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Kathy Triggs

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The Poverty of Riches: A Victorian Approach Reconsidered

Kathy Triggs

George MacDonald is known to the twentieth century as the author of two adult fantasies and a number of fairy stories. In fact, he wrote over fifty books—devotional works, poetry and many adult novels. His works were popular in his own time—they span the second half of last century—and he was friendly with such eminent people as John Ruskin and Lewis Carroll. He was also a close friend of the Rev. F.D. Maurice, and this friendship brought him into contact with the Christian Socialist group. He shared the Christian Socialists' concern for the poor, although his view of poverty and how to deal with it was very much his own. He had a profound insight into the truths of Christianity, and he applied this to poverty as to everything else in his life.

He was never a rich man, and in his early days he had a real struggle with poverty. His upbringing in Aberdeenshire, as the son of a tenant-farmer, was poor enough. There was an adequate supply of simple food, but his clothing was shabby and money was scarce. However, education in Scotland in the early nineteenth century was cheap so that all but the most needy could afford it. MacDonald's father sent all four of his sons to school, and George went on to university. The Scottish university system was geared to the poor scholar: fees were low, and there was a long summer vacation, so that students could earn enough by, say, tutoring, to pay their way through the winter session. MacDonald was familiar with students who endured great hardships to get themselves a university education.

On leaving university, he became first a tutor, then a minister in the Congregational Church—both ill-paid occupations. After about three years he gave up the ministry, mainly on account of differences with his congregation; and there followed several years' struggling to make ends meet for himself, wife, and growing family—he had 11

[We regret that owing to pressure on space we have had to condense the last part of this contribution. (Ed)] **[end of page 31]**

children in all. He preached and lectured when and where he could, and contributed to *The Christian Spectator*. His first book, a dramatic poem entitled *Within and Without*, established him as an author, but his was always a hand-to-mouth existence: money from one book would go to settle the debts incurred since the previous one.

As a student MacDonald was familiar with the slums of Aberdeen. Later he lived in Manchester and London, not in the slums, but near enough to those most in want to appreciate their plight. He gave what help he could; the family would share their Christmas festivities with a dozen or so of these children. The plight of the poor really was dreadful. The industrial revolution had been the cause of an influx of labourers and their families from the country to towns totally unprepared to cope with it. Families were crowded into decaying dwellings, once the houses of the well-to-do, who had rapidly moved out to the suburbs. They lived in cellars and anywhere they could find room. Often several families shared two rooms between them: they all slept in one, and used the other as a kitchen/ living/dining-room. Many even lived in old cattle sheds. Houses were built around courts: small spaces with a narrow, covered passageway as the only entrance. Pigs were kept in some courts. Most poor quarters were without sanitation, sewers or drainage; or the only water-supply might be an open sewer that ran just outside the window. Disease was rife: the cholera epidemic of 1831-33 killed some 60,000 mainly from the poor quarters. It was no wonder if these people turned to drink. Gin was cheaper than food. Many a baby died from alcohol or opium poisoning: the gin soothed the stomach, the laudanum induced sleep.

MacDonald wrote about the poor in several of his novels, notably *The Vicar's Daughter*, *Guild Court*, *Robert Falconer* and *Castle Warlock*. The first three deal with London's poor, the last with poverty in the Scottish Highlands. MacDonald did not write primarily to draw attention to the plight of the needy, as did Charles Kingsley in *Alton Locke*, which is based on the real life of a tailor-poet in the sweat-shops of the London slums. MacDonald wrote to show how in a man's circumstances the Spirit of God is at work drawing him to himself, if the man will. He was not therefore bitter towards the [32] rich, as Kingsley was: indeed, he cherished a remark made to him by Lady Byron who, as his patron, often helped him out in his need:—

“I hope, it is no disgrace to me to be rich, as it is none in you to be poor.”¹

MacDonald felt that in some respects the rich were less well-off than the poor. The greedy, grasping landlord, the superficial, selfish, middle-class M.P.

are presented to us as objects for our pity; they have only their wealth: those whom they either victimise or patronise have so much more!

He is uncompromising in his charge to Christians of all classes that they are serving Mammon:

If thy hope of well-being in time to come rests upon thy houses, or lands, or business, or money in store, and not upon the living God, be thou friendly and kind with the overflowing of thy possessions, or a churl whom no man loves, thou art equally a server of Mammon.²

The poor who covet the wealth of the upper classes are just as bad as those who depend on the security of their possessions. Money is neither coveted nor hoarded, but circulated freely, that it might bring good to as many as possible. It should be used to

carry the gift of God, the water of life, through the world—in lovely justice to the oppressed, in healthful labour to them whom no man hath hired, in rest to the weary who have borne the burden and heat of the day, in joy to the heavy-hearted, in laughter to the dull-spirited.³

However, MacDonald saw money as highly dangerous—as dangerous as dynamite—and to be used with great care:

the way to use money is not so easily discovered as some would think, for it is not one of God's ready means of doing good. It is not the potent

1. *George MacDonald and his Wife*—Greville MacDonald

2. *Paul Faber*—George MacDonald

3. Ibid [33]

instrument for the betterment of the world that so many who would fain do the impossible and serve both God and Mammon imagine it.⁴

MacDonald had little time for committees and societies for doing good. It was his experience that “charity” was likely to do more harm than good. In *The Vicar's Daughter* a clergyman explains why he dislikes “almsgiving”:

There are portions of every London parish which clergymen and their coadjutors have so degraded by the practical teaching of beggary, that they have blocked up every door to a healthy

spiritual relation between them and a possible pastor Alms from any but the hand of personal friendship tend to evil, and will, in the long run, increase misery.

MacDonald always sought the spiritual principle behind the material fact; he saw the hand of God at work in every part of human existence, and knew that we cause many of our own problems by dashing into a challenging situation in our own strength, failing to see that God is there before us, and as a consequence failing to discern the will of God for that situation; with the result that we act against God instead of with him. God is the eternal Worker, working in all things to the salvation of men. It is a privilege to have a hand in the business with God—but we must be quite clear what our part is:

A man is not bound to walk in the dark, or work in the night; for the mere sake of doing something, he must not run the risk of doing evil.⁵

A prime duty, if we would exercise the privilege of working with God, is the combating of evil in ourselves. MacDonald knew well the great principle that Jesus gave to his disciples, “Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven . . .”

A man must first of all do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with his God; so, be he rich or poor, will he learn of God how to spend.⁶

4. *Castle Warlock*

5. Ibid

6. Ibid [34]

In the poem *A Hidden Life* the hero, a poor country-farmer by choice, though well-educated, hears of hunger, neglect and wretchedness in the great cities, and wonders sadly what he can do to help. He concludes that the best that he can do for the great world is the same as the best that he can do in and for his own small community; the truth that is in himself and his acts will pass beyond his narrow circumstances in truth's own right.

To be a true man is to be within God's will; and because we cannot see the good that comes therefrom, shall we therefore disbelieve in it? To be acting in a right relationship to God is to be acting in a right relationship to our fellows. The good that we would do, we must do as individuals to individuals; we must respect our fellow-men, be they rich or poor, and approach them with neither condescension nor defiance, but in true humility. Of MacDonald's poor, the more able resented patronage, the weaker

succumbed and became “pauperised”—dependent on handouts from the charitable rich. In the character of Miss Clare, MacDonald gives us a new, authoritative view on poverty. Marion Clare is a badly-off young woman, just able to earn her own living, but she has a God-given strength that enables her to rise above her circumstances, and to help her friends and neighbours in the slum court where she lives:

One of her positive convictions was that you ought not to give them anything which they *ought* to provide for themselves, such as food, clothing or shelter. In such circumstances as rendered it impossible for them to do so, the ought was in abeyance. But she heartily approved of making them an occasional present of something they could not be expected to procure for themselves—flowers, for instance.⁷

Such a gift means a compliment, and sets the recipient on a level equal to, or higher than, the giver. It give a lot more than mere “charity.”

In the unseen world things are not as they seem. It is a principle of the Kingdom that “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” So it is with rich and poor:

For the poor have more done for them as outward things go, in the way of salvation than the rich, and

7. *The Vicar's Daughter* [35]

have a beatitude all to themselves besides. For in the making of this world as a school of salvation the poor, as the necessary majority, have been more regarded than the rich . . .

I think sometimes that the world must have been especially created for the poor, and that particular allowances will be made for the rich because they are born with such disadvantages; with their wickednesses and their miseries, their love of spiritual dirt and meanness, [they] subscribe to the highest growth and emancipation of the poor, that they may inherit both the earth and the kingdom of heaven.⁸

Another principle of the Kingdom is, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” and MacDonald believed firmly in individuals helping their neighbour in need. Simply to pass on to another the responsibility of doing good with our money is shirking our individual duty. Not even the poor are exempt from this commandment, for more true good can be done by those

nearest to the one in need. Robert Falconer encourages an unemployed silk-weaver to board up the rat-holes in his neighbour's room:

Of course I could send in a man to do it; but if you would do it, that would do her heart good. And that's what most wants doing good to—isn't it now?⁹

MacDonald saw too that in many cases the rich are unable to help the poor by reason of the great social and cultural gulf that is between them. Mrs. Morgenstern, a rich and benevolent lady, wishes to help the little street arab, Poppie. She bathes her, gives her a new dress, and some dinner. But the whole experience is beyond Poppie's comprehension. The bath is some strange kind of torment to her. The only food she can recognise as such is a bread-roll, with which she dives under the table; there she sits twisting the buttons off her dress, thinking they are some sort of "treasure." However, if the rich can help those who are not quite destitute, they in turn can pass on the benefits to those in deep want. Mrs. Morgenstern is able to help Mattie, the daughter of a poor bookseller, and a friendship develops between the two girls from which both Mattie and Poppie benefit.¹⁰

8. *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*

9. *Robert Falconer*

10. *Guild Court* [36]

Another way we can help is by making the needy our neighbours, by going and living amongst them and ministering to them. MacDonald holds before us the example of our Lord, who "counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men." He made us his neighbours and loved us as himself, with Love supreme. Robert Falconer is MacDonald's best example of such Christlike behaviour. Falconer, MacDonald's type of the ideal man, deliberately makes his home in a poor quarter of London, although he is rich and well educated. He goes among his neighbours getting to know them and earning their respect and friendship. He shares as much as he can their misery and degradation: he sees the gin-sodden mother being sick in the gutter, while her baby peers with wide eyes over her shoulder; he saves two toddlers, out in the night looking for their mother, from that mother's drunken fury as she comes out of the public house. Once he has earned the respect of the poor, they are more willing to be helped by him. They themselves recognise the divine source of his ministry: some of them suppose that he is Christ himself.

The writer then considers the relevance of George MacDonald's values, his application of the principles of the Kingdom to aspects of our modern situation.

We do not have such grinding poverty in our country in the 20th century as he witnessed in his day. Our attention is now drawn to the plight of the poor in the wider world which we endeavour to alleviate. To do this, she says, firstly we must have faith. The world belongs to God our Father; he made it and cares for it. We must not suppose that with all the resources of the universe he needs our paltry money; nor that he does not love his children in the Third World; nor that it was only when the missionaries arrived that God began to do anything about the situation. God is Love—and that means that he is continually acting in his world for its redemption.

Secondly, we must seek the kingdom of heaven. To combat the evil in ourselves is to share the fight against evil in the whole world. [37]

We, like the Victorians, must learn to respect the poor. The pauperism of last century has become the refugee-camp mentality of this. The damage done by dealing with people through institutions without the means of maintaining their independence is becoming evident. Relief systems are geared to treating people *en masse*, not as individuals with differing temperaments and abilities. More important, they are geared only to give out, not to receive; that is, our agencies set us up as the superior parties, condescending to the poor. But, if MacDonald is right, the world's poor have all the advantages of the sort that God cares about: and we, impoverished by wealth, should approach them cap in hand, begging to share in their blessings. Jesus's command to the rich young man to give all his money to the poor was not that the poor might benefit, but that the young man himself might be free to enjoy all the riches of the Kingdom.

Thirdly, she continues, we must love our neighbour as ourselves. Who is my neighbour? To say that the Third World citizen is my neighbour is not effectively true, for if all the world is my neighbour, then no one is. We are individuals and have to relate to each other as individuals. The Good Samaritan's answer is simple; my neighbour is anyone I meet that I am able to help, regardless of class, creed or colour. There are two ways to find him the writer concludes. One way is, as the farmer's in *A Hidden Life*,¹¹ by doing the good that you can where you are: for example, by building relationships with people among us from overseas countries: students who will return home as teachers and leaders, immigrants who retain links with and assist needy relatives abroad: what they receive here of love and friendship, as well

as of skills and money, will be passed on, and from a growing relationship of giving and receiving we, too, benefit. Where it is all give and no take there is no relationship. Or else, following the example of Robert Falconer, the example of our Lord, we can go out to where the needy are and, becoming poor like them, establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust—giving rather what we *are* than what we *have*, such as Western money and technology. In MacDonald's words:

It is not because of God's poverty that the world is so slowly redeemed. Not the most righteous expenditure of money will save it, but the pouring forth of life and

11. *Poetical Works*—George MacDonald Vol I pp. 133-169 [38]

soul and spirit, carrying with it nerve and muscle, blood and brain—and money too if there be any. All those our Lord spent—spent them in Godlike fashion—but not money. Therefore I say, that of all means for the saving of the world, or for doing good as it is called, money comes last and far behind.¹²

12. *Castle Warlock* [39]