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George MacDonald and the Homiletics of Religious Imagination

Keith Waddle

In 1850, George MacDonald was called to preach at a Congregational church in Arundel. Shortly thereafter he complained to his father: “I have been very much occupied with one thing and another—particularly with some annoyance given me by some members of the church who are very unteachable” (Sadler 54). Three years later he was forced out on charges of heresy by church leaders fearful of his sympathy with science and with German theology.¹ He wrote to his father after his dismissal: “Do not think I intend giving up preaching—but I shall be very happy not to be dependent on it—if so it pleases God. Preaching I think is in part my mission in this world and I shall try to fulfil it” (Sadler 67). He pursued a literary career, thus fulfilling his call to preach through his fiction, essays and printed sermons.

As a preacher, MacDonald differed from Victorian contemporaries such as John Henry Newman and Charles Haddon Spurgeon in significant ways. Apart from his early failure as a pastor at Arundel, he was never a leader of any organised church group. He resisted any rigid system of dogma that claimed final answers about God, whether it was the Anglo-Catholicism of Newman or the Evangelicalism of Spurgeon (Sadler 51)—though he did join the Church of England under the influence of Frederick Denison Maurice (Saintsbury 133).² Also, his writings do not contain explicit instructions on sermons or critiques of other homiletic traditions, unlike Newman and Spurgeon, who took considerable interest in the art of homiletics.³

MacDonald did however maintain a lifelong interest in language. Even though he wrote no treatises on homiletics or rhetoric, the relationship between language and imagination was a primary concern in his sermons and essays.⁴ Since he considered himself a preacher, albeit a non-traditional one, it is valid to consider everything he wrote about language and imagination as constituting a theory of homiletics. In fact, he considered the attempt to enliven another person’s religious imagination as crucial: “To persuade the heart, the will, the action is alone worth .the full energy of a man” (“The Hardness of the Way,” *U.S.* 191). He writes that faith:

is the highest effort of the whole human intellect, imagination

and will in the highest direction. Never does human nature put forth such power with such effort and with such energy as when exercising faith in God. So I say that faith is the highest, and sometimes the most difficult, work that a person can do.

(*Proving 2*)⁵ **[end of page 1]**

A preacher's task then is to provoke the imagination of his listeners so that they will undertake the same exercise of faith. What role imagination and language serve in this process is the question he explores in his essays and sermons.

MacDonald's ideas on the imagination were influenced in part by his readings in German Romanticism and Christian mysticism. German writers such as Novalis showed him "that truth was first received by the imagination and the intuition, and then rationally apprehended" (Hein 149). From Christian mystics such as Swedenborg, he developed the idea that the unconscious imagination is "the dwelling place of God in men, and hence the fount of absolute rather than possibly subjective truth" (Manlove, "Circle" 56). He explores this idea in "The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture" where he imagines how "God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness" (*Orts* 24-25). Since the imagination is the dwelling place of God, he considered it the highest of mental faculties (Manlove, "Fairy Tales" 99).

MacDonald's other source for his understanding of the imagination was Samuel Taylor Coleridge.⁶ The "representative Romantic definition" (Ashton 310) occurs in the *Biographia Literaria*:⁷

The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, but still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the modes of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or when this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (159)

MacDonald adapts Coleridge's ideas in his own work in order to stimulate his audience's religious imagination, to provoke them to see beyond the obvious. As Stephen Prickett says in *Romanticism and Religion*:

it was left perhaps to MacDonald, more than to any of the “professional” theologians, to explore the implications of such aesthetic imagery applied to the nature of the Church MacDonald saw perhaps more clearly than any of his contemporaries that religious experience is, of its very nature, metaphorical and mythological—that it is bound up with the “poetic” structure of language itself. (261)

MacDonald argues the essential point that the imagination must transcend the words conveying it; language is only a vehicle for the imagination, not its end. Like Coleridge, he defines the imagination as an inventive mental faculty that confirms the function and purpose of the divine imagination: [2]

The imagination is that faculty which gives form to thought—not necessarily uttered form, but form capable of being uttered in shape or in soul, or in any mode upon which the senses can lay hold. It is, therefore, that faculty in man which is likeliest to the prime operation of the power of God, and has, therefore, been called the *creative* faculty, and its exercise *creation*.
(*Orts* 2)

Two realities coexist, the human creative faculty and the divine creative faculty. In the human mind lies the potential prelinguistic thought or impulse. That impulse is “clothed” in some recognisable form, be it language, music, or some visual expression by the imagination. This “creative faculty,” he argues, is the aspect of humanity that is most God-like.

MacDonald believed that the goal of the imagination is to attain to a correct understanding of one’s self in relation to God and nature, to achieve harmony: “A right imagination, being the reflex of the creation, will fall in with the divine order of things as the highest form of its own operation” (*Orts* 35). Aligning one’s imagination with God’s was of supreme importance to MacDonald, who says that the development of the imagination:

is one of the main ends of the divine education of life, with all its efforts and experiences. Therefore the first and essential means for its culture must be an ordering of our life towards harmony with its ideal in the mind of God . . . For all is God’s; and the man who is growing into harmony with His will, is growing into harmony with himself (*Orts* 36).

MacDonald sees everything we experience as a divine school, life as part of a cosmic seminary. Therefore, all experiences are not only useful in developing the imagination, they are also intended by God to do so because He places

great value in fostering His own creativity in His created beings.

MacDonald, observes Rolland Hein, “believed that it is through the imagination that man may reach farthest toward truth” (x). How does a writer or preacher carry out the process of reaching truth through the medium of language? MacDonald addresses this issue in his essay “On Polish,” examining “polish” as it is figuratively applied to language. The purpose of polish is to reveal and reflect—he uses the term as a symbol of what a writer, and by inference a preacher, must do to a text in relation to an audience. Polish is a useful symbol “because of its faculty of enabling other things to show themselves—to come to the surface” (*Orts* 183).

MacDonald begins his essay on polish by describing polish of style and polish of manners. Polish of style means “the approximately complete revelation of the thought. It will be the removal of everything that can interfere between the thought of the speaker and the mind of the hearer” (184). Human thought is not merely intellect. Again relying upon poetic imagery, he anatomises thought: **[3]** “every human thought is in a sense a human being, has as necessarily its muscles of motion, its skin of beauty, its blood of feeling, as its skeleton of logic” (185). He wishes his reader to understand the consubstantial nature of language, that thoughts themselves reflect the physical entity of the human being. The writer’s task then is to “polish” away anything in his writing that in any way obscures his whole self as manifested in a particular piece. The writer must polish off any ornamentation or meaningless rhetorical tropes that add nothing to the meaning of the text, and he should also polish away all other causes of possible obscurity such as grammatical or stylistic mistakes (188). In short, anything that will “distract the mind, and confuse its observation of the main idea, the essence or life of the book or paper, must be diligently refused” (187). Only the natural elegance innate in human language should remain.

He extends the idea of polish from style to manners. Just as language is symbolic of the self, in the sense that the writer must bring out the full humanity of writing, the self is symbolic of divine nature, and a person must polish away that which hides one’s likeness to God. “If we cut away deep enough at the rough block of our nature, shall we not arrive at some likeness of that true man who, the apostle says, dwells in us—the hope of glory? He informs us—that is, forms us from within” (190-91).

MacDonald takes pains to distinguish manners that arise out of internal goodness from manners used in conforming to social expectations. The latter kind is more akin to paint than polish. True polish of manners

“recognizes the fact that the divine nature lies at the root of the human nature, and that the polish which lets that spiritual nature shine out in the simplicity of heavenly childhood, is the true Polish of Manners of which all merely social refinements are a poor imitation” (191). He believes that the “harmonies of our nature” are hidden within. The polish of manners gradually frees these harmonies until they permeate the whole self and are seen by others.

Manners are polished through suffering, by which “the beautiful realities of human nature are brought to the surface” (191). Here MacDonald alludes to his discussion on the imagination, the “divine education of life” being the necessary means of shaping the imagination. “Life is at work in us—the sacred Spirit of God travelling in us. That spirit has gained one end of his labour—at which he can begin to do yet more for us—when he has brought us to beg for the help which he has been giving us all the time” (194). The self is out of harmony with nature and life, and such suffering forces the self to recognise its utter dependence on God. At that moment of recognition the self has engaged in a creative act of perceiving what is divine, and the help proffered is through the very life or nature that was seemingly at odds with the self in the first place. The self, with a renewed spiritual imagination, now perceives what had previously [4] been hidden, the symbiotic relationship it has with nature as fellow symbols of the divine nature. The task of a preacher is to reveal the hidden, to provoke the spiritual imagination of his audience, and to make it recognise its inherent harmony with God, nature and other selves.

MacDonald’s discussion of polish contains three principal implications for a preacher. Firstly a sermon should be transparent; no particular element of the sermon’s style or content should get in the way of the audience’s perception of God. In fact, sermons are paradoxical in that they are an intentional discursive act designed to prompt the congregation’s religious imagination, yet the language of the sermon cannot fully accomplish this task. Secondly, the success of the sermon relies on the willingness of the congregation to exercise their own imagination. He states the necessity of the spiritual imagination to recognise the internal symbolic harmonies between God and human beings; the key to how an audience responds to a sermon depends on its religious imagination. Sermons should promote a devout response to God by stirring the religious imagination of the congregation. Thirdly, the success of the sermon also relies on the willingness to be obedient to God, so that a person will be attuned to God’s character.

If individuals in the congregation exercise like-minded willingness to be obedient to God, that is, to develop their moral imagination, then the sermon will enable that process of development.

Concerning the limitation of language, MacDonald argues that just as the facts of science only partially reveal the truth of physical nature: “Whatever belonging to the region of thought and feeling is uttered in words, is of necessity uttered imperfectly (“It Shall Not Be Forgiven,” *U.S.* 45). He recognises that as a result of the inadequacy of language to convey fully what is true or divine, whatever is said will of necessity “represent fragmentarily” such things (*Proving* 2). Similarly to Augustine, he believed divine truths can only be fully conveyed through symbols; therefore it is a mistake to approach Scripture only literally, as if the actual words on the page were self-sufficient artefacts of truth (Saintsbury 134). He argues that God did not intend humans to be reliant solely on words:

God has not cared that we should anywhere have assurance of his very words; and that not merely, perhaps, because of the tendency in his children to word-worship, false logic, and corruption of the truth, but because he would not have them oppressed by words, seeing that words, being human, therefore but partially capable, could not absolutely contain or express what the Lord meant Seeing it could not give life, the letter should not be throned with power to kill. (“The Knowing of the Son,” *U.S.* 435)

Just as science can give only tentative guesses on the purpose and significance of nature, literal language cannot convey adequately the intentions of God. When language is approached in a non-symbolic fashion it is destructive. [5] MacDonald echoes Saint Augustine’s hermeneutic principle that literal interpretation is spiritually deadening, that God allows for and even encourages a variety of interpretative responses to the language of scripture. Because words themselves can never adequately communicate intents and desires, he criticises the Apostle Paul in his letters for “the fault of trying to say too much at once, of pouring out stintless the plethora of a soul swelling with life and its thought, through the too narrow neck of human utterance” (“The Mirrors of the Lord,” *U.S.* 449).⁸ Some divine concepts are beyond language, and can only be conveyed through symbols. For example, MacDonald asks: “Why should we love our enemies? The deepest reason for this we cannot put in words, for it lies in the absolute reality of their being, where our enemies are of one nature with us, even of the divine nature”

(“Love Thine Enemy,” *U.S.* 148).

Consequently, it is better to misinterpret the literal meaning of language than refuse the truth of the meaning—that is, the motivation and intentions of the speaker. Misinterpretation by itself is not necessarily bad as long as one comprehends and responds positively to the intentions of the speaker. With this justification, he takes liberties with his own interpretation of Scripture. He states that although the Bible contains the words of God, it nowhere claims to be *the* word of God (“The Temptation in the Wilderness,” *U.S.* 95-96). Since language is an imperfect conveyor of truth—even divinely inspired language—MacDonald feels free to disagree with a biblical author or to offer an unusual exposition on the meaning of some passage. “All high things can be spoken only in figures; these figures, having to do with matters too high for them, *cannot fit* intellectually. . . . It was never the design of the Lord to explain things to our understanding—nor would that in the least have helped our necessity” (“Self-Denial,” *U.S.* 376). Given the inherent inadequacy of language, its purpose is to provoke the individual’s desire for a reciprocal relationship with the divine that I can only be achieved through the imagination.

If someone were to take exception to his eccentricities of scriptural interpretation, MacDonald would reply that, first, Scripture is not the only revelation of God, and it is God’s intent that we discover meanings of Scripture that abundantly surpass the literal words themselves (“The Temptation in the Wilderness,” *U.S.* 96). What really matters is having the right attitude towards God. Just as the facts of water do not constitute the truth of water, truth about God is “not an utterance, not even a *right* form of words” (“The New Name,” *U.S.* 69). Truth about God, according to MacDonald, is an attitude leading to right actions, not a systematic theology. It is better to be a heretic and have a right attitude towards God than to be an orthodox parrot of correct doctrine and despise one’s neighbour. In a letter to his father he writes: “There are some in every age who can see the essential truth through the form, and hold by that, and [6] who are not alarmed at a change, but others, and they the most by far[,] cannot see this, & think all is rejected by one who rejects the form of a truth which they count essential” (Sadler 69). Truth does not change, but language, like scientific facts, is constantly changing in order to account for new discoveries about some timeless truth. He rejects the view of those who confuse as truth the language that attempts to describe the truth.

In short, the persuasiveness or otherwise of the sermon does not

depend on any rational argument, especially if the preacher's purpose is to prove some theological dogma. MacDonald makes this point explicit in his novel *Paul Faber, Surgeon*:

The man who is anxious to hold every point, will speedily bring a question to a mere dispute about trifles, leaving the real matter . . . out in the cold . . . Few men do more harm than those who, taking the right side, dispute for personal victory . . . But even genuine argument for the truth is not preaching the gospel, neither is he whose unbelief is thus assailed likely to be brought thereby into any mood but one unfit for receiving it. Argument should be kept to books . . . God alone can convince. (156)

Concerning a congregation's response to a sermon, MacDonald argues that the success of a sermon depends on the imaginative volition of the audience. Reception of a message is primarily dependent on the positive imagination of the audience, and less dependent on the demonstration of proof or reason. The individuals who respond positively to a sermon are those who are "capable of imagining a world in which every good thing thinkable may be a fact," otherwise the message will be rejected ("Jesus and His Fellow Townsmen," *Hope* 68). This sermon offers a case-study in failed persuasion. Jesus preaches the same gospel message to his fellow Nazarenes as he had preached elsewhere. MacDonald says that when a person who has yielded himself reads the message "of healing and sight and liberty" (66) he looks "to be rendered capable of and receive a pure vision of [God's] will, freedom from the prison-house of [his] limitation, from the bondage of a finite existence" (69). The initial step of the religious imagination is to recognise its own limitation and to desire something which transcends its temporal existence. Jesus' former neighbours, however, could not rise above their preconceptions of their now famous prophet. As a result: "Those who would not believe without signs and wonders, could never believe worthily with any number of them, and none should be given them!" (73). Since Jesus' purpose was to provoke moral goodness in his audience, and since a willing imagination is necessary for goodness, He refused to entertain those for whom, "wonders would delight but nowise better" (74). MacDonald states that one's imagination must be grounded in good intentions: "if the questioner be such that the dispersion of his doubt would but leave him in disobedience, the Power of [7] truth has no care to effect his conviction. Why cast out a devil that the man may the better do the work of the devil?" (77). A person's imaginative intentions must be worthwhile ones, he argues,

in order for God to engage in a symbolic exchange with that person, for the divine imagination will not engage the imagination merely for the sake of an individual's intellectual or emotional enjoyment.

MacDonald understood the volition of individual imaginations in his congregations acutely. Even though he regularly spoke to large crowds, his concern was for the person who might take his sermon to heart.⁹ It is no surprise then that he focused on the individual rather than the crowd:

It is a great sight to see a multitude of human faces around you; but the whole thing I would rather forget. Even when I stand before an assembly to speak, I would much rather forget the gathering and meet the individuals gathered. I prefer speaking to the single heart and soul of an individual; I have no ambition to move the masses. The true power of life lies in the one soul. The whole gathered mass is but a heap of human sand except in proportion to what is awakened in the hearts of individuals. There is no religion, no praise, no worship, but of the individual. (*Proving* 22)

The crowd hears the sermon, but only the individual can understand the mysterious process of imaginative persuasion.

Concerning the requirement for obedience, MacDonald concludes his extended definition of imagination with this critical theme that appears in all his works: "We believe, therefore, that nothing will do so much for the intellect or the imagination as *being good*—we do not mean after any formula or any creed, but simply after the faith of Him who did the will of his Father in heaven" (*Orts* 36). He is making a crucial point on the reciprocal relationship between goodness and the imagination. The imagination is necessary for recognising and formulating what is good: which he understands as being obedient to God. Conversely, being good is necessary for developing the imagination. The method for understanding truth requires a willing imagination, it also requires action. Belief—valid intellectual assent—is demonstrated by action, which in turn leads to an increase in intellectual understanding and assent:

to hold a thing with the intellect, is not to believe it. A man's real belief is that which he lives by; and that which the man I mean lives by, is the love of God, and obedience to his law, so far as he has recognized it. Those hideous doctrines are outside of him; he *thinks* they are inside, but no matter; they are not true, and they cannot really be inside any good man. ("The

Truth in Jesus,” *U.S.* 390)

Here “hideous doctrines” means beliefs or opinions contradictory to Christianity. If a congregation believes something heretical but is otherwise obedient to God, those beliefs are irrelevant in determining their goodness.

However if a [8] congregation does not put into action a message that is true, then they do not truly believe the message, or more specifically the messenger, even though they may spend considerable energy in defending the words of the message against those who claim it to be false. He goes even further:

What I come to and insist upon is, that, supposing your theories right, and containing all that is to be believed, yet those theories are not what makes you Christians, if Christians indeed you are. On the contrary, they are, with not a few of you, just what keeps you from being Christians. For when you say that, to be saved, a man must hold this or that, then you are leaving the living God and his will, and putting trust in some notion about him or his will. . . . and no preaching of any plan of salvation is the preaching of the glorious gospel of the living God. (390-91)

Truth about God, according to MacDonald, cannot be contained in mere words. It must be something that is lived. Therefore the imagination itself is not simply a faculty of the mind, neither is it a collection of clever insights. The religious imagination is a way of life that constantly seeks the will of God. For MacDonald, his life was his sermon, not his words.

Three of MacDonald’s volumes of sermons were published under the curious title, *Unspoken Sermons*. He probably did preach at least some form of them. What then did he mean by “unspoken sermons”? The structure of the sermons provides one clue. Each sermon ends with a quotation from some scriptural passage; this passage is quoted under the title of the next sermon and serves as its starting point. These references create a continuum of sermons that cannot be spoken at one time. Also he makes no explicit transitions from one sermon to the next. He leaves it to his readers to figure out what is unspoken. Thus the structure of his collection illustrates the non-verbal component of imagination in language. Moreover the sermons are unspoken in the sense that his purpose is to motivate one towards obeying and loving God, and when a sermon succeeds in doing that, it paradoxically succeeds because of what it cannot say. The words of the sermons, like the facts of science, can describe elements of God’s nature, but it requires an

act of sympathetic imagination for understanding the truth of God (“The Truth,” *U.S.* 462). MacDonald was not a preacher for Newman’s academy or Spurgeon’s masses; his sermon legacy lies with those like-minded souls provoked by his religious imagination.

Notes

1. William Raeper reports that it was a fairly common practice for Victorian nonconformist churches to fire ministers who were suspected of holding unorthodox religious views. MacDonald’s experience at Arundel was by no means unique (79-80). [9]

2. F. D. Maurice was one of the most influential theologians of the nineteenth century (Raeper 240). His book *The Kingdom of Christ* (1842), “propounded much of Coleridge’s own ‘organic’ philosophy. Unity was the keynote—and most particularly that men and women were children of God and part of his family simply by dint of being born Maurice’s influence on MacDonald cannot be stressed too strongly” (Raeper 240).

3. B. G. Collins writes: “MacDonald had returned to an older and nobler tradition” of mystical Christianity in reaction against the Calvinistic Evangelicals, whose “gospel had become bound up with a narrow system of phrase and dogma in which the amplitude of the love of God was lost” (66).

4. MacDonald, in fact, applied for the chair of rhetoric at the University of Edinburgh in 1865, marshalling “a glittering array of intellects to testify for him.” But the chair was offered to MacDonald’s friend David Masson, a prominent Milton scholar of the day (Raeper 227-29).

5. *Proving the Unseen* is an edited collection of MacDonald’s sermons first published in *The Christian World Pulpit* between 1870 and 1895.

6. In addition to being a close and sympathetic reader of Coleridge, MacDonald had ties with him through his cousin James MacDonald, a surgeon; his father in law, James Powell; and his mentor F. D. Maurice. All these were friends or personal acquaintances of Coleridge (Greville MacDonald 137).

7. John Coulson has an extensive discussion of Coleridge’s ideas on imagination (6-15).

8. Some have applied the same criticism to MacDonald. In 1872 he toured the United States, giving lectures on literary topics and preaching at various churches throughout the Northeast and Midwest. Phillips Brooks, a prominent minister in Boston, recorded his impression of MacDonald in his own book on homiletics:

The minstrel who sings before you to show his skill, will be praised for his wit, and rhymes, and voice. But the courier who hurries in breathless, to bring you a message, will be forgiven in the message that he brings. Among the many sermons I have heard, I always remember one, for the wonderful way in which it was pervaded by

this quality. It was a sermon by Mr. George MacDonald, the English author, who was in this country a few years ago; and it had many of the good and bad characteristics of his interesting style. It had his brave and manly honesty, and his tendency to sentimentality, But over and through it all it had this quality: it was a message from God to these people by him. The man struggled with language as a child struggles with his imperfectly mastered tongue, that will not tell the errand as he received it, and has it in his mind. As I listened, I seemed to see how weak in contrast was the way in which other preachers had amused me and challenged my admiration for the working of their minds. Here was a gospel. Here were real tidings. And you listened and forgot the preacher. (16)

9. MacDonald was offered a pastoral position at a large church in New York City for the then astounding annual salary of \$20,000, which he turned down because he did not like being a focus of attention (Raeper 302). **[10]**

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