

Essays in Honor of Alister McGrath

with Bethany Sollereider, "Introduction to Essays in Honor of Alister McGrath"; Peter Harrison, "What is Natural Theology? (And Should We Dispense with It?)" ; John Hedley Brooke, "Revisiting William Paley"; Helen De Cruz, "A Taste for the Infinite: What Philosophy of Biology Can Tell Us about Religious Belief"; Michael Ruse, "The Dawkins Challenge"; Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Territories of Thinking and Feeling: Rethinking Religion, Science, and Reason with Alister McGrath"; Andrew Pinsent, "Alister McGrath and Education in Science and Religion"; Andrew Davison, "Science and Specificity: Interdisciplinary Teaching between Theology, Religion, and the Natural Sciences"; Victoria Lorrimar, "Does an Inkling Belong in Science and Religion? Human Consciousness, Epistemology, and the Imagination"; and Alister E. McGrath, "Response: Science and Religion—The State of the Art."

INTRODUCTION TO ESSAYS IN HONOR OF ALISTER McGRATH

by Bethany Sollereider

Abstract. This introduction gives a short biography of Alister McGrath, introduces the articles that are part of this special issue, and concludes with a few personal reflections on working with McGrath by the author.

Keywords: Festschrift; Inklings; Alister McGrath; natural theology; New Atheism; pedagogy; science and religion

It is with great pleasure that Arthur Petersen and myself are able to offer these essays in honor of Alister McGrath's retirement from the Andreas Idreos Chair in Science and Religion at Oxford University.¹ His life, not to mention his career, has been varied and interesting. Relating his achievements and work history reveals a whirlwind of simultaneous areas of study, work commitments, and publishing.

He studied chemistry at Wadham College, Oxford. After graduating with a first-class degree, he went on to study biochemistry, earning a D.Phil. in Oxford in 1977. His interest in theology was not far behind, and he studied for the Final Honour School in theology while complet-

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ing his D.Phil., eventually gaining first-class honours in Theology in 1978. That same year, he left Oxford for Cambridge where he took up the Naden Studentship in Divinity at St. John's College. Simultaneously, he completed the study required for ordination, and was ordained as a priest in 1981 after serving a curacy in Wollaton, Nottingham. In 1983, he returned to Oxford University as a lecturer in Christian doctrine and ethics at Wycliffe Hall. In 1993, McGrath was made a University Research Lecturer in theology at Oxford University as well as a professor of theology at Regent College, Vancouver, which he held until 1997. In 1995, he was elected to be Principal of Wycliffe Hall. In 1999, he took up a personal chair in theology at Oxford University as the Professor of Historical Theology, and earned a Doctorate of Divinity at Oxford for his published work in 2001. In 2004, McGrath resigned from being the Principal of Wycliffe Hall in order to direct the newly established Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics. In 2006, he joined Harris Manchester College, Oxford, as a Senior Research Fellow. In 2008, McGrath moved to London to the Chair of Theology, Ministry and Education at King's College and was the academic leader of the Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture. Finally, in 2014, McGrath returned to Oxford to take up the Andreas Idreos Professorship in Science and Religion.

None of these commitments capture the avalanche of writing McGrath has consistently delivered throughout his career. The scope of his work is breathtaking: his work ranges from ground-breaking academic writings in Reformation studies, systematic and historical theology to popular works in biography, apologetics, textbooks, and even a fantasy trilogy. He has written 32 monographs, 9 academic textbooks, and at least 21 other theological books for wider readership, from laypeople to clergy. McGrath is an excellent model for all who want to hold together academic rigor and popular appeal.

This issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, with essays from colleagues and former students, seeks to represent that breadth, with essays around the topics of natural theology, New Atheism, education in science and religion, and the Inklings.

The collection opens with essays from the two former holders of the Andreas Idreos chair: Peter Harrison and John Hedley Brooke. Harrison's essay re-examines and extends McGrath's arguments around the topic of natural theology. Harrison argues that the "established" understanding of natural theology is largely absent from the history of Christian thought, and that it is largely a nineteenth-century construction that was and is now still pursued largely by people outside the practice of faith. Harrison also offers constructive proposals for how and where natural theology could still be useful, both in the debates over the place of naturalism in science, and in science and religion as a discipline.

John Hedley Brooke's work revisits William Paley's work and reception, seeking to correct four caricatures that are often made of Paley's thought. First, that he neglected Hume, second that he thought his works were deductive proofs of God's existence, third that he thought of natural theology as independent of revelation, and fourth that his attention to anatomical detail left him blind to the laws bringing consilience to natural phenomena.

The third essay, rounding out the section on natural theology, is by Helen De Cruz. She draws parallels between Friedrich Schleiermacher's ideas that religion is rooted in feeling and the work of contemporary philosophy of biology and the Cognitive Science of Religion. In doing so, she shows how Schleiermacher's project aligns with a broad natural theology in the sense that religion itself could be investigated through naturalistic means.

The fourth and fifth essays approach the theme of New Atheism. Michael Ruse's reflective essay explores Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and Alister McGrath's several responses to Dawkins's work, particularly in *The Dawkins Delusion* and *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. The essay ends with Ruse's own evaluation of the success of *The God Delusion* from a sociological point of view on class divisions, particularly in the United States and Britain.

Donovan Shaefer's wide-ranging article reflects on the place of affect in rationality. Using McGrath's *The Territories of Human Reason* (OUP 2019) as a jumping off point, Shaefer introduces "Cogency theory," which brings together philosophy, theology, religious studies, and secularism studies into a unified view on how affect shapes and underlies our inferences in explanation. Shaefer then analyzes McGrath's interaction with Dawkins and the wider science-religion debate through the lens of cogency theory, showing how different conclusions are often constructed around what "feels" right rather than from any particular evidence (Stephen Colbert's use of "truthiness" points this same direction). Finally, Shaefer draws out how these reflections help us parse our cultural moment—both with regard to post-modernism and the complexities of the global ecological debate.

The sixth and seventh articles reflect on McGrath's pedagogy. Andrew Pinsent engages with McGrath's writing and teaching, highlighting the clarity of McGrath's writing as a key attribute which have led to his works being so popular. McGrath's success in this has helped to diminish the prejudice against popular writing in the academy. Pinsent uses the concept of "second-person pedagogy" to describe how McGrath invites others to think alongside him about topics, rather than to simply give verdicts on theological matters. Added to this, his refusal to take partisan theological positions and dealing with those he disagrees with fairly means he is trusted across a wide spectrum of readers. Pinsent ends with a challenge for people

to apply McGrath's principles of generous scholarship and the application of scientific thought to the realm of revealed doctrines.

Andrew Davison's essay reflects more broadly on interdisciplinary teaching in science and religion. He reflects on the challenges that teachers face in both undergraduate and graduate instruction and includes helpful recommendations on preparing graduate students seeking employment.

Victoria Lorrimar's essay combines many of the themes of imagination, interdisciplinarity, and epistemology—in asking what contributions Owen Barfield can make to science and religion. Lorrimar highlights Barfield's understanding of how human evolution has shaped language, science, and spirituality. His work on representation and participation in the evolution of consciousness in many ways parallels the work of Julian Jaynes on the bi-cameral mind, of Iain McGilchrist's work on brain hemispheres, and in other ways on the work of Max Weber on disenchantment. Lorrimar goes on to show how Barfield's views on imagination and consciousness help guide epistemology and apologetics between the extremes of scientism on one side or an ungrounded romanticism on the other.

The collection finishes with a reflection by Alister McGrath on the state of science and religion alongside responses to each of the pieces in this issue. He outlines the need for greater diversity in the field, and how a wider scope of interest will allow the discipline to grow, but will also leave it with porous, fluid boundaries. He suggests a new informing narrative to give it a more secure identity through this transition—and suggests retrieving “the disciplinary imaginative of early modern ‘natural philosophy’” as a way forward. Throughout his response, McGrath's gracious approach to the work of others, and his perceptive insights across a range of subjects are on full display. It is perhaps his demonstration of hospitable scholarship that will offer the surest way forward in this field.

On a more personal note, working with Alister over the last five years developing and running the science and religion program at Oxford University has been a distinct and memorable honor. Alister's personal warmth, his support, and his collaborative teaching style have made working with him an absolute pleasure. He showed unending patience as I pursued my McGrath myth-busting agenda (i.e., “Is it true that you have a photographic memory?” and “Is it true that you divide your day into 10-minute slots?”—to which, “No,” and “No, but I do think of 10 minutes as a useful amount of time for getting things done” are the answers). One story, that I thought might be myth but turned out to be true (“it's happened a couple of times”), perfectly illustrates both McGrath's unique abilities of mind and the warmth of his heart. He was asked to preach at a prominent church abroad and was given a particular biblical text to prepare for. When the service began, the reader got up and read a completely different passage. Rather than embarrass the organizer by pointing out the mistake and sticking to the original sermon, he simply composed a new 20-minute

sermon in the 20 seconds between the end of the reading and walking up to the pulpit.

Alongside the clarity of his teaching and writing, and the generosity of his responses to everyone, one of the things that I am still seeking to learn from him is his deep love of writing. At the end of the day, when the rest of us are settling down to Netflix or the newest *Ted Lasso* episode, Alister thinks, “At last!” and settles down to write the next few paragraphs of the newest book. Long may it continue!

NOTE

1. Arthur Petersen invited me to act as guest editor and we jointly decided on whom to ask as contributors.