

GEORGE MATHESON AND MYSTICISM – A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY, Scott McKenna (Wipf and Stock 2022), 978-1-7252-9891-0, paperback £20. There is also an e-book and hardback versions.

It is wonderfully refreshing to find a discussion of mystical theology and spirituality from the perspective of the Scottish Presbyterian tradition and Dr McKenna offers a fascinating contribution to the field in his biographical study on George Matheson.

Although retaining an interest in the contemplative and mystic strands within Christianity, I must confess to having known Matheson primarily as the author of the hymn ‘O love that wilt not let me go’ and did not know very much else about this 19th century Scottish theologian and minister. Almost completely blind from the age of 18, Matheson managed a life of ministry and spiritual writing, profoundly drawing on the ‘inner life’ in his reflections on the Divine, still relevant for us today.

The author presents to us a theologian worthy of our acquaintance. An introduction outlines the broad topic of ‘mysticism’, helpful in putting it into perspective: not as a detached experience of some, but something we all share in prayer and in reflection on the being and nature of God.

A biographical sketch then introduces us to George Matheson, the circumstances of his life and influences on his theological thinking. McKenna puts it that ‘self-knowledge, inwardness or the examination of the inner life is a key component of the mystic’. Bernard of Clairvaux says something similar when he writes in one of his sermons that ‘today we shall read in the book of experience’, noting the importance of self-knowledge for any spiritual path. Matheson’s biography, therefore, provides us with more than a timeline and life-facts, but shows how Matheson’s life experience (not least his blindness) shaped his theology and outlook on life – including the discussion of a crisis of faith which could be seen as almost a necessary step on any mystic journey. Matheson is presented as part of a theological and philosophical habitat rather than as a singular character in the religious landscape of the 19th century, with the influence of John Caird and Hegel on Matheson’s thinking discussed in particular.

A helpful chapter entitled ‘Evolution’ deals with the earthquake of Darwinism and what it meant for the Church of the 19th century (as McKenna puts it, a

‘century of enormous scientific change’), which provides further background to the theological thinking and debate of Matheson’s time and paves the way for a deeper discussion of Matheson’s own approach to theology.

The remaining chapters – the main part of the book really – then cover key spiritual ideas central for both Matheson’s thought and mystic theology: union (or oneness with God), the richness of the inner life (and the importance of meditation and contemplative prayer in Matheson’s practice), as well as the ‘power of self-forgetfulness’ (as McKenna puts it), showing Matheson firmly to be within the bounds of ‘kenotic theology’ in his quest for union with God in his whole being. Ample quotes from Matheson’s works give good insight into the language and thinking of the theologian.

After reading the book, I know now that Matheson wrote ‘O love that wilt not let me go’ on the 6th June 1882 at the manse in Innellan. I also know more about church history in Scotland, mystical thought within the Presbyterian tradition and 19th century theological thought. But the book is far more than a biography of George Matheson or the discussion of his works: rather, the book paints a picture of the religious scene in which Matheson was immersed and which tells the story of a ‘Protestant mystic’ as a living example for the reader to engage with in their own quest for a deeper relationship with God and life.

As Evelyn Underhill once wrote: ‘the history [of the mystics] is vital for the deeper understanding of the history of humanity’, because it shows the way our ‘spiritual consciousness must necessarily unfold.’ Scott McKenna has truly gifted us a beautiful and profound reflection on this mystic pathway, built around the example of the blind Church of Scotland minister George Matheson.

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