

COMMITTED OPENNESS

The personal religion of William Montgomery Watt

The title I have given this short address is 'Committed Openness: a Glance at William Montgomery Watt's Religious Life'. And I think the title needs an explanation. In religion being both committed and open would be considered by many to be a contradiction in terms. There is a strong belief in both Christianity and Islam that the religious question has been fully and finally answered. The matter is closed. The revelation is sealed. All that is left is commentary, explanation and commitment. If you are open you can't be committed. If you are committed you can't be open. William Montgomery Watt would have smiled quietly at that and replied: maybe so, but I happen to be both.

Like many another distinguished Scot, he was a son of the manse, born on March 14 1909 to Andrew and Mary Watt, in Ceres, Fife, where his father was Minister. The most significant event in his life, when he was only fourteen months old, was the death of his father, who had just become Minister of Balshagray Parish Church in Glasgow. In an unpublished manuscript from his later years William meditated on the impact his father's death had on his own attitude to life. It had necessitated a lot of moving about in his early years, and he mused: 'I sometimes wonder if this early change of abode is the source of my tendency, once I have found a tolerable billet, to remain in it as long as possible.'

He was a good example of what Hugh MacDiarmid famously described as the Caledonian antizygy, the existence of two opposing or competing polarities in the same entity, the famous Scottish double-mindedness. If the search for stability of life was one of the polarities in his character, the other equally powerful drive was for intellectual and spiritual exploration.

So it was that in 1937 William made a turn that would direct the rest of his life: he discovered Islam. While studying for a doctorate at Edinburgh, he took in a Muslim lodger to make ends meet, K.A.Mannan, a student from Pakistan who was a member of the Ahmadiyya sect. This is how he described what happened: "I began to learn something about Islam, of which I had been largely ignorant; but the dominant impression was that I was engaged not merely in arguing with this individual but in confronting a century-old system of thought and life."

That turn to Islam led him to correspond with the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, George Francis Graham Brown. Brown became something of a father-figure to William, who agreed to join him in Jerusalem as his chaplain, while working on the intellectual approach to Islam. He was fast-tracked through Cuddesdon Theological College Oxford in one year and ordained deacon in 1939. He served a curacy at St Mary's The Bolton's Kensington, and began the study of Arabic at the School of Oriental Studies. He was ordained priest in 1940. When St Mary's was closed because of bomb damage, he returned to Edinburgh to finish his training as a curate at Old St Paul's, where he also began work on his doctoral thesis, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*.

He finally made it to Jerusalem to work with Bishop Brown in 1943. After his return to Scotland in 1946, he was made lecturer in Arabic at Edinburgh University, where he remained - another "tolerable billet" - until retirement in 1979. He was given a

personal chair in Arabic and Islamic Studies in 1964. William said of his commitment to the study of Islam that he always had an ability to see the other person's point of view, "indeed almost a tendency to prefer the other's point of view". And he became fascinated by the historical prejudice of the west against Islam.

His understanding of this prejudice was increased by his association with Norman Daniel, author of *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image*. Daniel persuaded him that the distorted image of Islam in the West was created by scholars between the 12th and 14th centuries to provide propaganda in support of the crusades. William came to the conviction that the distorted image '...was a negative aspect of European identity, that is, an image of what the European is not. It is then in contrast to his positive identity as a Christian. The tenacity of the prejudice I would attribute to the fact that the distorted image was an essential aspect of the emergence of European identity'.

He remained a Christian, and worked for many years as a priest for the Scottish Episcopal church, but there was a time, under the influence of Charles de Foucauld, the French priest who lived as a hermit among the Muslim desert tribes of Algeria till his assassination in 1916, when he thought of his vocation as constituting "a willed and deliberate presence" in the intellectual world of Islam. To implement this conception of presence, he often took as the basis of his daily meditation a passage either from the Qur'an or from an Islamic mystical work.

William brought the same exploratory reverence to his own Christian faith. He was born in the Kirk, evolved into Anglicanism, but retained enormous respect for the Presbyterian tradition – I don't think he thought very much of bishops – and he respected the decision of his wife, Jean, whom he married in 1943, to become a Roman Catholic. He joined the Iona Community in 1960, because he found its brand of radical and exploratory faith congenial. He continued to be both an explorer and a theological reconciler right up to the end. His last book, published in 2002 when he was 93, was 'A Christian Faith for Today', a distillation of the sort of generous Christianity to which he had given his life.

I want to conclude with an image of from William's family life. He and Jean bought their first house, the Neuk, at Bridgend, Dalkeith, in 1947, and it proved to be a very tolerable billet. Then in 1956 they acquired another house in Crail, in Fife, for holidays. Those two welcoming homes supplied an almost liturgical rhythm to their family life. At Crail, during summer holidays by the sea, William worked hard to create a little beach for his five children. He moved rocks, dug channels and battled seaweed to provide them with a clear space on the rocky shore. By summer's end it would be almost perfect, but when the Watts were back in their town house in Dalkeith, the sea would destroy what he had created. And the following summer he would have to do it all over again.

It speaks of his determination, but it also speaks of something more profound. Though the struggle against it is never finished, he spent his life battling the tide of intolerance. In our time that tide is once again at flood level.

William Montgomery Watt was a theologically liberal, socially and politically radical Christian who loved Islam. As I said at the beginning: committed openness.

