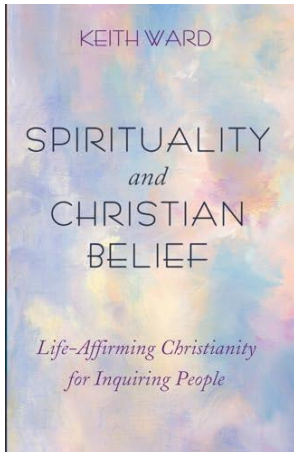


Keith Ward : Spirituality and Christian Belief



In this important and mercifully slim and accessible book, Ward sets his stall out early declaring he is a man of traditional beliefs but doesn't feel the need to believe Adam and Eve really existed or that they encountered a magically speaking serpent. He thinks those who do believe such things are doing an injustice to scripture and a disservice to people of an inquiring mind.

He notes an enormous range of different and conflicting beliefs about God throughout scripture: in the 'Old' Testament, and even within the Gospels and Epistles. This, he believes, should encourage us all to explore a wide variety of experiences and understandings of God from within and beyond the Christian traditions resisting any single interpretation of who God or Jesus is or that there is any single moral teaching within scripture. The only caveat to that is, he is quite happy to describe as 'mistaken' any belief in a God that conflicts with the compassionate image found in the Gospels. The stories about God found in the Bible are, he believes, not an attempt at historical accuracy, but are better understood as symbolically heightened narratives written to elicit faith.

Ward's strongest chapter is on the Atonement. There are three enduring caricatures of this theory that he dismisses. One is the idea that God is holy and therefore requires the sacrifice of something to placate God's honour. Another is the idea that Jesus receives the punishment of death that is owing to us. And the third is that God 'pays' the devil with the death of the Son in exchange for the release human souls. Indeed, he comments that in 'sending' the Son, God is not sending someone 'else' – God sends God-self.

Rather, he prefers to see the life and death of Jesus as an 'icon' of what God is doing throughout creation: God is constantly giving and self-sacrificing, and seeing it in the human life of Jesus just reveals to us this eternal process of salvation. It is not the death that saves, (no one has to die to make God love us) but being prepared to give and seek even if this means death reveals what God has always been doing.

The life of Jesus is then also a pattern for his followers and the Spirit makes this possible. Thus we can be set free from our self-centred inclinations, free from the need for vengeance, and learn to unite our heart with the Divine Heart – which is what the whole thing is all about.

Ward then goes on to address the End Times – which, he believes, are not imminent. We now have a better grasp of the fact that the universe is not just this planet earth and is also a tad older than the few thousand years imagined in biblical times. So, to what is Jesus going to return if, as the Bible states, the 'whole creation' is to be renewed? He is convinced that the life beyond the grave is a real life – with 'time' (no such thing then, he says) for everyone to continue their journey towards God. Thus there is no one who ends up in everlasting punishment because the self-giving of God continues in eternity until, as St Paul says, 'all are raised'. He dismisses as vindictive the early church's comments of never-ending damnation, completely at odds with what we see of Jesus in the Gospels.

This is a refreshing and mature book which enables Christians to speak with sympathy and authority to those beyond the narrow confines of our version of the faith. It is traditional in its attempt to show that Christianity is the story of our efforts through the Spirit to unite our souls with God but it dismisses very quickly some of the self-imposed obstacles that much of our language and ideas present.

Not for the faint-hearted, but very much a recommended read.