

Maude Royden's Guildhouse: A Nexus of Religious Change in Britain between the Wars

ALISON FALBY

This paper will describe how some British people redefined their beliefs during the 1920s and 1930s. The interwar period was a time of vibrant heterodoxy for intellectuals, middle-class youth, workers and women in particular. The religious changes of the period contributed to the development of a spiritualized lay psychotherapy and interest in Eastern religious philosophy, both of which continue to influence many people today.

This paper will focus on the Guildhouse, a non-denominational church in London, founded by the feminist pacifist Maude Royden in 1921. Like other unorthodox religionists of her day, Royden revised traditional Christian doctrines in light of social, physical and biological science. She redefined "salvation" as psychological, and conceived of immortality in terms of collective consciousness or energy. Composed primarily of women and young workers, the Guildhouse's 1,000-strong congregation took an active interest in fellowship, decolonization and Gandhian principles.¹

Royden and the Guildhouse are significant illustrations of the religious vitality of the British interwar period, the increasing influence of lay people on religion, particularly women, and the role of scientific discourse in religious change. This paper will explain these changes by highlighting the following themes: the intersection of scientific and religious discourse; the increasing influence of Eastern religious philosophy; and the role of "colonial modernities" in religious change.

The Guildhouse and Maude Royden

Maude Royden is a neglected figure-- too neglected, given her status as the alleged first Anglican woman preacher.² Born lame, she grew up in a wealthy family, daughter of Liverpool shipowner, Thomas Royden. Thomas served as Lord Mayor of Liverpool beginning in 1878, and as the Member of Parliament for West Toxteth (1885-1892).³ Educated at Oxford in a day when few women were, Maude began her career doing settlement work in Liverpool. Working among the poor evolved into teaching the poor, and then into preaching to the poor. Active in the women's suffrage and pacifist movements, she preached her first sermon at a non-conformist church, the City Temple, in London in 1917. She did so on the Sunday before the Dean of Durham and future irascible Bishop Hensley Henson was to preach there.⁴ She continued to preach at non-conformist churches and colleges over the next few years, and then in 1921, she gave the Good Friday sermon to over 900 people at the Anglican St. Botolph's Church in London. She did so against the objections of the diocesan Bishop,⁵ and despite a number of threatening letters. While the congregation was respectful, clergy at the subsequent diocesan conference were not, "howling down" St. Botolph's rector, Hudson Shaw.⁶

In 1920, Royden founded a "Fellowship Guild" at Kensington Town Hall with the Anglican clergyman and theologian Percy Dearmer, and the organist Martin Shaw.⁷ The Fellowship Guild became "the Guildhouse" when they moved to a "converted" (so to speak) Congregationalist chapel in Eccleston Square a year later.⁸ Backed by prominent feminists such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett, and prominent churchmen such as William Temple, the Guildhouse received considerable financial backing from Royden's brother, the then-chairman of the Cunard Cruise Line.⁹ The Guildhouse stayed at Eccleston Square until 1936 when it moved to Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, and it dissolved shortly thereafter. In its prime, its "members at large" (overseas members) extended to Australia, Canada, China, India, New Zealand and the United States, with a few in Turkey, Egypt, Syria and Japan.

Royden claimed that she did not intend the Guildhouse to be a schismatic church, or a new sect, and hence only held services on Sunday afternoons and evenings, and did not offer communion.¹⁰ The services combined liturgical and non-liturgical elements. Given her combination of militancy and unorthodoxy, it is entirely possible that Royden considered the Guildhouse to be a sort of church, especially given the lower-classes'

propensity for attending evening services at that time. She said in 1920, "But if those of us who desire reform are all forced to leave our own churches we shall found another church. People who desire any great reform must create a fellowship in which to work for it."¹¹

Increasing Influence of Laypeople and Women

Royden and Dearmer founded the Guildhouse "to develop the ministry of women" and involve lay people in fellowship.¹² Royden herself is the most obvious example of women's ministry, and she developed her already formidable skills at the Guildhouse. Her role included the usual clerical duties: leading Sunday services, preaching and taking "confessions" from congregation members upon request, but she also involved herself extensively in mission work (in the United States, Canada and India, among other places), peace work, political activism and in conducting retreats.

Royden's success convinced many of the need for female ordination. One journalist wrote, "All who still maintain that the Ministry should be rigidly closed to women should, if and when in London, worship at the Guildhouse. If they do, they are almost certain to be convinced of the error of their ways."¹³ Another suggested that Royden "will be a favourite candidate if the Episcopal Bench ever ceases to be a monopoly of men."¹⁴ It is fair to say that Royden helped pave the way for female ordination, and not simply because she founded the Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women to the Historic Ministry of the Church in 1955.

The Guildhouse attracted many female parishioners, especially young single women. In addition to serving tea, these women were active in various Guildhouse groups: the League of Nations Union, the Guildhouse Women Citizens Group, the Guildhouse Girl Citizens Group,¹⁵ and various groups devoted to the promotion of peace through international understanding. Examples of the latter category included the Russia Group and the India Group, which "organized parties and made friends with Indians and Russians, combining their social activities with a serious study of the problems affecting the countries in question."¹⁶ Female parishioners also gave lectures on such topics as travel abroad,¹⁷ attended model conferences of the International Labour Organization,¹⁸ and presented the occasional sermon.¹⁹

Royden's most infamous initiative concerned the formation of a Peace Army. Inspired by Gandhi, she and two fellow pacifists called upon

Christian, non-violent resisters to interpose themselves between Chinese and Japanese combatants in Manchuria in February 1932.²⁰ Although the Peace Army inspired many to volunteer their services (900 by May 1932),²¹ it didn't see action until 1937 and 1938, when the Guildhouse sent two members to Palestine for the purpose of reconciliation. As the historian Martin Ceadel put it, the "minute scale" of this endeavour "negated its original strategy."²²

Nonetheless, early enthusiasm for the Peace Army inspired many Guildhouse women to attend classes for instruction in Russian, the principles of Bolshevism and Esperanto, and to read French and German newspapers on a regular basis.²³ The original Peace Army initiative in 1932 marks the point at which Guildhouse members became actively involved in the peace movement. In 1934, several women formed a study group on Fascism and ways to combat it;²⁴ in 1936, the Guildhouse initiated a "Peace Week";²⁵ and in 1937 and 1938, the Guildhouse sent two groups of two to Palestine.

The Guildhouse also served as a nexus for more traditional forms of fellowship. Royden founded a women's fellowship group, the "Little Company of Christ," in 1919. The group's original members intended to form a religious order, but decided to form an order "not with material houses and churches and cloisters, but with their spiritual equivalent."²⁶ This group spawned several others, all of which took saints' names. By 1934, the "Little Companies" had 155 members,²⁷ and they lasted into the Second World War. Their significance is not so much in their numbers but in their reflection of increasing lay, particularly female, spirituality in the period as a whole.

These groups considered themselves responsible to the Guildhouse, and gathered together for an hour and a half on a weekly basis for meditation, silent prayer, "liberty of utterance" and intercession.²⁸ They believed the ideal group number to be about ten to twelve persons in size, and group members took turns conducting the meetings.²⁹ Group members referred to themselves as "Companions," and new Companions were given "Godmothers" who gave them "information and guidance."³⁰

Group Therapy and Eastern Religious Philosophy

There are obvious parallels between the "Little Company of Christ" and the Society of Friends, and also with "mutual assistance movements" such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which also met weekly for meditation,

silent prayer, “liberty of utterance” and intercession, although Alcoholics Anonymous uses different terminology. I have already written about the role of the Guildhouse in developing lay psychotherapy, so suffice it to say that lay fellowship groups helped facilitate such intellectual transformations as the medicalization or pathologization of sin and the popularization of public confession “epitomized by talk shows today.”³¹

In addition to promoting lay spirituality, Royden also promoted interest in “the East,” especially in India and its religions, and to a certain extent she can be seen as part of the larger context of the New Age movement. Obviously, “the West” had been “interested” in “the East” for centuries, but in the interwar period Britain saw a particular increase in interest. This interest can be related to three developments: one, the influence of Gandhi; two, the Indian independence movement; and three, the increased presence of prominent Indian intellectuals in Britain--not only Gandhi, but also the Nobel prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Oxford philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

The influences of Gandhi, the Indian independence movement and Indian intellectuals converged at the Guildhouse, helping make it a nexus for religious change. Already a pacifist, Royden reinforced her pacifism by meeting Gandhi in India in 1928 and 1934-1935, preaching about him in London, and hosting him at the Guildhouse. And like other women of the period such as Annie Besant, Royden’s support for decolonization stemmed from her feminism. In 1935, she attended the annual meeting of the All-India Women’s Association in Karachi, and its members persuaded her to support the nationalist cause. She did so in her sermons, lectures and political activism, voicing her support for Indian independence and continually emphasizing India’s “spiritual gifts.”³²

Finally, the Guildhouse benefitted from the direct influence of Indian intellectuals and through its “India Group” (mentioned previously), which corresponded with Tagore. Guildhouse members were exposed more indirectly to Indian religious philosophy through a number of Sunday afternoon lecture series. A very popular lecture series entitled, “The Evolution of Religion in the Twentieth Century,” featured talks by British Vedantists, a Theosophist and an Anthroposophist, among others.³³ Other lecture series explored such subjects as: “The World’s Beliefs,” with lectures on Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam; “Some Current Forms of Religious Thought,” with lectures on Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science;³⁴ and “Why religion?” with lectures on eastern religion and western psychology.³⁵

Discourse and Religious Change

Royden's own intellectual eclecticism and the intellectual eclecticism of the period made her open to non-religious disciplines, particularly science. And the Guildhouse itself, in providing a home for art, music, science and literature, sought to "reveal" religion through diverse media. These media or disciplines each had their own languages in a sense, and Royden emphasized the importance of finding appropriate languages to explain religious ideas and experience. She argued that Christ had been "obliged to use the language of his generation," and that the newer scientific disciplines made it possible to understand his original meaning better than ever before.³⁶

A number of intellectual historians have used a discursive approach to the history of religion.³⁷ But although concerned with religion, few of these historians have focussed on the history of religious change. Two exceptions are Callum Brown and Sarah Williams. Williams suggests that religious change may be viewed as a process of exchange between different "types of religious discourse,"³⁸ whereas Brown argues that secularization is essentially a "decay in discursive religiosity."³⁹ Williams' approach is particularly appropriate to the study of unorthodox religiosity in early twentieth-century Britain given lay religionists' extensive appropriation of terminology from psychology, biology and eastern religious philosophy. One new way of "being religious," in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was to find a new language(s) for old ideas—old wine in new bottles. Royden's Guildhouse was one context for discursive religious change in early twentieth-century Britain.

Royden borrowed extensively from the language of science, especially biology, to describe the Christian community.⁴⁰ She described the human race as a "multi-cellular organism," and suggested that "we have got to realize St. Paul's saying not as a platitude, but as a scientific truth."⁴¹ The saying to which she was referring, of course, was Romans 7:4-5: "for as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office; so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another." St Paul meant that people all have to come together if they are to be saved.

But saved from what? Up until the mid-to-late nineteenth century, most Christians would have characterized salvation as the literal coming of the kingdom of God and the assurance of their own ascension into heaven. But in the latter half of the nineteenth century, philosophical

Idealists, Natural Theologians and the Holiness Movement began to define salvation psychologically. That is, they characterized it as salvation from individualism and loneliness.⁴²

Royden echoed this view. She suggested that “Work in groups [by which she meant fellowship] . . . is a way by which we can combat the modern despair of the individual living soul.”⁴³ And she used the language of physics to describe the “spiritual power” of prayer: “When a great congregation prays together . . . I seem to see God sifting out every atom of worth that there is in those prayers and using it for all it is worth.”⁴⁴ She suggested that life operated according to “spiritual laws,” and characterized Jesus as a scientist: “He who is our Newton, our Darwin, our Galileo, all in one.”⁴⁵

Royden’s references to spiritual laws are especially reminiscent of nineteenth-century natural theology. But although she was not original in her scientific conceptualization of religious ideas, her invocation of scientific concepts reinforces the significance of the Guildhouse as a nexus of discursive religious change.

Conclusion

In the grand scheme of things, the Guildhouse’s success was short-lived. Royden departed from it in 1936, after which it lost many of its adherents, and the building was bombed during World War Two.⁴⁶ But many aspects of the Guildhouse presaged late-twentieth and early twentieth-century spirituality: the increasing influence of women, increasing interest in “Eastern” religions, and the loose use of scientific concepts and language to explain religious ideas. Royden helped disseminate these changes at the Guildhouse, on her speaking tours abroad, and, after the war, on the radio.⁴⁷ She was “one of the most popular speakers on the BBC’s Silver Lining programme when it was launched in the 1950s,” listened to by Christians and non-Christians alike.⁴⁸

Endnotes

1. On the working-class composition of the Guildhouse congregation, see Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royden: A Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 225. On the Guildhouse lectures on India, see “India,” *Guildhouse Monthly* 5, No. 45 (January 1931): 22; and “The India Group,” *Guildhouse Monthly* 9, No. 89 (January 1935): 110. On Gandhi, see Mohandas Gandhi, “Voluntary Poverty,” *Guildhouse Monthly* 5, No. 53 (October 1931): 208-215.

2. The only full-length work devoted to Royden is Sheila Fletcher's biography, *Maude Royden*. Royden merits mention in Sybil Oldfield, *Women Against the Iron Fist: Alternatives to Militarism 1900-1989* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 52-64; Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-1928* (London, 1989), 17, 42; and Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).
3. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 5.
4. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 152-153.
5. See *Daily Chronicle*, 26 March 1921.
6. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 196.
7. Dearmer and Shaw compiled the well-known hymnbook *Songs of Praise* with Ralph Vaughan Williams. See *Guildhouse Monthly* 10, No. 110 (December 1936): 291.
8. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 209.
9. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 210.
10. Maude Royden, "The Fellowship Guild," *Guildhouse Monthly* 1, No. 1 (January 1927): 28.
11. "The Church of England and the Free Church--Miss Royden at the City Temple," *The Coming Day*, March 1920, 112-114.
12. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 210.
13. "As Others See Us," *Guildhouse Monthly* 1, No. 6 (June 1927): 164.
14. "Some Press Cuttings," *Guildhouse Monthly* 2, No. 18 (July-August 1928): 239.
15. The Girl Citizens Group disbanded in 1934. "Guild of Girl Citizens," *Guildhouse Monthly* 8, No. 81 (April 1934): 97.
16. "What Should I Do About Peace?" *Guildhouse Monthly* 10, No. 102 (March 1936): 69.
17. "Miss Kemble's visit to Russia," *Guildhouse Monthly* 5, No. 45 (January 1931): 22.
18. "League of Nations Union," *Guildhouse Monthly* 4, No. 35 (February 1930): 46.
19. "The Pulpit," *Guildhouse Monthly* 5, No. 45 (January 1931): 20.

20. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945*, 93. The other two pacifists were H.R.L. "Dick" Sheppard and A. Herbert Gray.
21. "Guildhouse Peace Work," *Guildhouse Monthly* 6, No. 60 (May 1932): 127.
22. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945*, 96.
23. "Guildhouse Peace Work," *Guildhouse Monthly* 6, No. 58 (March 1932): 70.
24. "'New Britain' Group," *Guildhouse Monthly* 8, No. 81 (April 1934): 100.
25. "Guildhouse Peace Week," *Guildhouse Monthly* 10, No. 102 (March 1936): 65-67.
26. "Little Company Information" [c. 1924], 8, A.M. Royden Papers, Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.
27. "Little Company Conference--12 March 1934," A.M. Royden Papers, Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.
28. "Little Company Meetings" [c. 1934], A.M. Royden Papers, Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.
29. "The Little Company of Christ," *Guildhouse Fellowship* 10, No. VI (November 1942): 1.
30. "Little Company Information," 2 [undated].
31. Alison Falby, "The Modern Confessional: Anglo-American Religious Groups and the Emergence of Lay Psychotherapy," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 39, No. 3 (Summer 2003): 251-267.
32. For example, Maude Royden, "The Genius of India," *Guildhouse Monthly* 6, No. 59 (April 1932): 80; *Britain and India* [sermon delivered 2 December 1934] (London: Guildhouse Publications, c. 1934/5); "Where India Leads--Her Deep Spiritual Tradition--Speeches by Dr. Royden & Mrs. Ashby," *Hindustan Times*, 9 January 1935.
33. "Five Quarters," *Guildhouse Monthly* 6, No. 63 (September 1932): 216; and "Five Quarters," *Guildhouse Monthly* 7, No. 67 (January 1933): 313. Speakers in the first series included Royden, Oxford professor of divinity L.W. Grensted, journalist J. Middleton Murray, philosopher and Vedantist C.E.M. Joad, and Christian philosopher John MacMurray. Speakers in the second series included popular science broadcaster and Vedantist Gerald Heard, Theosophist A. Hawliczek, Anthroposophist George Kaufmann, and the Unitarian head of Manchester College and *Hibbert Journal* editor, L.P. Jacks.

34. Women's Library, London Metropolitan University, A.M. Royden Papers, 7 /AMR, File 7/1: Leaflets & Typescript Notes Relating to Lectures at the Guildhouse ("Five Quarters").
35. "Why Religion? An Important Conference," *Guildhouse Monthly* 9, No. 93 (May 1935): 216. Speakers included Rabbi Mattuck, novelist J.D. Beresford, Geraldine Coster (author of *Yoga and Western Psychology*) and Gerald Heard.
36. Maude Royden, "The End of the World III. What Did Christ Look for?" *Guildhouse Monthly* 2, No. 20 (October 1928): 288. See also Maude Royden, "The Theologian and the Scientist," *Guildhouse Monthly* 1, No. 10 (November 1927).
37. Joy Dixon, "Ancient Wisdom, Modern Motherhood: Theosophy and the colonial syncretic," in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. A. Burton (London: Routledge, 1999), 193-206; Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997); and R. King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1999).
38. S. Williams, "The Language of Belief: An Alternative Agenda for the Study of Victorian Working-Class Religion," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 1 (1996): 314.
39. C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.
40. See Maude Royden, "Books That Have Helped Me--Conception of Religion Enlarged by Modern Science," *T.P.'s and Cassell's Weekly*, 15 March 1924, 750; and Maude Royden, "Science and Life--What Religion Owes to Research," *The Western Daily Press*, 15 February 1927 [also printed in *Scarborough Evening News and Post*].
41. Maude Royden, "The Fellowship of All Humanity," *Guildhouse Monthly* 1, No. 2 (February 1927): 37.
42. See Falby, "The Modern Confessional," 253-256.
43. Maude Royden, "Group Work in the Modern World," *Guildhouse Monthly* 8, No. 81 (April 1934): 82.
44. "High Leigh Retreat --September 1937," 6, A.M. Royden Papers, The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.
45. A. Maude Royden, *Can We Set the World in Order?* 3rd rev. ed. (London: League of the Church Militant [Anglican], n.d.), 14.

46. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 276.
47. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 282.
48. Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 284.

