



Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age, Clive Marsh, London:
SCM Press 2002, pp 149, ISBN 0 334 02869 8. £9.95

Clive Marsh, a Methodist theologian, seeks in this book to argue the case for the relevance of Christianity in British society today. This he does by working his way through his own 95 theses or ‘discussion starters for bemused contemporaries’ through which he offers his own analysis of today’s society, Church and theology, hoping to arrive at a concept of religion which can relate to everyday life.

The analysis is brief but most certainly helpful, and displays a well-informed and reflective mind. The outcome of Marsh’s analysis is that he makes the case for what he calls a chastened liberalism, one which takes the positives from traditional liberalism, ‘education, openness and criticism’, but which also has a much stronger link to the ‘communal dimension’ of the Faith. In this way this post-liberal liberalism holds the individual and social aspects of religious belief together. This revised critical theology Marsh unites to a renewed Protestantism which for him is not denominational, but based on the protesting principle. Therefore a Catholic can be a Protestant as well. It is the protesting principle which is important for Marsh, as theologically it keeps asking the question: how do we ensure God is put first? Moreover, socially and politically the protesting principle engages with matters of peace and justice. Therefore, this new liberal protestantism engages with the challenge of living with a faith, aligning itself with other protesting movements and inviting people to live in this world reflectively, critically and seriously.

Marsh does indeed live in the real world. He writes as one who believes that Christianity can make a positive contribution to the life of the individual and to society and that it can continue to exist in the post-modern world and should stand up and be counted. He also writes very graciously with reference to the different denominations and theologies present today, and is very open to the Church with a capital C taking many varying forms as Christianity is embodied in today’s and tomorrow’s believers. I found much that he had to say very stimulating and challenging, particularly in relation to how all-

embracing Christianity must become for the well-being of people and society. Marsh himself writes that “Christianity will only reveal itself to be a visible form of religion in contemporary Britain if it begins to work again for people as a source of personal, social and political transformation” (p 118). To even contemplate that takes a great deal of faith, and I believe Marsh’s book certainly encourages that.

Joe Kavanagh,
Mearns Parish Church



A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley,
Roy Hattersley, London: Little, Brown. 2002. ISBN:
0316860204, pp. 468. £20.

Back in the 1950’s when I was a boy, I remember being taken to the Methodist Hall in our village to see a film of the life of John Wesley in glorious colour. It was a vivid movie and must have cost the worldwide Methodist Church a lot of money to produce. I remember being impressed by Wesley’s rescue as a child from his father’s burning rectory, his dramatic conversion, and his travels on horseback. The film presented Wesley’s life rather in the way that the Book of Acts presents the growth of the church, an irresistible force inspired from first to last by the spirit of God. But the Book of Acts needs to be balanced by a careful reading of the letters of Paul, where the advance of the Holy Spirit is hindered by quarrelling, controversy and lapses in faith in the church. Hattersley’s biography does more than balance the message of that film. It shows it to be at best hagiography and at worst harmful propaganda. Hattersley gives us John Wesley, warts and all – and there are warts aplenty. Although a great man of God, Wesley was at times small-minded, domineering, calculating and, when young women were around, downright silly.

John Wesley always considered himself a brand from the burning because of his narrow childhood escape from his burning home. At Oxford University he became involved with the Holy Club, which was