



A Christian Faith For Today, W. Montgomery Watt, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 104, Pb. £8.99, ISBN 0-415-27703-5

This is a small book which one can happily read on the train. If you haven't finished it on the journey from Glasgow to Edinburgh, you will certainly have read it through from start to finish by the time your train pulls back into Glasgow Queen Street.

It is also a very easy read – on the cover Richard Holloway describes it as 'The intelligent person's guide to Christianity'. It is certainly a book which some people will find timely. By way of preparation for his discussions about Biblical Truth, and what we learn from the pages of Scripture, Watt first discusses the nature of truth and our ability, or inability, fully to comprehend the nature and completeness of God. This leads on to an equally interesting examination of how we experience God in our lives, of the question of free-will and the problem of suffering and it is at this point that Watt takes his readers to the pages of the Old Testament, explaining why some passages leap out at us today as being so immoral: 'The man is blessed who takes the babes of Israel's enemies and dashes them against a rock.' (Ps. 137: 7 – 10) or Moses ordering a man to be stoned to death for working on the Sabbath by collecting a few sticks to make a fire (Numbers 15: 32 – 36) for example, and setting them in context and within the framework of a developing understanding of God. He explains how Old Testament writers operated, the way in which they used all the sources open to them, leading to repetition and, on occasion, confusion. He discusses the role of Old Testament prophecy concluding:

'A traditional view of the prophets was that they were primarily persons capable of foretelling the future, not critics of their own society; and certainly the prophets spoke of disasters ahead if people persisted in their wrong courses. The modern believer should realise that many of these prophecies of the future were not fulfilled in detail, even if some of them were; but this should not be taken as falsifying or belittling their critique of contemporary society.'



Watt identifies a number of false assumptions of Old Testament writers which he believes modern Christians are unable to accept. Each is discussed in full and the list includes the assumption that God is able to interfere with natural processes and is able to intervene from without in human affairs. Some 'modern Christians' will no doubt find this hard to accept but will be the better for listening to his argument.

Moving into the realm of New Testament thought, Watt's argument is clearly seen in his understanding of the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 which he takes to mean 'that Jesus had no power to do anything a saintly human being could not do.' This takes him into a detailed examination of the miracles which he is anxious to assert 'that there is no need to suppose that there was some breach of natural law.' An example of his thought is caught in this passage from page 61:

'Much the same is true of the other alleged miracles, such as the stilling of the storm and walking on water. In the case of the storm, did the serenity of Jesus restore the confidence of the disciples, or did the tempest suddenly subside as storms are said to do in the Sea of Galilee? Walking on the water could be a description of someone swimming, by someone unfamiliar with it, or Jesus could have been in shallow water near the shore. In all these incidents we cannot know what exactly happened. It is even conceivable that the writers meant the occurrence to be understood symbolically. There is certainly no ground for thinking that something happened contrary to the laws of nature, or that Jesus was able to do things that other saintly persons cannot do.'

Watt now goes on to discuss Jesus' ministry and mission in detail, his baptism, his temptations, the culmination of the mission, and the resurrection appearances and the resurrection body, ending with the affirmation that 'what can be affirmed about the resurrection with absolute certainty is that it brought about a complete change in the lives of the apostles and of the other followers of Jesus.'

Finally the book concludes with a chapter on the true oneness of the triune God in which the author discusses Jesus' divinity and the threefold nature of the one God.

I suspect that some will read this book and be challenged by it; some will dismiss it out of hand as being too liberal by half in its theology and probably put it down as soon as they have picked it up; while some who are searching may find in its pages thoughts with which they can identify and which may draw them into a closer and more serious dialogue with our faith.

W. Montgomery Watt has held professorships at the Universities of Edinburgh, Toronto and Georgetown and the Collège de France. He is a priest of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and has published over thirty books on Christianity and Islam, and, indeed, the book concludes with an interesting 'final word to Muslims'.

Dane Sherrard,
Luss & Arrochar

T *Relational Deity: Hartshorne and Macquarrie on God,* Douglas Pratt, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, (2002), pp. xxii+ 212. NP ISBN: 0761822097

This re-working of a doctoral thesis seeks through a thorough examination of the concepts of God to be found in the works of two substantial thinkers to arrive at a 'relational' understanding of God. The thinkers in question are the philosopher Charles Hartshorne, the leading expositor of 'process' thought and 'neo-classical theism' and the theologian John Macquarrie, whose characteristic emphasis is 'existential-ontological'.

Unlike some studies in this field where two thinkers of superficially similar but actually contrasting tendencies are presented as 'goodies' and 'baddies', Pratt is concerned to learn from both so as to develop constructively what he considers a conception free of the constraints