George Matheson and mysticism: a biographical study

Abstract
George Matheson, a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Church of Scotland in the late Victorian period, was a mystic. Mysticism is not commonly associated with Scottish Presbyterian ministers who stand in the Calvinist branch of the Reformed tradition. In this thesis I discuss the extent to which Mathesonian theology reflects mystical theology, generally understood, and more specifically Hegelian mysticism. Drawing on a significant number of Matheson's writings, I have created a succession of foci which encapsulate Matheson's mystical thought: union with God, the inner life, immortality of the soul, and self-forgetfulness. After a brief biographical chapter, I discuss Matheson's crisis of faith, which he suffered in the first year or two following his ordination, and his spiritual recovery. In chapter three, I discuss Matheson's contribution to the debate between science and religion and specifically his engagement with the doctrine of transcendence proposed by Herbert Spencer. In the remaining chapters, I discuss the four central themes of Matheson's work: union with God, the inner life and immortality of the soul, and self-forgetfulness (kenotic theology). In common with other mystics, Matheson's sense of union or oneness with the Divine is a central characteristic of his work. Christ in us, Christ in you, was the lived experience which moulded Matheson's spiritual life, theology and meditations. In chapter 5 I discuss Matheson's focus on the inner life, the importance of silence and solitude, and immortality of the soul. Matheson's imaginative engagement with Scripture was shaped by his physical blindness. The darkness which enveloped his existence was the darkness in which he saw and felt the mystery of God. From inescapable darkness, he saw God in all things. In the final chapter I discuss Matheson's kenotic theology. Matheson understood death and suffering, like eternal life, to be integral to the Divine.
Mysticism makes an in-depth and comprehensive exploration of mysticism. Part One examines 'The Mystic Fact,' explaining the relation of mysticism to vitalism, to psychology, to theology, to symbolism, and to magic. Part Two, 'The Mystic Way,' explores the awakening, purification, and illumination of the self; discusses voices and visions; and delves into manifestations from ecstasy and rapture to the dark night of the soul. Yet in spite of the adjustments required by such a shifting at the philosophic outlook, and by nearly twenty years of further study and meditation, the final positions which seem to me to be required by the existence of mysticism remain substantially unchanged.