

JOHN MACMURRAY'S RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PERSON by Esther McIntosh, *Ashgate*, Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vermont, 2011, pp. xi + 263, £50, hbk

Esther McIntosh, a Research Fellow at York St John University in the United Kingdom, published in 2004 a book entitled *John Macmurray: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Now, in this second book on him, which appeared in 2011, she offers the first comprehensive study of his religious philosophy written by a single commentator, whose familiarity with this philosopher's unpublished work amounts to a great asset.

The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1891–1976), who taught in England, South Africa and Scotland, was very influential as a personalist between 1930 and 1960. One of his most quoted excerpts is: 'Personality is mutual in its very being. The self is one term in a relation between two selves. It cannot be prior to that relation and equally, of course, the relation cannot be prior to it. "I" exist only as one member of the "you and I". The self only exists in the communion of selves' (*Interpreting the Universe*, p. 137).

There is still interest in his thought, as testified by the section of McIntosh's Bibliography entitled 'Selected Works on John Macmurray'. His best contributions to philosophy are *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*, being the Gifford Lectures of 1953 and 1954. In these Lectures McIntosh discerns two key principles: 'The first is that the self is defined by action at least as much as by thought and the second is that the development of the self requires dynamic relation with other selves' (p. 1).

Her comment on the part that Macmurray played in twentieth-century philosophy is apposite: 'At the time that Macmurray is promoting emphasis on the whole person and highlighting the vital importance of positive relationships, these are original and striking ideas' (p. 1). She sees his thought as an eclectic system which is accessible to the non-specialists in philosophy. Her Introduction, from which these quotations have been drawn, must be commended as a fine synopsis of Macmurray's ideas. Her Conclusion offers a very helpful summary of the various topics expounded in her book.

With impressive arguments, Macmurray maintained that a complete account of the nature of reality must include religion. By linking up his religious views to their historical contexts and to the other principal themes of his corpus, McIntosh provides a critical appraisal of his whole philosophy. The parts of her monograph are entitled 'The Essence of the Person', 'Developing as a Person', 'Persons and Politics', and 'Persons and Religion'.

She details, in an illuminating fashion, his theory of agency and relationality (systematically explicated in his Gifford Lectures), his views on education, the role of thought in general and of science in particular, the dualism mind/body, the intertwining of reason and emotion, the intrinsic openness of the self to the other, and the usefulness of society as different from the centrality of human relationships. In so doing, she manifests the large scope of his interests. Moreover, she clarifies the ways in which Macmurray engaged the conceptions of important thinkers such as Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, the British idealists, Marx and Freud.

Her section on 'Jesus, the Hebrew Prophet' is remarkable. She shows that Macmurray was right in asserting that Jesus was untainted by modern dualism, namely by the separation of the material and the spiritual. Jesus also refused to utilize force, which would have jeopardized his commitment to peaceful human relationships. Given that the New Testament's apocalyptic passages speak of violence and destruction, Macmurray does not interpret them literally but as

indicating that the divine purpose cannot be thwarted. Furthermore, he points out that in the Synoptic Gospels the actual opposition is not between sin and faith, but between fear and faith – the former being the expression of a pessimism, and the latter being the expression of a hope intrinsically bound up with the realistic anticipation and acceptance of suffering. Lastly, McIntosh correctly states that the fact that according to Macmurray Jesus is not divine does not subtract anything to that personalist thinker's views on religion, since he strongly insists that the function of religion is to foster the quality of interpersonal relationships.

McIntosh has kept abreast of the latest developments in the secondary literature on Macmurray and she takes into consideration the commentators' remarks and good points. At times, she can be acutely aware of his shortcomings, for instance in his either 'opaque' or 'oversimplified' characterisation of 'God', 'Christianity', 'friendship', 'positive' and 'negative', etc. And yet here is how she portrays the nature of her criticisms: 'For the most part, the areas of criticism revolve around points of detail, which do not affect the validity of Macmurray's central tenets in any irremediable way. That is, by engaging with the ambiguities and problems found in Macmurray's account, this text has attempted to refine rather than dismiss his perception' (p. 207).

Moreover, she underlines several aspects of his thought that lend themselves especially well to contemporary concerns and studies, for example about child development, pedagogy, or feminist theology. Above all, her review and discussion of Macmurray's main concepts is nuanced and represents his outlook accurately, while situating his ideas according to phases of his thinking.

A final note: In the Bibliography, section 'Unpublished Material', another PhD dissertation should be mentioned: Louis Roy, 'The Form of the Personal: A Study of the Philosophy of John Macmurray with Particular Reference to his Critique of Religious Idealism' (University of Cambridge, 1984), University Microfilm International, order no. DA8501107.

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