

There Will Be No Heaven Unless We Make It —
Florence Nightingale's Religion

John Maindonald.

Florence (b 1820, d 1910) with older sister Parthenope

William, their father,
tutored both daughters.
(FN: 6 languages,
philosophy, history,
chemistry,
mathematics)



Co-workers (mostly army reform & public health) with Florence

Sidney Herbert

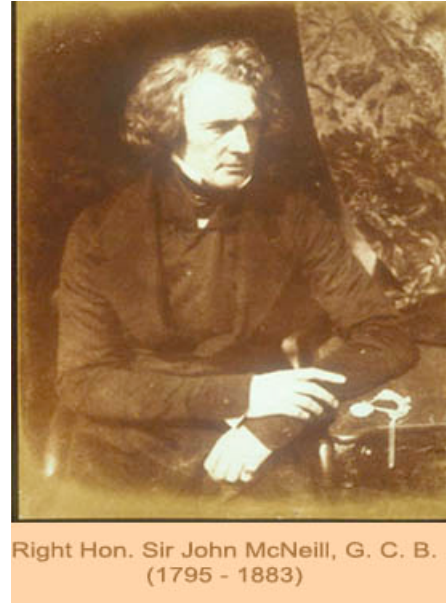
d 1861



William Farr

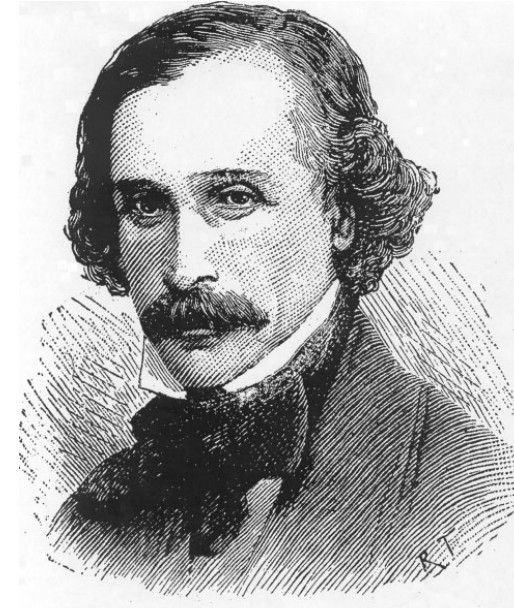


John McNeill



Right Hon. Sir John McNeill, G. C. B.
(1795 - 1883)

John Sutherland

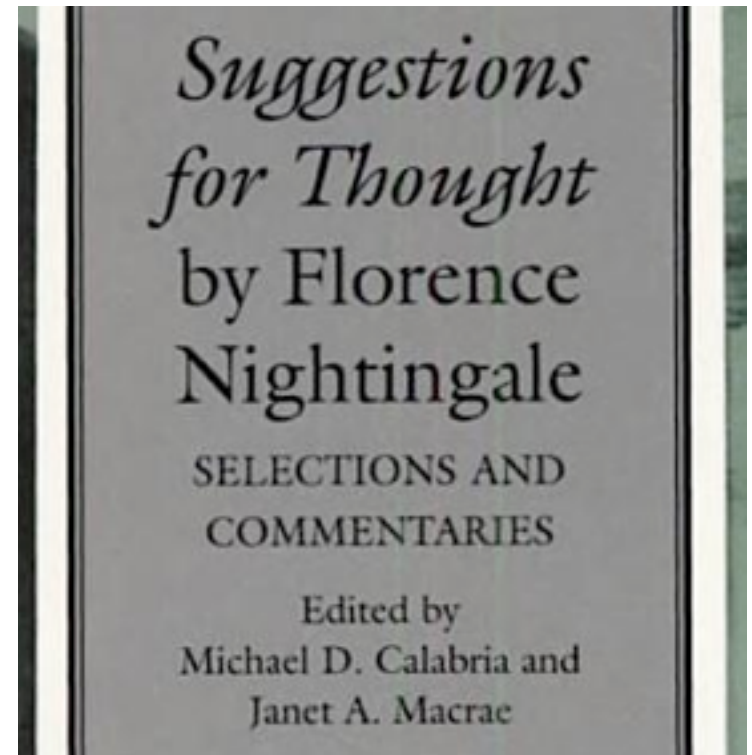


All 4 worked with Florence on her appendix (graphs & tables) to the Crimean Royal Commission report, & on other reform. Sutherland and McNeil (and others) worked with Florence in later public health & medical work.

Arthur Clough, poet, classical scholar, 1819-1861



FN's Personal secretary,
1858 - 1860, midwife for
'Suggestions for Thought'



SAY not the struggle naught availeth, ...

Benjamin Jowett, Professor of Greek at Oxford



Essay in *Essays & Reviews* (1860)
led to heresy charges that were
eventually dismissed.

FN & BJ developed a strong &
affectionate relationship, gave
mutual help [1862 & on]

First come I, my name is J-W-TT.
There's no knowledge but I know it.
I am Master of this College,
What I don't know isn't knowledge.

EVERYONE knows the popular conception of Florence Nightingale. The saintly, self-sacrificing woman, the delicate maiden of high degree who threw aside the pleasures of a life of ease to succour the afflicted, the Lady with the Lamp, ... consecrating with the radiance of her goodness the dying soldier's couch—the vision is familiar to all. But the truth was different. The Miss Nightingale of fact was not as facile fancy painted her. She worked in another fashion, and towards another end; she moved under the stress of an impetus which finds no place in the popular imagination. [Lytton Strachey, in *Eminent Victorians*, 1918]

Florence's 'Call' (age 17, 37, ...), but to what?

- Until the Crimean war, a life in nursing, maybe ...

The first idea I can recollect when I was a child was a desire to serve the sick. My daydreams were all of hospitals and I visited them whenever I could. . . .

I thought God had called me to serve him in that way.

- After Crimea — army & army health, public health, maternity provisions, poor law, Indian social reform, ...
- Organizing a religion remained an interest.

When very many years ago I planned a future, my one idea was not organizing a hospital but organizing a religion.

Florence's Family Connections

- Well-connected family
- Strong tradition of social and religious radicalism

Grandfather Smith guided the Unitarian Toleration Act through Parliament, succeeded in getting repeal of Test and Corporation Acts, worked for abolition of slavery.

- Wide family network exposed Florence to prominent radicals and social reformers, from Europe and USA as well as UK.
- Strong Unitarian influences

Unitarian Influences

Where Unitarianism did assert a powerful influence on Florence was in the general ethos it provided. Its optimism and belief in social progress, its concern with the nature of moral obligations within a society, and the ways in which it placed its trust in good works and public service, were all to leave their mark on Florence Nightingale's subsequent career.

[Mark Bostridge, in *Florence Nightingale*, 2008]

NB: Unitarians (some at least) were at the radical fringe of the dissenter movement — where everything was open to question.

FN as Seen by Biographers, Co-workers, and family

Yet her conception of God was certainly not orthodox. She felt towards Him as she might have felt towards a glorified sanitary engineer; and in some of her speculations she seems hardly to distinguish between the Deity and the Drains. As one turns over these singular pages, one has the impression that Miss Nightingale has got the Almighty too into her clutches, and that, if He is not careful, she will kill Him with overwork.. [Lytton Strachey]

- Florence found family life oppressive — never got on with mother; mother, sister (strongly) resisted nursing ambitions.
- Could be very hard on wider family & co-workers
 - ... I never made nor accepted any excuses.
- Could show, and receive, strong affection (Sister Mary Clare Moore, Benjamin Jowett)

Florence's 'Theology' (alias 'Social Science'?) — Sources

- Suggestions for Thought (a few copies of a draft were printed and privately distributed in 1860)
- Two 1873 articles in Fraser's Magazine:
May 1873: 'A Note of Interrogation
July 1873: A Sub-'Note of Interrogation.'
I.— What Will Our Religion Be Like In 1999?
- Surviving part of "Notes from the Devotional Authors of the Middle Ages"
- Letters

Florence's Theology — Overview

Faith in a God, good according to human standards of goodness, is for her non-negotiable. This God had called her, at age 17, to His service.

God has left humans to reason out what is required of them, what to believe. Social science and action are, along with religious belief, an integral part of theology.

Social science and action clearly are open to and demand the use of scientific processes.

She goes further, arguing that religious claims are amenable to scientific processes of empirical investigation. This is surely harder to defend!

Florence's Theology — Some Key Themes

- There is an over-riding need to understand the character of God.
- Theology has never received the attention, with careful use of data and proper scientific processes, that has been given to other 'sciences'.
- Numerous mistakes arise from this failure — notably God is made out to be some kind of monster.
- The universe is ruled by inviolable laws. We need to discover what those laws are, as much in religion as in science.
- God has a plan to bring each one of us to perfection. [If He is good, he surely must.]

Florence's Theology, continued

- We have to work — educate ourselves, think, call on the best resources available, to find out what God wants of us.
- Mystical (NOT ecstatic) experience is a means by which we draw near to God. But, be careful!
- Theology is, or ought to be, practical social science.
[Yes, drainage is important. But so also is the remedying of every other social ill — disease, poor education, pauperism, crime, ...]
- Criticism is important, and has rid religion of much superstition. But it should not supplant feeling.

NB: Quotes on the slides that follow are, except where otherwise indicated, from FN's May 1873 article in Fraser's Magazine.

Florence on The Character of God

... Him we have always with us. And we make no effort to know Him. ...

It is not that men have not been absorbed, throughout the history of man, in religion. Probably no subject, not even how to procure food, has absorbed man more. But scarcely any study has received less attention than that of the character of God. Men have been content to take it upon authority, upon sympathy, antipathy, blind 'intuition,' or association — they , have been content to give this study not even the serious enquiry which is given to the anatomy of a pigeon or the construction of a bivalve shell . . .

Florence on The Character of God, cont.

How would it be possible to construct any other science without knowing its fundamental law? to construct the physical science of astronomy without knowing whether the sun or the earth moved round the other? to construct moral science without knowing man?

God's Character — we need to know that God is good

But does any preacher show us this? He may say that God is good, but he shows Him to be very bad. He may say that God is 'Love,' but he shows him to be hate, worse than any hate of man. As the Persian poet says: 'If God punishes me for doing evil by doing me evil, how is He better than I?'

NB: Human understandings of goodness tell us what God must be like

NOT: God's revelation through priests and prophets tell us what is good.

Mistakes, from inattention to the Character of God

That God regards suffering as good in itself, that He pays well those who inflict it on themselves, is the basis on which was founded a very large polity in the Roman Catholic Church.

That God has so let go man as to become essentially wicked, for which He has instituted no other system of help except letting another pay the penalty for man, was the foundation of another theory of religion sometimes called 'Evangelical.'

That this barbarising doctrine does not make man barbarous, at least not very, can only be because men are so much better than their God.

Mistakes, from inattention to the Character of God, ...

That God has made a scheme of salvation and damnation by which a certain number of His creatures are saved 'everlastingly', a certain number 'damned' everlastingly, is considered by all the orthodox millions of the Church which calls itself 'Christian,' . . .

The (so-called) ‘Liberals’ are no better!

But if you ask the ‘Liberal’ you will find that he does not suppose God has made any other plan, any plan for conducting each and all of us to perfection; he simply supposes that God has no plan at all; or that, if He has, we can’t find it out.

In that case, it is difficult to see how his God is better than the others. Indeed, in point of intellect, He is worse. . . . To please God, I am justly told, is the end of my being; but I must know what God is like, in order to know what is pleasing to Him. The most frightful crimes which this world has ever seen have been perpetrated ‘to please God.’

God has everything planned

Another thing is certain, that everything, down to the minutest particular, is so governed, by laws “which can be seen in their effects,” that not the most trifling action or feeling is left to chance, and that any who could see into the mind of the ‘All-Ordering Power,’ as manifested by His laws or thoughts, could of course predict history.

God leaves us to find out

It is a radical mistake fatal to all progress to say that we are to remain in the position 'in which God has placed us'. The very object of all the teaching which we have from God is that we may *find* out the 'calling' to which we are called.

He leaves *us* to find it out. If he were to rub out the wrong figure in the sum and put in the right one Himself, would that be exercising our faculties ... as it does to make us do it ourselves?

...

God's plan is that we should make mistakes.

[Suggestions for Thought (SFT):V]

How then does God reveal Himself?

Would He [God] have left such an important question as religion to the unassisted reason of His creatures? All we can say is, He *has* done it. ...

People allow that there are 'doctrines upon which eternal life depends, and yet of these not a whisper was heard until there came a revelation' 4,000 years after the world began. They do not see what a God they have made when they say this, they do not see how they have been insulting Him. We, who say that revelation has to be worked out by the exercise of man's faculties, can readily believe (and thank God for it) that 4,000 years and much more might pass before the revelation came.

[SFT, VI]

How then does God reveal Himself? — continued

There have been three parties — those who say that there was revelation through the book; those who have said that there was a revelation through the Church, or through the book and the Church; and those who have said that there was no revelation at all. Now we say that there is a revelation to everyone, through the exercise of his own nature — that God is always revealing Himself.

[SFT, VI]

Mystical Experience may bring us Close to God

It is very plain how “ecstasies” were bred in people half-starved by long fastings & long watchings. So far from wondering that these half-starved people believed in their Visions, we wonder that they had not more. The “mystical” state — by which we understand the drawing near to God by means of — not Church or ceremony, but — the state in which we keep, through God’s laws, our own soul — is real & should be permanent. The “ecstatic” state is unreal & should not be at all.

[Quoted in Webb, *Florence Nightingale — the Making of Making of a Radical Theologian*, p.173]

God expects us to cultivate judgement ...

Take, e.g., this dictum, that God looks only at our intentions — a cloak, by the way, for every laziness, every unwisdom of man, an excuse for not taking, the means of success which we must take for every walk of life — for not cultivating judgment, obtaining experience, watching results, as we do in every other profession, science, and business.

How does God teach humans?

... Yet we see that inexorably consequences are visited upon the 'third and fourth generation.' Consequences of what? Of ignorance. Why? Because this is the very plan of God to teach man through inexorable consequences. To teach him what? ... [To teach him] the plan of God to bring each and all of us to perfection through mankind learning to create mankind by experience, learning by means of the invariable, the inexorable nature of these consequences.

The lesson that ‘infection’ should teach us

... to remove the conditions of dirt, of overcrowding, of foulness of every kind under which men live. ... Disease is Elijah’s earthquake, which forces us to attend ... to the ‘still small voice.

Not so much a lesson as a statement

That education is to teach men not to know, but to do; that the true end of education is production ... — but ‘production’ in the widest sense of the term. And, to teach man to produce, the educating him to perfect accuracy of thought — and, it might have been added, to accurate habits of observation — and to perfectly accurate habits of expression ... — what a grand ‘lesson’ this is.

If only ...

If mankind would but set to work on the moral laws as they have done on the physical laws, equal discoveries would be achieved?

Could we not, e.g., discover how to redeem man from pauperism, how to teach every man, not infirm or incapable, to produce? Scarcely a single step has been made in this direction in England — among us, the most practical nation of the earth. Could we not discover how to redeem men from habitual crime?

Florence's parting plea: If, then, moral science, the science of the social and political improvement of man, the science of educating or administering the world by discovering the laws which govern man's motives, his moral nature, is synonymous with the study of the character of God, because the laws of the moral world are the expressions and solely the expressions of the character of God, shall we not undertake now, with all our minds, and with all our souls, and with all our hearts, and with all our strength, this study, which is the oldest, the newest, the most important, the most untouched, the most Christ-like, the most philosophical, the most practical, the most human, the most divine, of all the work that God has given us to do?

Parting Thoughts/Questions

- Many traditional religious people argue that God's laws as expounded by religious prophets and teachers tell us what it is to be good. Florence turns this around. Human perceptions of goodness tell us what God is like. Which position is more defensible?
- Modern humanists move directly from the introspection of their own human nature and the observation of Society, to humanitarian concern and action, without (as in FN's theology) a desire to be God's co-worker as the driver of that action. Is God a necessary/desirable driving force?

- To what extent does the Biblical tradition support the close equation of theology with social science and social action?
- Val Webb finds close points of connection between Florence's theology and process theology. A huge difference is that, for Florence, a Divine and immutable plan is not a theological mistake?
- Which of FN's challenges/insights are the most relevant now in 2010, 100 years after her death.
- Charles Darwin and Florence Nightingale are face to face, debating whether it is God's plan, or our evolutionary history, or both, that have made us what we are. Will they find common ground?

Two Strongly Recommended Books

Mark Bostridge: "Florence Nightingale: the woman and her legend". Penguin Books 2009. (now in paperback)

Val Webb: "Florence Nightingale: The Making of a Radical Theologian". Chalice Press 2002.

For those who want to read the 1873 articles

<http://www.maths.anu.edu.au/~johnm/misc/misc.html>

Quotes that are not otherwise identified are from FN's May 1873 article (*A 'Note' of Interrogation*) in Fraser's Magazine.