The aim of the present paper is to discuss the issue of religion in E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*. Religion is one of the main forces which influence the social and personal life of the main characters of the novel. Its place is quite naturally second to the influence of the law, and yet it is religious upbringing, a vision of morality rooted in religious teaching that should shape the way the characters perceive themselves and their own behaviour, and should guide them in their choices. Our aim is to retrace the influence of Christianity on the main characters’ psychological development and behaviour. The issue will be discussed in the context of Forster’s personal attitude towards organised religion and, more specifically, Christianity. [this issue to be developed!]

The place of religion within the novel was quite precisely defined by J. H. Stape – the novel presents a quest of the eponymous hero for:

expression [of his experiences and emotions which] will necessarily liberate him from society as constituted since it requires from him a self carefully regulated by a set of rigid but unspoken rules that are inculcated and sustained by traditional social institutions – Family, School and the Church – all of which Forster targets as agents of “repression” (Stape 1990: 144-145).

Religion is thus mainly present as a part of the system of repression. Quite tellingly, it is not presented as its source, the root of the oppression against homosexuals. Actually, there is little attempt in the text to explain or justify the legal regulations with anything less elusive that “English character”. Maurice (as well as Clive or Alec) treats the oppression as something quite obvious, he is actually rather surprised to
find that there are places which adopted Code Napoleon and where homosexuality is not a crime (AM 183).

Let us start from the very text of the novel - offering a close reading of those excerpts where religion plays a part, stressing their importance in the structure of the novel. The very first appearance of church and religion in the text is quite telling and sets the tone for its further part:

[Maurice’s family] nearly left when the church was built, but they became accustomed to it, as to everything, and even found it a convenience. Church was the only place Mrs. Hall had to go to – the shops delivered (AM 7).

As it usual in Forster’s writing, special attention must be paid to every single word, and two words attract attention in this short passage. Firstly, the church is found to be a convenience only with the passage of time. Apparently, originally it was perceived as an inconvenience. Secondly, we have a pun here – the shops deliver while the church does not. Multiple meaning of the verb ‘to deliver’ maybe read into this short sentence, the message, however, is quite clear. The church does not deliver on its promises, especially the one to be found in the Lord’s Prayer – “deliver us from evil”. The very first moment the church appears in the novel, it is disregarded and, to a large extent, this attitude does not change much further on.

Maurice soon moves out to start his education. Although the description of his schools is quite detailed there is no mention of any religious education. Even the confirmation produces little effect in young Maurice, its absence in the way he perceived the world is quite apparent in the dream scene:

Soon afterwards he was confirmed and tried to persuade himself that the friend [from his dream] must be Christ. But Christ has a mangy beard. Was he a Greek god, such as illustrates the Classical dictionary? More probable, but most probably he was just a man (AM 12).
The possibility that the face seen in the dream belonged to Christ is rejected outright. Quite tellingly, the possibility that it was “a Greek god” is considered as “more probable”.

This actual absence of God perceived as an important factor in Maurice’s life continues when he moves on to Cambridge. Forster makes it quite clear in the way Maurice sees himself within the structure of the society, his peers play much bigger role than God, conspicuously absent from his concerns:

Maurice became modest and conscious of sin: in all creation there could be no one as vile as himself. No wonder he pretended to be a piece of cardboard; if known as he was, he would be hounded out of the world. God, being altogether too large an order, did not worry him: he could not conceive of any censure being more terrific that, say Joey Fetherstonehaugh’s, who kept in the rooms below, or of any Hell as bitter as Coventry (AM 19).

Maurice adopts the attitude of his millieu without thinking much. Which was probably better as his attitude towards its ethic teaching was pretty unorthodox. Later in the novel Forster remarks that Maurice “always had been put off by Christ turning the other cheek” (AM 92). The message of kindness and humility could hardly agree with a bully. Largely devoid of any natural religious instinct, he still perceives religion as a natural element of his world. Forster offers a more expanded comment on Maurice’s religion at this point of his life, claiming that Maurice:

believed that he believed, and felt genuine pain when anything he was accustomed to met criticism – the pain that masquerades among the middle classes as Faith. It was not Faith, being inactive. It gave him no support, no wider
outlook. It didn’t exist till opposition touched it, when it ached like a useless nerve (AM 33).

The situation begins to change with the appearance of Clive Durham whose revelation challenges Maurice’s attitude:

- Hall, I don’t want to worry you with my beliefs, or rather with their absence, but to explain the situation I must tell you that I’m unorthodox. I’m not a Christian (AM 30).

Maurice’s first reaction is an attempt to defend his faith, he “comes out as a theologian” but the motives of this attempt are almost instantly revealed: “He had this overwhelming desire to impress Durham” (AM 33). The attempt ends in a complete failure (AM 34-37) and Maurice yields to Clive’s anti-religious views.

Maurice “lost. He realised that he had no sense of Christ’s existence or of His goodness, and should be positively sorry if there was such a person. His dislike of Christianity grew and became profound. In ten days he gave up communicating, in three weeks he cut out all the chapels he dared. ... Maurice, although he had lost and yielded all his opinions, had a queer feeling that he was really winning and carrying on a campaign that he had began last term” (AM 37).

Critics (e.g. Martland 1999: 141) and biographers (e.g. Furbank 1, 62 i 1, 98) agree that these passages have a peculiarly personal and autobiographic character. Clive turns Maurice away from Christianity just as Forster was turned away by HOM Meredith.

Maurice’s apostasy does not cause much of a stir. His relatives are quite unfazed with his behaviour.
Home emasculated everything. It was the same with his atheism. No one felt as deeply as he expected. With the crudity of youth he drew his mother apart and said that he should always respect her religious prejudices and those of the girls, but that his own conscience permitted him to attend church no longer. She said it was a great misfortune (AM 39).

Even Maurice’s thoughtless directness fails to leave a lasting mark:

Maurice’s atheism was forgotten. He did not communicate on Easter Sunday, and supposed a row would come then, as in Durham’s case. But no one took any notice, for the suburbs no longer exact Christianity. This disgusted him; it made him look at the society with new eyes. Did society, while professing to be so moral and sensitive, really mind anything? (AM 40).

It is at this point only that the reader becomes acquainted with a very different personal history of apostasy. Clive was deeply religious, with a living desire to reach God and to please Him, he found himself crossed at early age by this other desire, obviously from Sodom ... At first he thought God must be trying him, and if he did not blaspheme would recompense him like Job. He therefore bowed his head, fasted, and kept away from anyone whom he found himself inclined to like. His sixteenth year was a ceaseless torture. He told no one, and finally broke down and had to be removed from school (AM 55).
Clive, far more developed intellectually than Maurice, soon finds his solace in Plato and is ultimately:

obliged to throw over Christianity. Those who base their conduct upon what they are rather than what they ought to be, always must throw it over in the end (AM 56).

Clive’s rejection of Christianity is gradual. He wished Christianity would compromise with him a little and searched the Scriptures for support. There was David and Jonathan; there was even the “disciple that Jesus loved”. But the church’s interpretation was against him; he could not find any rest for his soul in her without crippling it, and withdrew higher into the classics yearly (AM 56).

There is, however, a consequence to his choices. Clive combines certain elements of Platonic thought (one should probably add at this point that his vision of Greek attitude towards homosexuality is quite anachronistic) with elements of Christian tradition and as a result:

Clive distorts the Greek ideal of moderation into abstinence in order to justify his conventional distaste for sexuality, a distaste rooted in Christian rather than classical thought (Summers 1983: 159).

It is thus this pseudo-Greek, quasi-aesthetic, superficially rejecting Christianity while actually adopting Christian vision of sexuality concept of homosexuality that Maurice takes over from Clive, and accepts as his for the three years that they are together. Apparently, even after they split, Maurice tries to maintain the same attitude towards carnality even though he finds it increasingly difficult. As Forster
remarks at this point Maurice “hadn’t a God, he hadn’t a lover – the two usual incentives to virtue” (AM 122).

Clive is not the only character in the novel trying to form his own philosophy. The other is Maurice’s grandfather, Mr Grace, who

occupied his leisure in evolving a new religion – or rather a new cosmogony, for it did not contradict chapel. The chief point was that God lives inside the sun, whose bright envelope consists of the spirits of the blessed. Sun spots reveal God to men, so that when they occurred Mr Grace spent hours at his telescope, noting the interior darkness. The incarnation was a sun spot (AM 117).

Religion becomes thus something that old people enjoy inventing after they retire. Fortunately, Mr Grace shows no inclination to proselytize and is ready to accept as much of the teaching of the Church of England as he has to.

The point of view of religion upon homosexuality was apparently adopted also by medicine (it is difficult to decide to what extent it is generally true as Maurice chooses to seek the advice of the retired family doctor whose views are quite naturally rather outdated). When Maurice approached Dr Barry, all the old doctor has to say is “Rubbish!” Forster explains his attitude in the following chapter. According to him, Dr Barry was:

averse to it by temperament, he endorsed the verdict of society gladly; that is to say his verdict was theological. He held that only the most depraved could glance at Sodom (AM 136).

Forster plays down this verdict immediately. The doctor “had read no scientific works on Maurice’s subject” (AM 136) and consequently believed that Maurice “had
heard some remark ... which generated morbid thoughts” which could be dispelled at once by “the contemptuous silence of a medical man” (AM 136).

The appearance of the reverend Mr Borenius, the curate at Penge, completes the cycle first indicated by Glen Cavaliero, according to whom Maurice:

has to pass the four guardians of society – the schoolmaster, the doctor, the scientist and the priest. All four in their different ways condemn him, and not one of them can offer any help (Cavaliero 1979: 137).¹

Mr Borenius, indeed, proves as ineffectual as the three other gentlemen, there is a difference, however. Maurice does not seek his help, it seems quite obvious from their exchange that he does not see any possibility of such a help. The two men quarrel, rather tellingly, over Alec Scudder’s confirmation (AM 163-164), but their quarrel ends in nothing. They have no common ground and none respects the other.

Mr Borenius, however, is not gone from the novel at this point. The two men meet again in Southampton and this time only Maurice becomes aware of the possible threat that the parson can be:

Asceticism and piety have their practical side. They can generate insight, as Maurice realised too late. He had assumed at Penge that a white-faced parson in a cassock could never have conceived of masculine love, but he knew now that there is no secret of humanity which, from a wrong angle, orthodoxy had not viewed, that religion is far more acute than science, and if it only added judgment to insight would be the greatest thing in the world. Destitute of the religious sense himself, he had never yet encountered it in another, and the shock was terrific (AM 205).

¹ Cavaliero actually simplifies the issue – Lasker Jones does not condemn Maurice in any way. He treats him with cool detachment and forgets about him as soon as it clear that Maurice’s “condition” cannot be altered by hypnosis.
Maurice’s fears are, fortunately, largely ungrounded (although it is impossible to say what would have happened had Alec arrived in Southampton). Mr Borenius, anyway, blames prostitution rather than homosexuality for the absence, although his views on sexual matters are generally quite extreme:

when the nations went a whoring they invariably ended by denying God, I think, and until all sexual irregularities and not some of them are penal the Church will never reconquer England (AM 206).

Maurice is unable to respond to that, torn between fear of being found out, and exhilaration at Alec’s failure to take the ship. His interest in Mr Borenius’ views is minimal, the only power that the parson retains is that of handing him over to the authorities (“Mr Borenius ... would punish them by the only means in his power”, AM 206)). In the text of the novel, according to Stephen Land, Borenius “provides the threat of exposure as well as bearing the burden of the author’s usual hostility to the religious establishment” (Land 1990: 185). Any power that Mr Borenius may have as a representative of his church is at best indifferent to Maurice and so at this point is the influence of religion. Maurice is free to join Alec.

Stape sees the ending of the novel as saturated with religious meaning:

Forster by his concluding image [of Maurice ‘clothed out in the sun’ returning in Clive’s dreams AM 214] champions, like Mr Grace, a new mythology: the Greek pantheon precious to Victorian and Edwardian “Cambridge”, and the Christian one, still thought to be valid by Maurice’s mother, have been replaced by Maurice’s version of a new embodied in himself and Scudder ... The search for a mythology with a human face ... finds its culminating moment (Stape 1990: 150).
I am, however, inclined to reject this reading. I am much more willing to return to the dream scene in search for necessary hints. The teenage Maurice, in his search of meaning of the mysterious friend who came to him in a dream, first rejects Christ, than Greek gods he knows from book covers, ultimately settling on “just a man”. Maurice’s development presented through further part of the novel retraces exactly the same path – he rejects Christianity, rejects the sexless pseudo-Greek Platonic vision of sexuality concocted by Clive, ultimately settling not on a myth but “just a man”, Alec Scudder.

During their last meeting, Clive attempts to resurrect the religious discourse asking: “Maurice, quo vadis?”(AM 213) but the quotation from the apocryphal Acts of Peter (or, just as likely, from the immensely popular at the time and Nobel prize winning novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz) fails to make Maurice change his mind, he refuses to answer the question, because, as he says, Clive may not ask such questions because he belongs to the past.

The quotation, however, is telling if we consider the context in which the words were first spoken, when Christ appeared to St Paul who was trying to escape from Rome in order to avoid emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians. Clive clearly suggests that Maurice should turn back and face his martyrdom, but Maurice could not care less for such a lofty rubbish. He has chosen not noble death (such as a “suicide pact” mentioned by Forster in his “Notes”, AM 216) but life and happiness, such as he is able to strive for.

A seemingly religious aspect of the novel which attracted the attention of critics is its use of religious terminology. Examples are quite numerous, the most characteristic is probably the following

\[\text{[Footnote]}\]

It may also be seen as an echo to the “sleepy ‘that’s finished’ [AM 209] appears to be a positive resolution, but there is a deep ambivalence. It is also an echo of Christ’s last words on the cross, which suggests that both homosexual love and the act of writing are a form of crucifixion. Even when it appears otherwise, Maurice is not simple and straightforward” (Booth 2007: 185).
By pleasuring the body Maurice had confirmed – that very word was used in the final verdict – he had confirmed his spirit in its perversion, and cut himself off from the congregation of normal man (AM 185).

Nicholas Royle offers an extensive comment on the matter:

at least partly unconscious exercise of falling in love is also linked up with the language of Christianity and religious conversion. Forster’s novel plays on the ‘unorthodox’ as hesitating between non-Christian and queer. As Clive tells his new friend: ‘Hall, I don’t want to worry you... but to explain the situation I must tell you that I’m unorthodox. I’m not a Christian” (43). The novel also plays on the idea of a queer Jesus – as, for example, in the reference to ‘the disciple that Jesus loved’ (68) – (Royle 1999: 67).

However, Royle does not take into consideration the conclusions of Richard Ellmann’s studies which allow us to place Forster’s attitude towards religion and religious imagery in a wider contemporary context. According to Ellmann:

Almost to a man, Edwardian writers rejected Christianity, and having done so, they felt free to use it, for while they did not need religion, they did need religious metaphors (...). The Edwardians were looking for ways to express their conviction that we can be religious about life itself, and they naturally adopted metaphors offered by the religion they knew best (Ellmann 1960: 192-196).
Forster’s use of religious terms (typical for his language in other books as well – Fordonski 2005: ??) firmly belongs to the language of his times and as such, its importance should not be overestimated.

It is difficult to state with any certainty to what extent this vision of powerless religion reflects the reality of Edwardian England, and to what extent it reflects merely Forster’s personal experience. Maurice moves in circles that were best known to the writer and each of the settings and milieus of this particular novel may be found in at least one other novel. One might consequently assume that the image painted in Maurice represents the reality as the writer knew it.

One of the basic questions (provoked by the author himself) concerning Maurice is whether the novel dated. Let me finish by trying to answer the following question: to what extent has Maurice dated in the particular respect of relations between religion and homosexuality? To what (if at all) extent does it remain a contemporary work for many of its 21st century readers describing dilemmas which they may face in their own lives? A contemporary English reader is bound to reply that situation improved greatly and Maurice belongs fully to the past. The Church of England not only withdrew any support of persecution of homosexuals long ago but in more recent times turned into a major champion of their rights, to such an extent as appointing openly gay bishops.

There are many countries, however, where the vision presented in Maurice seems almost a fairy tale. There are many countries where the words of Mr Borenius: “I vote for no one who is not a communicant” (AM 160) are a very serious warning to any prospective political leaders and religion still plays a major role in political and everyday life. The worst thing is that it happens more and more often that religious leaders take an active role in supporting or even inciting persecution. One would probably think first about the Islamic leaders of Iran (where, according to their president, there are no homosexuals there, anyway) but Christian churches such as the protestant congregations active in Uganda and other African states, or the Russian Orthodox Church, are not far behind in their support of anti-gay actions. The changes which took place in Great Britain, a proof of which was the very fact that Maurice could be ultimately published, should not make us turn a blind eye to the
fact that the story it presents and dilemmas its characters face are everyday reality in far too many places of the world.

To be discussed:
- Religion of Alec

Bibliography

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