

ANTI-ATHEISM OF ALISTER MCGRATH FROM HIS BOOK, MERE THEOLOGY (SPCK, London, 2010)

Alister Mc Grath is a popular Christian writer in the vein of C S Lewis. He writes in defence of the faith. He is heavily overrated as the following quote shows where he claims that truth does not matter. "Hopelessly overstated arguments that once seemed so persuasive - such as 'science disproves God' - have lost their credibility. Anyway, our culture's criterion of acceptability is not 'Is it right?' but 'Does it work?' And the simple fact is that religious belief works for many, many people, giving direction, purpose and stability to their lives ...". It works for some not many. And are we to invent all the religions we want to as long as they work? People think a lot of things work when they don't. Think of the terrible things they do with their vote! Mc Grath plainly does not care that once truth is demoted justice soon ends up in trouble.

This is an examination of his book, Mere Theology.

Page 66 says that good arguments for Christianity do not make converts. What they do is support those who already believe and remove obstacles for those who do not believe. True conversion is change of the heart and the spirit.

There is conversion as in changing from one belief to the other.

There is conversion as in changing your heart to a different state - eg becoming a less bitter person.

Page 71 says that the Christian faith is reasonable because it makes sense of what we perceive and observe and experience. It approvingly tells us that Simone Weil stated that if the bulb lights up the room, you do not look at its brightness to work out how powerful it is. You simply look at the objects it lights up to work that out. She said that Christian faith and faith in God are reasonable in the sense that they make sense of what we observe and experience. This is really saying that having a theory that seems to account for the kind of beings we are and the kind of universe we have and our existence and its existence is reasonable. That view is correct. But it does not follow that the Christian faith and faith in God are the best theories or that they are good theories or even coherent theories. The biggest problem is that they are actually incoherent.

Take for example how Christians teach, "The reason Jesus' tomb was empty was because he rose from the dead. The empty tomb is evidence that he rose for nobody had reason to steal the body". But we cannot assume nobody had a reason. And the gospels do not say that when the tomb was opened that the body had already gone. In fact they suggest the tomb opened and there was nobody about until the women came and found the body missing. The body could have been taken after the tomb was opened and the body taken.

If we can come up with a faith theory to make sense of what we observe and experience then surely the theory should be atheistic? We cannot observe and experience God creating. And if we think we experience God, it is only because we have put that interpretation on the experience. That is not experiencing God but experiencing the perceptions you have made of God.

McGrath likes to look for contradictions in the writings of atheists. He states on page ix that there is more to the Christian religion than trying to make sense of things. How hypocritical of him for making sense of things means dealing with and overcoming contradictions!

Page 78, he says that when he was an atheist, he concluded that nobody would adopt such a dreary position as atheism unless it were true. He found the stuff about God and Jesus to be too good to be true.

The Christians argue that the people who died before they would repudiate the Christian faith show that the faith must be VERY believable and credible when it is worth dying for. They ignore the atheists who suffer by adopting atheism. They even impugn their sincerity.

Many atheists are so appalled at human suffering that they despise the thought of honouring God for they don't want to even slightly collude with a God who allows it to happen and who seems to be deaf to the agonising cries. They sacrifice whatever benefits that are alleged to come from faith in God in order to suffer despair with the despairing in a true spirit of compassion. Compassion is suffering with the suffering. These atheists are the real martyrs. Their testimony is better than the blood of insane Christians who choose to die rather than abandon or mock their ridiculous religion. They know nobody has the right to say suffering is agreeable with a good divine plan unless you walk in the steps of every person who has suffered and who will. It is easy for you to say its a plan when you can't know what it is like no matter how much you suffer.

Page 88, Dawkins is accused of saying that science explains everything. One problem McGrath finds is that science and its theories cannot explain everything about the world and cannot explain what its purpose is. Another problem is that science is not about explaining the world but the phenomena in the world. John Lennox is cited as stating that science can tell you the composition of a cake but it cannot tell you that the cake is a birthday cake. Its structure/composition is one thing and its purpose is another.

But science can know its purpose is a cake period! What a bizarre stupid argument from Lennox! Does it matter if science works out of it it is birthday cake or not as long as it recognises it as the cake that it is?

Dawkins holds that in principle science explains everything. That is all that he is saying. In practice its different. We know that in theory science could explain the time Joshua made the sun stand still. But it can't in practice for we can't go back in time and do tests. Christians have to use the straw-man approach to condemn science!

Page 89 says that scientific explanations and religious explanations can supplement each other.

This is a lie. If you know what science has found, it is easy to invent a faith that sits well with the discoveries. The faith will fill the gaps in our scientific knowledge. Other people can come up with faiths to rival yours and which also claim to be supplemented by science and fit its gaps. The end result will be many religions all contradicting one another even in foundational matters and all claiming to show that their beliefs and science do not contradict each other. That is not supplementation. It is merely using religion to fill the gaps in science. We talk about the God of the Gaps. This is Religion of the Gaps. It is dishonest to claim that your faith and science both give you the truth when a faith that contradicts yours can fit science as well. And that dishonesty is epidemic in Christianity.

It is okay to make guesses to fill the gaps as long as you are willing to abandon them should new evidence tell you to. But to start filling the gaps with God and Religion is saying you must use dogma to fill the gaps. Dogma is that which must be believed even if the evidence refutes it. Organised religion means organised dogmatism. Religion praises the husband who refuses to let evidence of his wife's infidelity stop him trusting her. It praises his dogmatism and asks us to be supporters of its dogmatism.

The God of the Gaps and the Religion of the Gaps idea argues, "I don't know what plugs the hole therefore it is God and religion that does it." This is irrational and foolish. It does not follow.

Consider the Christian faith's testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. Science cannot prove that Jesus rose for there is no possibility of doing experiments on his body to see if its really dead and no possibility of testing the risen body to see if it is really Jesus raised up. To say that Christianity is supplemented by science and vice versa is silly. Science implies that believing what is tested and determined through experimentation is the most rational form of belief and the best attested. This by default declares religious faith to be inferior. What kind of supplementation is that?

Page 94 mentions Clifford's *The Will to Believe* in which Clifford argued that it is always dishonest and immoral to believe anything on insufficient evidence. Clifford was saying nobody should be allowed to believe things when there there little or no evidence for them. McGrath approves of the psychologist, William James', refutation of this. James argued that its unrealistic to expect people to always look for enough evidence. There isn't the time and sometimes we can't test things. James said we need the working hypothesis. A working hypothesis is a theory we make so that we can live in the world. For example, if you take on employment job you create the working hypnotist that you will get paid. For James faith is a working hypothesis. James said that such faith was not immoral as long as you were open to new evidence and willing to revise or even abandon your faith for another should it turn out irrational or seriously harmful. James said that dogmatic faith was a contradiction in terms. This is faith that ignores evidence. The believer will not change no matter what. For James, the person who ignores evidence against his faith is not a real believer at all. He would be a bigot or an addict or both.

Faith that is a working hypothesis is such weak faith that it would be closer to an assumption than anything else.

If you have to believe, that does not mean you just settle for believing. You believe if you have to but as soon as you no longer have to you must check out its accuracy. If the belief is true it will only get stronger and better.

The religious believer who has faith that is based on little or no evidence and does not avail of the opportunity to check its veracity is showing signs of bigotry. Bigotry is a refusal to honour truth and correctness and by implication those who honour them. It makes life more difficult for those who care about the truth. The religious believer who goes further and who ignores arguments against his faith is far worse.

Page 105 says that Charles Darwin was not an atheist though at the end of his life he did not accept traditional Christian beliefs. Page 106 McGrath states that he sees the evidence as showing that Darwin didn't want to talk about his religious

beliefs and considered them to be a private matter.

McGrath is trying to soften the truth that Darwin made a huge repudiation of Christianity - Christians simply are not allowed to believe and cannot believe that faith is just a personal matter. The Christian is called to share the faith and resist the state when the state undermines the faith.

Darwin's privacy may indicate that he was indeed an atheist!

Page 115 advocates the view that if evolution is true, then God was involved in it. He set things up to make themselves.

So God sets it up so that when a thing from the sea evolves into an ape that it looks like he wasn't involved! If he hides so much how can we believe in miracles? Evolution would be more certain than miracles so it would be evidence that if there is a God he does not like to draw attention to his existence. McGrath on pages 96 and 97 gives us examples of evolution. He accepts it. So McGrath believes in natural selection - survival of the most versatile. He also thinks Christianity is the one true faith - he insinuates that the Christian can be a better person than the non-Christian or the person who has such unorthodox beliefs that he or she cannot be considered to be a real Christian. Clearly, putting two and two together he thinks the goal of evolution is to produce Christians by natural selection. Any other kind of human being is inferior.

Page 120 sneakily dismisses Dawkins objections to the moral laws of the Bible God. This God demanded that the Israelite who did not obey the law to rest on the Sabbath was to be put to death. McGrath says that Dawkins talks if these rules were binding on today's Christians which they are not. McGrath complains that Dawkins makes no effort to work out how such texts are understood in the Christian community.

But belief in the authority of the rules is binding on Christians. The Christians hold that the rules were correct but today God has suspended them. It seems the laws are still in force. But if they are not, the problem is that God wanted that man cruelly put to death for a peccadillo. That is the issue. It is the principle that is the problem not whether or not the rule is binding on Christians today.

Page 122 states that religion is a false universal. In other words there are religions but the thing called religion doesn't exist.

Confucianism and some systems that ignore the supernatural are really not religions at all. Religion is what implicitly or explicitly embraces the supernatural. Religion tends to be a label. No two Catholics for example believe the same way. Thus they are really two faiths under one label.

Page 124 approves of the research of Robert Pape that alleged that if all suicide bombings since 1980 are looked at, religious belief alone cannot account for them. Pape said that when religion played a role it did not play a sufficient role. It was the other motivations - political and the fact that the bombers had no other way to carry out the bombings - that moved them to become human bombs.

Atheists rightly point out that religion might have been the thing that made them take that little step over the threshold to become murderers. It is good that Pape admitted that religion has a part in it.

Many religions demand that religious principles be applied even when the believer seems to be doing something non-religious. For example, the good Catholic may do his work well and not even mention religion but his motivation is to serve his god through his religion. Consider the economic and social and patriotic reasons the suicide bomber has. They are really religious underneath it all.

Page 125 says that absolutism causes the problems associated with religion. The absolutist makes absolute roles that must never be disobeyed. He does this because he sees things in himself that he doesn't like. For example, if he has a sexual weakness for women, he may force women into burkas to hide their attractiveness from him. His controlling is violence in itself and easily erupts into more open violence. He hates being challenged. McGrath observes that absolutism is a problem in religion but anything human is prone to it. Politics is rife with examples of dangerous absolutism.

Take an absolutist atheist. He goes, "I know my unbelief in God is correct. I forbid you to build a Church near my house for I don't want to see it. It is an insult to the truth that there is no God." If he had any self-respect or self-confidence he would not carry on like that. The true atheist will be so confident that he is right that he will not care about the Church. He will understand that it takes time for people to absorb the truth and to deal with it. His absolutism looks ridiculous.

If you want to be an absolutist and get influence and a semblance of credibility you simply have to claim that you have supernatural knowledge that you are right. There is no other way. In other words, true absolutism is always religious thought not always overtly. Ask yourself who sounds the biggest fool:

PERSON A, Socialists should not be tolerated because republicanism is undeniably right. I say this on my own authority.

Comment: Person A cannot go that far with their own belief or opinion. He cannot have absolute proof that he is right. He is really pretending that just because he feels something that proves it to be true!

PERSON B, Socialists should not be tolerated because republicanism is undeniably right. I say this on God's authority for he has revealed this to me and I know he is right.

Comment: Person B is not as ridiculous as Person A. If God exists then we have to admit the possibility that B really does know this.

Clearly B is the most dangerous of the two.

McGrath makes the point that anything that tries to give people meaning in life and purpose can lead to absolutism especially when it is challenged. Atheists tend to get meaning in life from all the little things. Religionists seek that one big thing that one big God that is going to bring them meaning in life. In reality they are trying to avoid getting meaning in the normal little things and that is dangerous. McGrath's point proves that religion is intrinsically dangerous. When it is good it is still a disaster waiting to happen.