Hulsean lectures which I began by transcribing and those with which I now conclude, but the extracts must convey to any attentive reader a vision of the earthly beside the heavenly which was lacking to him, and must inevitably be lacking to most of those whose life is wholly in the all-absorbing vision of the Eternal.

“We are full of inconsistencies, and so is all around us.

But those inconsistencies are the mark of the passage from the lower consistency of unconscious animal life to the higher consistency of spiritual life, preserving and perfecting every element of the animal life, yet transforming it by the new creation. To go back now to the lower consistency means to choose chaos, darkness, death. . . . Yet we ought never to be satisfied with inconsistency. We must struggle forward towards a rational and effectual Unity.”¹

JULIA WEDGWOOD.

¹ *The Way, the Truth, the Life*, p. 168.

ERRATUM.

In the September No. page 195, line 15, *for* A.D. 96, *read* A.D. 69.

[*The transposition of the figures was a printer's error.*]