

A BRUSH WITH THE UNITARIAN MINISTRY

JOHN HENRY MUIRHEAD (b. Glasgow, 28th April 1855 – d. May 1940)

Whilst not an important and original philosopher in his own right Muirhead was an eloquent interpreter of both the Platonic tradition and Philosophical Idealism in British and American thought; his two most important books (still worth consulting) being *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* (George Allen & Unwin, London 1931) and *Coleridge as Philosopher* (George Allen & Unwin, London 1930). He will also be remembered for editing an influential series of philosophical books for George Allen & Unwin which became known under the general title of *The Muirhead Library of Philosophy* and for his teaching of Philosophy and Political Economy in Mason College Birmingham (which became the University of Birmingham during his tenure). However, as interesting as an exploration of his philosophical career would be, what concerns us here is his little known brush with the Unitarian ministry between 1885 and 1888. The information in this resumé is taken entirely from his autobiography *Reflections by a Journeyman in Philosophy* (George Allen & Unwin, London 1942).

Between 1879 and 1885 Muirhead was working as an assistant in Latin to Prof. George Gilbert Ramsay at Glasgow University where, despite all the opportunities and excitements of the place he became “more and more haunted with the conviction that I was missing my vocation, and came in 1884 to the decision to make a change before it was too late.”¹ He considered first the possibility of ministry within the Church of Scotland as he was of the opinion that “the new philosophical teaching² had broadened out so as to seem to open the door to all degrees of heresy in its ministers.”³ Unfortunately he found that, whilst this “broadening out” might have occurred amongst certain ministers in parishes, within the confines of University’s Theology Faculty such heresies were very much frowned upon. Not least of all there remained the stumbling block of subscription to the Westminster Confession which, although Muirhead and some others tried to have eased, remained firmly in place. Yet such was his calling that he felt he had “gone to far to turn back” and so “entered into correspondence with James Martineau the Principal of Manchester New College with a view to continuing my explorations in what I hoped would be a freer atmosphere.”⁴

This decision to explore the possibility of ministry within Unitarian movement was not without its cost both immediately and with respect to his future career. Muirhead’s Free Church family, already concerned at his dabble with the Establishment Church, now found an opportunity to be even more worried at this heretical turn in his thinking which they thought was leading him towards atheism. Secondly when, a number of years later he was candidating for the chair of Logic at Glasgow

¹ *Reflections by a Journeyman in Philosophy* (George Allen & Unwin, London 1942) pp. 61-62

² i.e. the Philosophical Idealism of people such as T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet and Edward Caird

³ *ibid* p. 62

⁴ *ibid*

University, he was informed by one of the electors that his involvement with the Unitarians had been “fatal to any chance of success he might otherwise have had.”⁵

A comment he makes about this move towards Unitarian churches which is worth highlighting was that he believed it offered “the prospect of being without compromise of honesty to enter an historical church.”⁶ It is often claimed that thinkers from the Idealist school tend overly to diminish the value of history but in Muirhead’s case the historical continuity and depth of the Unitarian tradition was seen to be of the highest value. So it was, in the autumn of 1885, that he took up residence at University Hall.

In addition to the principal James Martineau the staff at that time consisted of James Drummond, Estlin-Carpenter and Charles B. Upton. Although Muirhead states that these three were “the inheritors of a strong theistic faith, of which they took to the teaching of Christ to be the highest and purest development and Martineau’s writings the most reliable exponent,”⁷ Muirhead clearly saw that there existed tensions and disagreements between them and Martineau. The most visible and notable of these being Martineau’s difficulty in accepting Carpenter’s attempt to enlarge the Unitarian position by an exploration of and an encounter with “Eastern and more pantheistic modes of thought.”⁸

During these years as Muirhead explored Unitarian thinking and continued to develop his own lines of thought, his optimistic position of 1885 changed and he began to come to the conclusion that Unitarianism “from the side of both its theology and its social philosophy was [. . .] suffering from a species of motor ataxia.”⁹ He acknowledged its great history in gaining various religious freedoms for individuals and individual churches and its recent success in freeing itself of the belief that “the essential truth of Christianity was in any way dependent upon miraculous historical events”¹⁰ but believed it was by now failing badly. Muirhead concisely states the problem as follows:

. . . the appeal to the authority of conscience, on which it [Unitarianism] sought to erect its own theology, as only explicable if based on the intuitively discerned commands of a personal Deity seemed to me far too narrow to support a truly spiritual and universal form of religion. If the choice was between a doctrine of Incarnation broadly interpreted as “God manifest in the flesh,” and so attenuated a faith as this, it seemed hardly doubtful which was in closer touch with the larger outlook that was then opening out as the foundations of religious consciousness, as this had found expression in the great religions alike of East and West.

A similar (in reality a consequential) weakness was the entire absence in this type of moral theism of a social philosophy which could be an inspiration in years which were marked by a growing, even absorbing interest in questions of social reform. Here, too,

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid* p. 64

⁸ *ibid* p. 65

⁹ *ibid* p. 69

¹⁰ *ibid*

Unitarianism had a great tradition in the revolutionary ardour of Priestley and Price. But these times were past, and again, if the choice lay between the individualism of the middle of the century, by this time turning into the Toryism of the Liberty and Property Defence League, and the ardent semi-socialist politics of the leaders both of the Broad and the High Church parties, there was little doubt which was more in harmony with the spirit of the time.¹¹

Despite Muirhead's clear divergence from the beliefs and thinking of the college and its staff it is a credit to them that Muirhead never felt pressured to adopt any view that ran counter to his conscience. Indeed, in his reminiscences he speaks respectfully of Martineau and very fondly of Carpenter.

Muirhead left the college rather unclear what to do and, although he had come to the conclusion that the Unitarian ministry was not for him, he still "allowed himself to be proposed as Geldart's successor in the Croyden Free Christian Church, even delivering a sermon from its pulpit with that object."¹² In addition, during the winter of 1888-1889, he was even persuaded to start a new "conventicle, under a similar title" in a small room in Ealing's Town Hall¹³ but this did not succeed; for what reasons he does not say but Muirhead's view of these opportunities, at least at the time when he was writing these memoirs, can be glimpsed when he describes these failures as having been fortunate.

From this point onwards Muirhead's trajectory begins to take him ever further away from Unitarian thinking of the time and draws him into the development of the Ethical Culture Movement. In so doing Muirhead began to openly address his public using the language of the British Idealists especially that of F. H. Bradley; indeed he goes so far as to say that as far as he and his associates were concerned "Our scriptures (if we had any) were the 'Concluding Remarks' in Bradley's *Ethical Studies*."¹⁴ An insight into his religious position at this stage can be obtained from the following remarks he made as he contemplated how they might proceed:

We had no idea of forming a "church," nor did we believe that "morality" was everything. However inadequately its object and essential spirit were interpreted by the existing creeds, religion was a fundamental element in human life in the sense of a faith in the living beyond sight of the things that make life worth living. We were not theists in James Martineau's sense. But neither were we Positivists in Harriet Martineau's sense, or even Humanists in Comte's. We did not believe that man could rest satisfied with the idea of an "ought to be," which was nowhere realized as an "is," or that was not rooted in the structure of the universe. "Order," yes, but an order that reflected something more than human convention, that, as Wordsworth taught and as Heraclitus had taught before him, "kept the stars from wrong." "Progress," also yes, but towards any goal that was fully attainable in time. To make progress an "end" was a form of self-stultification. One "far-off divine *event*" would mean the end of all "ends," and the stagnation of death.¹⁵

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid* p. 90

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid* p. 75

¹⁵ *ibid*

Despite this move to a different position and way of expressing his religion Muirhead's close association with the Unitarian movement did not cease immediately. He had naturally made many friends with whom he maintained contact and, because he was involved with both the Ethical Society and the University Extension scheme, he often found himself at Essex Hall which both groups were using for some of their meetings.

Muirhead never again came close to joining the Unitarian movement but it is clear he felt he owed something important to it (or at least its manner of education) as his concluding, rather melancholy, comments in his chapter on Unitarianism reveal. His words are here describing Manchester College after its move to Oxford:

If its Unitarianism may be said to be one of the "lost causes" which proverbially find their home there, this cannot be said for the principle of absolute freedom of thought for which it still, alone there among theological institutions, immovably stands.¹⁶

Whatever Muirhead thought about Unitarianism itself it seems not too far fetched to suggest that without Muirhead's encounter with an institution and a religious tradition which encouraged such "absolute freedom of thought" Britain may well never have benefited from such an eloquent philosophical interpreter and editor.

¹⁶ *ibid* p. 73