Alister McGrath and Education in Science and Religion

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Alister McGrath has undoubtedly made an impressive contribution to educating people in science and religion, but what are the secrets of his success? In this paper, drawn from studies of his publications and a personal interview, I highlight the priority he gives to clarity, his second-personal pedagogy, his non-partisan trustworthiness, his encouragement of diversity, and his gentle, spell-breaking humour. For all his achievements in clearing intellectual space for revelation, McGrath has, however, tended to focus much more on science in relation to natural theology than revelation. Due to this focus, I tend to classify him as a John Bunyan rather than a Dante Alighieri. Hence McGrath, who has achieved so much in educating people in science and religion, has also left plenty of opportunities for future generations to expand on his research.

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Introduction

Alister McGrath is undoubtedly someone whose work ought to be studied by anyone interested in education in science and religion. His numerous books are rare pleasures to read for their clarity and remarkable level of scholarship across multiple disciplines, and this assessment is clearly widely shared. I witnessed the impact of his work very directly in Oxford in 2014 when one of his public lectures attracted well over a thousand attendees, filling to overflowing two of the largest lecture halls of the university and leading to a serious concern that we might be overrun. McGrath also attracts capacity audiences across Europe, the Americas and the Far East. Over the longer term, as the most recent Andreas Idreos Chair in Science and Religion at Oxford, his relaunch of the Masters course in theology, specializing in science and religion, along with new papers for undergraduates, have been hugely successful, making science and religion among the most popular subdisciplines in theology at the

university. In addition, a recent assessment, based principally on the analysis of citations, has judged him to be the most influential theologian of any kind over the last thirty years.[1]

Although McGrath has not yet written an explicit guide to education in science and religion, he is someone who has put a huge effort into education in theology in a more general sense. The most famous result has been *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, now in its sixth edition and twentieth language translation.[2] Given its goal and success, and the fact that this work has been refined repeatedly based on feedback, it serves as a paragon of McGrath's pedagogy. Given, in addition, that the majority of his publications on science and religion can be read and appreciated by an unusually broad range of readers, pedagogical lessons can be drawn from many of these. In this paper, I focus especially on *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology*,[3] based on his Hulsean Lectures for 2009 at the University of Cambridge, and which I reviewed for *The Way* in October 2012.[4] I have also interviewed McGrath directly in Oxford about his aims and pedagogical techniques.

McGrathian Pedagogy

The priority of clarity

McGrath's early focus of interest was on science. He unexpectedly converted to Christianity from atheism at the age of eighteen, when he had started studying chemistry at Wadham College, Oxford. As his scientific education continued to a doctoral degree in molecular biophysics in 1977, he studied, in parallel, for the Final Honour School of Theology, also at Oxford, gaining a first-class degree in 1978. This theological education continued during his training in Cambridge for ministry in the Anglican

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1 'Search People Result | Academic Influence' <https://academicinfluence.com/people?year-min=1990&discipline=theology> [accessed 2 December 2021].

2 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction, 6th Edition*, 6th edition (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

3 Alister E. McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

4 Andrew Pinsent, 'A Review of Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology, by Alister E. McGrath', *The Way*, 51.4 (2012).

Communion and a series of academic positions leading to his most recent appointments as the Andreas Idreos Chair at Oxford and Professor of Divinity at Gresham College.

The fact that McGrath began with science, however, has impacted enormously on his approach to teaching theology in general and science and religion in particular. He has always placed the greatest importance on clarity of explanation, a clarity that has also been an ideal of Cartesian science and Anglo-Saxon philosophy. He also underlines how this need for clarity has grown ever greater over the decades of his academic life in the face of the steady erosion of inherited Christian faith in society. Theologians today simply cannot assume that their students have any of the background knowledge that used to be taken for granted. As one example, he is not surprised and is, indeed, happy to explain what is in the Bible and how to look up a Biblical reference. As another example, his *Christian Theology: An Introduction* contains a very helpful seven pages of "Jargon-Busting: A Glossary of Theological Terms," which do exactly what the title claims. I have also noticed how McGrath addresses this need in his lectures at Oxford with the greatest sensitivity, without making people feel foolish.

Given some of the older academic prejudices against popular works, I asked McGrath whether he had faced opposition in his career due to his approach. He replied that, yes, he had been warned against being pigeonholed as a populist writer by no less a figure than Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford from 1970 to 1991. In response, he had initially divided his publications into popular works and research works, with the latter written in a more conventional contemporaneous academic style. By this means, he was able to satisfy his desire to communicate the riches of theology to a broad audience while remaining successful by more conventional academic measures.

Gradually, however, the older prejudice has died away. In McGrath's case, it is not easy to dismiss someone as superficial who has delivered both the Hulsean and Gifford Lectures, but I think that theology itself has changed, quietly but radically. Professors, including several who are currently or have been recently at the Faculty of Theology and Religion in Oxford, no longer seem ashamed of writing works that can be appreciated by intelligent non-specialists and the general public. Indeed, accessibility and impact are increasingly considered as marks of success, a trend that has been reinformed by the criteria

of success of the Research Excellence Framework in British universities. Similarly, a new wave of theological writing in the United States seems to achieve the twin goals, once considered incompatible, of being both scholarly and extremely readable. For such reasons, I would go so far as to say that we are in a new golden age of theological writing. Others will have different choices, but I would single out, as recent personal favorites, Bergsma, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*; Bennett, *Scripture Wars*; and Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*.[5] It is McGrath, however, who has played a pioneering and, probably, catalysing role in enabling this cultural transition which is continuing to transform theology.

Second-personal pedagogy

The term "second-personal pedagogy" is my own, but it seems appropriate for what McGrath describes as "thinking along topics" with others. In his own words, most theological texts look at the ideas and make judgments about the ideas, but McGrath takes a more oblique approach. He will ask students to consider what difference an idea makes, and he invites them to think with whomever they are studying. For example, in examining the Arian heresy, he will say something like, "You can see why Athanasius had concerns," implicitly inviting students to put themselves in Athanasius' position rather than simply condemning the Arians with whom he was struggling for the meaning of Christianity.

A little reflection shows the advantages of McGrath's approach. One issue is that theology can be a somewhat insular and clannish subject in which the priority can become one of finding out who is a member of one's own clan and who else should be ostracized. By contrast, thinking along a topic with others can be helpful in all kinds of ways. For example, if one appreciates why certain persons hold certain views, one may be less polemical towards them. One may also learn from their reasoning, even if they are wrong, and be more likely to correct one's own reasoning, if they are right. This approach was adopted by Thomas Aquinas and his contemporaries, especially by their consideration of objections to every theological question addressed, and ought to be a "win-win" for everyone.

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[5] John Bergsma, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Revealing the Jewish Roots of Christianity* (Image, 2019); Rod Bennett, *Scripture Wars: Justin Martyr's Battle to Save the Old Testament for Christians* (Sophia Institute Press, 2019); Brant James Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary: Unveiling the Mother of the Messiah* (New York: Image, 2018).

There is another reason why this second-personal pedagogy may be important, namely that a teacher tries to stimulate insights, that is, new understanding in others. Unlike logical reasoning, insight remains extremely mysterious and can rarely be planned or anticipated. Nevertheless, situations in which one aligns with others psychologically, namely one's teacher or the person one is studying, can plausibly help to trigger such insights shared with the second person. Jane Austen seems to hold this view, as expressed in the following:

> Kept back as she [Fanny] was by everybody else, his [Edmund's] single support could not bring her forward; but his attentions were otherwise of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures. He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of history; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment: he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise.[6]

In this text, Edmund constantly seeks to align himself with Fanny in a second-personal manner, by taking an interest in what interests her, encouraging and correcting her as required. This manner of teaching is central to the pedagogy of the University of Oxford, which still maintains a tutorial system, but it is one that is well-suited to McGrath's priorities in pedagogy and his enjoyment of teaching. As he told me, there is a great joy in seeing someone understand something.

Non-partisan trustworthiness

In pedagogy as in law, even minor imperfections tend to be punished severely. Teachers who make mistakes lose the trust of their students and even a small amount of error tends to overshadow what may otherwise be perfectly true. Conversely, truthfulness in what can be checked independently by a student lends credence to what may be new to a student.

One of the most striking aspects of McGrath's work, in all its forms, is that it is extraordinarily well-informed. He has doctorates in molecular biophysics, theology, and intellectual history. His

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6 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. by James Kinsley, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 18.

personal aim over several decades has been to write a book along with four other publications every year. This background, along with his teaching and lecturing responsibilities over many decades, means that he is also extremely well-read. He is known at Oxford today for being able to lecture on practically any subject that might be of interest to a student of theology, at undergraduate or graduate level, and, if necessary, without any special preparation. This accumulated knowledge, over many decades, has contributed enormously to McGrath being considered trustworthy.

I have personal experience of this trustworthiness. I have a considerable background in science and religion, with doctorates in both philosophy and particle physics, together with seven years of ecclesiastical training that included a great deal of historical study of theology. Given this background, it is rare for me to review a book in science and religion without finding at least some errors or misrepresentations, simply because it is so difficult and unusual to obtain deep training in more than one discipline. McGrath's work is a rare exception. In reviewing *Darwinism and the Divine*, I was quite astonished to find no mistakes at all to the limit of my own considerable knowledge. McGrath puts a great deal of effort into getting his details right, in effect following Aristotle's dictum that "… we must inquire which of the common statements are right and which are not right …"[7] For many years, for example, when writing about someone who was still alive, he would check with the person whether or not what he had written was correct. This kind of effort can be wearisome, and the benefits slow to accumulate, but McGrath is someone for whom it has borne pedagogical fruit.

There is another sense in which McGrath is trusted, namely his remarkable achievement in writing works, like those of C. S. Lewis, that can be accepted across an unusually wide spectrum of Christian belief. As McGrath has confirmed to me, his priority has been to tell the truth as clearly and simply as possible, and whether he is writing about Aquinas or Zwingli, he summarizes their positions and explains why they defend these positions as fairly as possible. He thoroughly eschews partisan language and avoids any hasty judgments of any kind. Although these steps might seem straightforward, it is rare for them to implemented so thoroughly and successfully. One measure of success is that translations of his

[7] *Metaphysics* VII, 2, 1028b27 – 28.

work *Christian Theology: An Introduction* have been accepted and supported by both Catholic and Protestant seminaries in the Balkans, and by Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic seminaries in Japan.

Encouraging Diversity

As a corollary to his non-partisan approach to theology, McGrath has strongly encouraged diversity in science and religion at Oxford. This achievement is striking given that the immediate cultural antecedents of the field can be found in the male WASP culture of nineteenth-century Britain and the United States, especially in the debates over natural theology. When I arrived back in Oxford in 2009, this background still shaped, albeit faintly, the culture of the field of science and religion.

McGrath, however, has actively encouraged a broadening of the field. On a personal note, and writing as a Roman Catholic priest, it has been a privilege to work with him and we have never had any friction in working together for nearly a decade. We have also vastly expanded the geographic scope of our collaborators. Latin America, for example, with nearly 10% of the world's population, had almost no involvement in work in science and religion prior to the two large Templeton-funded projects we undertook from 2011, with thirty-nine sub-grants involving over two hundred and fifty scholars across seventeen countries in the region. More recently, the Ian Ramsey Centre has undertaken a project on an even larger scale in twenty-four countries across Central Europe, the Balkans, the Baltic, the Dnieper Basin, and Transcaucasia. These two regions, Latin American and Central and Eastern Europe, encompass a great many Catholic countries as well as the birthplace of Protestantism, along with Slavonic Orthodoxy, the home of the ancient Georgian and Armenian churches, and three Muslim-majority countries, broadening immensely the religious and cultural range of participants in the field.

These projects have certainly helped to broaden the range of persons, cultural backgrounds, and questions addressed among those studying and researching science and religion at Oxford, and are continuing to recruit new students from Eastern Europe and Latin America. Moreover, this cultural broadening has taken place in parallel with two other changes. First, there has been a steady growth of interest in psychology and neuroscience, which may represent the new frontier of exploration in science

and religion. Second, there has been a substantial increase in the number of women. At the time of writing, at a recent social event bringing together the majority of our students and early-career researchers, the majority of those present were women from across the world.

Although these changes are consistent with broader social and academic trends, McGrath has welcomed and done much to encourage these changes at the University of Oxford.

Gentle, spell-breaking humour

Another aspect of McGrathian pedagogy that is worth mentioning is his use of a gentle, deadpan humour. In *Why God Won't Go Away*, for example, he has a little fun with the New Atheists, in particular, the invention of the term 'Brights' by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell. This word was seen quite widely, for a while, as a new, positive and upbeat term for atheists and their fellow-travellers. The principal aspect of McGrath's response is simply to list all available attendance figures for meetings of Brights in London between 2003 and 2010, noting drily that any church that "garnered such meagre attendances on such an infrequent basis would have been closed down years ago."[8]

Even in these instances, McGrath avoids direct ridicule and subcontracts his most direct criticisms. For example, on the choice of the word 'Bright', he cites and agrees with Christopher Hitchens, who criticized the "cringe-worthy proposal" that atheists should nominate themselves as "Brights". This kind of humour, consisting principally of presenting some carefully chosen facts, does, I think, play an important pedagogical role. In particular, McGrath employs this method, gently and sparingly, to perform 'spell-breaking', to clear his students' minds of intellectual blockages or superficial intimidation.[9]

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8 Alister McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away - Engaging with the New Atheism*, 1st Edition (London: SPCK Publishing, 2011), pp. 35–39.

9 For more on spell-breaking in philosophy, see Andrew Pinsent, 'Spell-Breaking with Revitalizing Metaphors', *Res Philosophica*, 96.1 (2019), 3–15.

A John Bunyan, not a Dante Alighieri

Given McGrath's successes, is there anything that remains to be said, especially about the future of education in science and religion? I think the answer is yes, and it would be helpful to explain with reference to two of the most famous writers in Christian history, John Bunyan and Dante Alighieri, who wrote, respectively, an allegorical narrative and an allegorical poem of the Christian life.

Both Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Dante in *The Divine Comedy* write about the drama of salvation. For Bunyan, the drama is focused on Christian's journey from his home in the "City of Destruction", through the narrow wicket gate, and along a long and dangerous road, beset by temptations and intimidations, culminating in the "Celestial City" of heaven. For Dante, the journey is through every state of the human soul, descending first through the circles of hell, then ascending through the stages of purgatory to reach the earthly paradise. In the final book, he rises through the spheres of heaven, culminating in a vision of the Triune God in which his soul harmonises with the love of God.

Both works have been fantastically influential and are considered masterpieces of their respective languages, English and Italian, but they are noticeably different in their termination points. Bunyan takes the reader to the gates of the Celestial City, roughly equivalent to the end point of Dante's second book, which culminates in the earthly paradise. Dante, however, adds another whole book, the *Paradiso*, describing the great diversity of the blissful souls of heaven and culminating in the vision of God.

How, then, do Bunyan and Dante relate to the scope of McGrath's work? My answer is that Bunyan's stopping point, at the gates of the Celestial City, roughly sums up the limit that McGrath has so far set around his work in science and religion. He has excelled in natural theology and done a great deal to revive this area of research. He has also excelled in clearing away the obstacles to belief, especially in deconstructing the totalizing claims of scientism. Moreover, his *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, presents, with admirable clarity, the theological claims of Christianity, the reasons behind these claims and a summary of their historical development where appropriate.

What McGrath does not generally do, however, is to attempt to apply insights from science to revealed theology. Of course, it may be thought that science has little or nothing to contribute but, in response, I cite a rather important example from early Christianity. Controversially, the word *homoousios* was included in the Nicene Creed of the first Ecumenical Council in 325 to describe the unity of the Father and Son. This word was included as a defence against the Arian heresy, which denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ. *Homoousios*, meaning 'of one being or substance', was not found in scripture, however, but drew from the Greek word *ousia* ('substance'), inspired in part by the unity of living and growing things as studied by Aristotle, the first biologist. So science has had a surprisingly long history interacting with theology, and there may well be other opportunities for insights.

Looking to future work, how, then, should one proceed in applying insights from science beyond the scope of natural theology? There is no doubt that revealed theology does present different challenges to natural theology, an obvious one being that one has to wrestle more with confessional distinctions if one is to engage with the issues without being partisan. In my opinion, a masterclass in how to carry out this challenging task can be found in chapter 9 of Eleonore Stump, *Atonement*.[10] The goal of the book is to make progress on one of the most challenging unsolved or badly solved problems in revealed theology, namely how Christ's sacrificial death brings about human salvation. Stump draws from insights in science, especially contemporary psychology, in tackling this problem.

In chapter 9, she addresses the difficult task of interpreting the role of the Eucharist in the work of salvation or re-uniting us with God. The difficulty is augmented by the substantial disagreements among Christians about the Eucharist. Stump addresses this problem by first outlining what the Eucharist means in extremely broad terms that would be acceptable to practically everyone who self-declares as Christian. She then proceeds to present two accounts: a sparse account, in which Christ's words, "This is my body," are understood in a symbolic way; and a metaphysically richer account, in which the words are interpreted in some way that is more literal. Stump argues that both accounts can support her more general

[10] Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

conclusion, namely that the Eucharist aids a person in perseverance in the Christian life. In this way, Stump accommodates divergences in revealed theology while keeping her main argument intact.

To give another example of insights in science and religion being applied to revealed theology, for the last decade I have been working principally on the topic of theological anthropology. The central question being investigated is very straightforward to state, namely, "What is a Christian?" Specifically, I have been working on an interpretation of the virtue ethics of St Thomas Aquinas that makes use of new insights into the second-person perspective from experimental psychology.[11] On this account, the most crucial change in the transition to being a Christian is the gift of a second-personal relationship to God, oriented towards friendship with God, the kind of relationship that causes Augustine to exclaim, "Late have I loved you!" (*Confessions* 10.27.38). The topic is very much one that belongs to revealed rather than natural theology, and is clearly a matter of importance to any self-declared Christian.

These examples, ancient and modern, should serve to highlight how insights from science can be applied fruitfully to the content of revelation. For all his brilliance and achievements in clearing intellectual space for revelation, McGrath, however, has tended to focus much more on natural theology. For this reason, as noted previously, I tend to classify him as being more like John Bunyan, who brings the reader to the gates of the heavenly city, rather than Dante Alighieri, who goes right into the circles of heaven. One further conclusion is therefore clear: McGrath, who has done so much to educate people in science and religion has left plenty of opportunities for future generations to expand on his research.

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