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# The Interface of Science, Theology, and Religion

Essays in Honor of Alister E. McGrath

*Presented on the Occasion of McGrath's 65th Birthday*

Edited by DENNIS NGIEN

Foreword by GRAHAM TOMLIN

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THE INTERFACE OF SCIENCE, THEOLOGY, AND RELIGION  
Essays in Honor of Alister E. McGrath

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# Introduction

DENNIS NGIEN

ALISTER E. MCGRATH CURRENTLY holds the Andreas Idreos Professorship in Science and Religion in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford. In celebration of McGrath's sixty-fifth birthday in 2018, this *Festschrift* aims to highlight him as a lauded scholar, who exemplifies an interface of science, theology, and religion. It comprises works by McGrath's theological allies and colleagues. It too presents an opportunity for thinkers from various backgrounds to pay tribute to McGrath, who has risen to a life of significance as a scientist-turned-theologian, professor, author, Christian apologist, and churchman. A word of thanks must be extended to the contributors and endorsers in this volume. I am also indebted to Kate Wong, who helped typeset the manuscript. All their efforts have made my task as the editor a pleasant and rewarding experience.

Theology is not hopelessly irrelevant, as it offers manifold service to the church, and speaks to the world, to culture, and to society in general. First, didactically, theology serves the teaching function of the Christian church. Second, polemically, theology aids in defense of the Christian truth against error within the church or from quasi-Christian movements. Third, apologetically, theology is done in response to the prevailing criticisms of Christianity or in response to questions about ultimate reality allegedly raised by humankind, including science, the new atheism, and religious pluralism. Fourth, spiritually, theology functions as the essential background for the formulation of the principles of piety and application of theological truth to Christian living.<sup>1</sup> Fifth, pastorally, theology—good theology—helps nurture

1. Cf. Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (Westminster, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1987), 22. Spiritual theology is that branch of theology concerned with the principles and practices of living the Christian life.

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souls, especially those of the wounded. McGrath articulates eloquently that the church needs theology precisely for the reasons mentioned above.

Scripture is the norm, but tradition, McGrath writes, “can refer to both the action of passing teachings on to others . . . and to the body of teachings which are passed on in this manner.” Tradition is both “a process as well as a body of teaching.”<sup>2</sup> The genius of McGrath is his remarkable ability to write in a clear, concise, and lucid manner that draws the readers to participate with the great thinkers of the Christian tradition, past and present. McGrath has not pitted his task as a systematic theologian against the work of the historians, but has sought to build bridges between the two disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Praiseworthy is his emphasis on history, seeing it as essential for understanding the nature of the church and its mission in the world. His reliance of classical Christian orthodoxy on careful historical analysis is evident. All of his scholarship and publications focus on the five categories of historical investigation: tradition, identity, ideas, contexts, and individuals.<sup>4</sup> Individuals and faith communities utilize tradition to inculcate identity, helping those who claim Christian faith to know who they are and where they belong in the church and in the world. As the vehicle for passing on identity and ideas, tradition enables us to inquire what really constitutes a Christian, and what kind of Christianity best defines the nature of the gospel and its implications for the life of the church.

McGrath’s colleagues provide glimpses into his vision of how the biblical message has made and continues to make its impact in our world. In the New Testament Christian initiation, becoming a Christian involves repentance and faith. But it also includes baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. Tony Lane compares that pattern with the evangelistic practice of British Evangelicals in the 1960s, in the current century, and in online materials. He examines books by Billy Graham, John Stott, Michael Green, and David Watson, as well as the much-used booklet *Journey into Life*, all of which were produced in the 1960s. Here the need for repentance and faith is evident, receiving the Spirit is clearer in some accounts than others; baptism is excluded in the process of becoming a Christian. Tony also investigates the

2. *Christianity: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 107.

3. See *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 6th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017); *The Christian Theology Reader*. 5th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017). These two books reflect McGrath’s attempt to bridge historical and systematic theology; they too have become the seminal texts for an introductory course in systematic theology in several theological schools.

4. See Bill J. Leonard, “Why Study Church History? Listening to Saints and Sinners,” in *Theology in the Service of the Church. Essays Presented to Fisher H. Humphreys*, eds. Timothy George and Eric F. Mason (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 62–71.

recent and the frequently used enquirer's courses *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored*, together with two popular booklets. In these materials, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit is more pronounced than their predecessors of the 1960s, but the role of baptism is left unattended. The online resources are less clear on the Holy Spirit and equally ignore baptism. The author offers five possible explanations for this consistent marginalisation of baptism. Finally, he admonishes Evangelicals to apply to their evangelism their declaration about the authority and normative role of Scripture.

Patrick Franklin explores the doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for ecclesial life. More specifically, the participatory approach to missional ecclesiology serves as a corrective to pragmatic, functional tendencies within some of the missional church literature. His fundamental assumption is that the God who sends is identical to the God who loves. This underscores that the mission of God is theologically grounded in God, whose essence is love. The loving Father who initiates his movement toward us through the Son in the Spirit is the same one who draws us into the heavenly sanctuary through the Son in the Spirit. This is borne out in Basil of Caesarea, who stresses the double movement of God in relation to us: the God-humanwardness, in which God first descends to us in the Son and reveals himself by the Holy Spirit as the object of our worship; and the human-Godwardness, in which the Spirit unites us to Christ and draws us to participate in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father (and thus also his ministry and mission). The double movement of the Trinity thus constitutes the condition of the possibility of true worship, faith, and practice.

Dating from the spring of 1979, McGrath was working on Luther at Cambridge University, under the direction of Professor Gordon Rupp.<sup>5</sup> Since then he has become a renowned reformation scholar, resulting in the publication of several major monographs including *Luther's Theology of the Cross*,<sup>6</sup> *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture*,<sup>7</sup> *Reformation Thought*,<sup>8</sup> and *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*.<sup>9</sup> Much of what he has written has benefitted the academy and the church; it too has rubbed off on several reformation scholars represented in this volume.

5. See McGrath's foreword to my *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Christ in Luther's Sermons on John* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), ix.

6. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.

7. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

8. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

9. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

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Martin Luther's doctrine of God as Creator, who brings into existence all things *ex nihilo*, without any merits of our own, constitutes the basis of the providential care of the Creator throughout his creation. This doctrine of providence, as Robert Kolb avers, is reflected in Luther's sermons and university lectures. Particularly the psalms and the stories of God's presence and interaction with his people in Genesis and the gospels supplied Luther with the content for an articulation of God's providence. God provides the material blessings sufficient to sustain body and life; his providence also includes the preservation of his human creatures in the face of multiple dangers. God's immanence bestows comfort in illness and persecution while it imparts health and peace at other times. This provision and protection for people occurs through gifts in nature and in the outworking of the callings of daily life to serve the neighbor. Faith perceives and receives God's bountiful blessings; the exercise of that faith encompasses both thanksgivings and petitions.

Both Luther and Calvin, Randall Zachman argues, understand the death of Christ in light of the fortunate or wonderful exchange Christ has made with sinners. Both also claim that God sent Christ to die for us out of sheer free love and mercy, to reconcile the sinful world to God. However, Luther claims that the free love of God frees us from the oppression brought about by our sin, by taking our sin from us and laying it upon Christ, so that Christ might destroy sin, death, and the wrath of God in his death, following Isaiah 53:6. Calvin, on the other hand, interprets Paul's statement that while we were yet enemies Christ died for us (Romans 5:10) to mean that God is as much the enemy of sinners as sinners are the enemies of God. Hence Calvin claims that God sent Christ out of love for sinful humanity in order to appease the wrath of God by his death, so that God could truly love sinners whom God would otherwise be compelled to hate. For Calvin, the death of Christ not only reconciles sinners to God, but it also reconciles God to sinners, by appeasing God's righteous wrath and vengeance against sin, following Isaiah 53:5.

Luther and Calvin, Sung Wook Chung claims, conceive of freedom as the integral aspect of the doctrine of salvation and its implication for public and civil ethics, the former grounds the latter. The reformers rediscovered the authentic and apostolic gospel whose central characteristic was the good news of not only freedom from the negatives — the law, sin, death, hell and the devil but also freedom for the positives — obedience, service and good works. They share the same contents concerning the function of law, which exposes human sinfulness and ultimately leads to Jesus Christ as savior. Through the recovery and restoration of the gospel of freedom, they endeavored to reform the church, and work out the ethical implications for

both private and public life. Then the author concludes with applying the Reformation insights to global Christianity in general and Asian Christianity in particular. This shows that the Reformation's theological legacy will be faithfully handed down to next generations, henceforth making a significant contribution to the healthy future of global Christianity.

Oliver Crisp identifies in the New England theologian, Jonathan Edwards, a quandary about the atonement, addressing the question of how Christ in becoming our penal substitute atones for human guilt without compromising his integrity. "Christ does as it were hereby bring their guilt upon himself," Jonathan Edwards wrote, "but not in any blameable sense." Oliver seeks to offer a cogent presentation that addresses this lacuna; and this he does in the spirit of Edwards, as it were, to resolve this puzzle in his atonement theology. He argues that, strictly speaking, Christ does not assume the guilt of fallen humanity. Indeed, he cannot do so because he is not guilty of sin. Nevertheless, Christ can be treated as a representative standing in for fallen human beings. In acting as a representative and a penal substitute he may be said to assume the penal consequences of the sin of fallen human beings. A real union with Christ forms the basis of the legal union with Christ in atonement. This reflects a vicarious act of representation that involves suffering the penal consequences for human sin, though not suffering the punishment for human sin and guilt.

McGrath has written three volumes of *A Scientific Theology*, categorized under three specific titles and topics: nature, reality, and theory.<sup>10</sup> This work explores the issue of theological method rather than specific theological topics. The second volume "Reality" deals with the issue of realism in science and theology. Jonathan Wilson takes McGrath's Reality as a focal point for investigating the question, "What is real?" Jonathan engages Richard Rorty, T. F. Torrance, Roy Bhaskar, and Alister McGrath to argue for a doxological practice rather than an epistemological framing of the question. Jonathan considers it a mistake to frame the work of theology by first giving an account of natural theology and natural sciences because the "object" in question in these three spheres (or practices) is categorically ineffable and incommensurable. The answer to "What is real?" is to be found in the practice of discipleship, which at its core is the disciple community gathered in worship. As such theology is an *a posteriori* discipline, or more accurately, doxological theology offers adequately an account of our being grasped by Reality. The strengths of this doxological practice are briefly suggested, and

10. *A Scientific Theology*, 3 vols., *Nature, Reality, and Theory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001–03).

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this particular practice is set within the gathering of God's people—the community of disciples—and other practices of the community.

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen argues for a theologically-grounded interdisciplinary account of the wideness of Christian hope. A comprehensive eschatological vision should comprise personal, communal, and cosmic dimensions and engage not only biblical-theological but also scientific—as well as, ideally—religious viewpoints. The author begins to identify the various eschatological constituents and insights in culture, religions, and sciences. Whilst he discerns an eclipse of eschatological hope in modern/contemporary theology, he too delineates some promising new developments on the way to a comprehensive Christian vision. Thereafter the author offers his own vision of a new kind of Christian eschatology in which personal and communal hope, human and cosmic destiny, as well as present and future—orientations are juxtaposed in a dynamic mutual correlation. Because of the oceanic immensity of the end, the eschatologist must accept a certain ambiguity when dealing with events no one has beheld; he too must observe the limit of human language and reason, though not capitulate before the bar of reason. Theological imagination is required to speak of eschatology, in a noetic, metaphorical, and testimonial manner. As McGrath himself states: “From a Christian perspective, the horizons defined by the parameters of our human existence merely limit what we can see; they do not define what there is to be seen.”<sup>11</sup>

In his *Re-Imagining Nature*,<sup>12</sup> McGrath proposes that the natural world is to be apprehended through the Christian imagination rather than the rationalistic proofs of the existence of God furnished by the design argument of the 19th century. With McGrath, Graham Ward does not intend to argue for the legitimacy of the necessary association between natural theology and systematic theology. Instead he explores the relationship between Christology and creation, the former is the abiding presupposition of the latter. He develops a theology of “nature” from a distinctly Christological point of view. The content of “nature” flows from and is predicated upon the revelation of God the Creator in Jesus Christ. This essay proceeds through an examination of the *aporias* in both Greek and Latin expressed in and around the Chalcedon formulation of the hypostatic union. It concludes that theology, while prompted always by faith to seek understanding, will never reach a definitive answer to the question of what is “nature” in a doctrine of creation. The task of Christian theology is not to provide answers,

11. *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1.

12. Oxford: Blackwell, 2016.

but to question reductive accounts and to evince errors in theo-logic with respect to the operations of God in the redemption of all things created.

Sister Benedicta Ward considers Alister McGrath's work on C. S. Lewis in the ambience of Oxford and the search for truth there in both science and literature, with particular emphasis on children's stories as a guide to ultimate truth. Sister Benedicta extols a positive use of personal imagination in meditation, as seen in history, stretching from Anselm's eleventh century prayers into the modern spiritual, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" It is not by "a scientific exploration of the truth of the New Testament but a way of being present within those texts by imaginative participation." While the analysis of facts is essential to the discovery of knowledge, it is often through fiction that true life can be seen. Life consists not so much in the examination of series of molecules for our analysis and use but in a personal pilgrimage from exile towards home, in solitude or in solidarity with others, a journey short or long, sad or glad, known by speaking which is personal and immediate, or by writing which reaches a wider audience and lasts longer. Ultimate truth, Sister Benedicta avers, shines through all attempts to understand both facts and fictions. In this, she praises McGrath for his serious attention to his fellow Oxfordian's novels for children: "Not everything has a name. . . beauty will save the world."

Models help us to better understand complex realities, including the intricate interrelationship of science and theology. Bethany Sollereder takes the idea of two cultures—science and theology—seriously as a means for understanding how practitioners tackle the frustrations of engaging in interdisciplinary work between these two fields. Models of interaction between science and theology tend to concentrate on issues of epistemology, focusing on truth claims and epistemic priority in any given context. The epistemic approach lacks practical advice for how one might go about actually engaging with the other domain of knowledge. Drawing from anthropology and intercultural studies, Bethany claims that cultural models not only furnishes a better description of the complex interrelationship of science and theology, but also that they offer a practical approach to engaging well in scholarship. Intercultural models can provide a practical approach to bridging the two different views of reality provided by science and theology. As an instance, she cites the theodicy of natural disasters represented by theologian David Bentley Hart's *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* and scientist Robert White's *Who is to Blame? Disasters, Nature and Acts of God*. Spurning isolation in ex-pat communities, challenging the discipline-centric impulse, and progressing towards becoming a 150 percent person are ways to begin to build bridges across these two oft-divided cultures. "To become a 150 percent person is to develop a third

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culture in oneself: one that is neither wholly the first nor the second. To do so requires the humility to take on an identity that is neither this nor that: to let go of mastery and embrace the uncertainty of the in between.” McGrath has demonstrated successfully what it looks like to live as a 150 percent person in science and theology, assuming an identity that is neither wholly the former nor the latter and embracing the two different cultures with enthusiasm and amicability.

Motivated by a pastoral concern for the wounded, McGrath published *Suffering* in 1992.<sup>13</sup> Michael Lloyd provides an appreciation and helpful critique of that book. He approaches the theological question by erecting a formally inconsistent set of propositions to which atheist philosophers have claimed that theists must be committed: (1) God is omnipotent; (2) God is wholly good; (3) Evil exists; (4a) There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do, (4b) Evil in the world is not logically necessary; (5) A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can. A logically consistent theist must therefore reject one of these propositions. The author describes various approaches to the problem of evil within Christian Theology and categorizes them according to which proposition they reject. It is Michael’s persuasion that McGrath rejects proposition 5, and, with Augustine, he presents human freedom as the philosophical legitimacy of why God has not eliminated evil. The Free Will defence, however, fails to account for natural evil. As a remedy, Michael outlines three families of response to natural evil: the Instrumental view, the Inevitable view and the Inimical view. McGrath utilizes both the Instrumental and the Inevitable views. However, these are subject to critique, Michael argues, particularly in light of the way in which Jesus’ healing ministry seems to disclose a divine assault upon (and therefore inimical attitude towards) suffering. Finally, McGrath’s practical, rather than theoretical, exposition of divine passibility, and why McGrath considers it to be theodically and spiritually helpful, is expounded.

Jeffrey Greenman offers a delightful compendious portrait of McGrath as an evangelical, Anglican, and ecclesial theologian in a consubstantial triad. Greenman proposes a tri-focal vision to penetrate the three interwoven aspects of McGrath’s life and work and draw from them the depths and breadth of his contribution to the church, society, and world. He praises McGrath’s ability to show how evangelicalism could be enriched by diverse traditions of the forebears without losing its own distinctive identity. Critical yet appreciative is the posture with which McGrath engages with the great tradition of the past. Beyond his evangelical allegiance, McGrath adheres to an Anglican tradition. He reaps from a list of Anglican thinkers, amongst

13. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992.

whom his favorites are John R. Stott, C. S. Lewis, and James I. Packer, and demonstrates effectively the inner consistency between evangelicalism and Anglicanism, that the former is, historically and theologically, a viable option within Anglicanism, as evident in his reading of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the only document, apart from Scripture, the creeds and the Prayer Book, accepted as authoritative for Anglicans. This too brings to light McGrath as an exemplary ecclesial theologian, fully committed to the centrality and life of the church as basic to his overall evangelical-Anglican vision. As much as he inculcates in God's people the importance of the passionate discipline of the mind, he is critical of pure academic theology that retreats into ivory tower, totally removed from concrete life questions and character formation, and deviations of theology that transcends the core of the historic, credal faith, already confessed by the Christian church. People of all persuasions have sought McGrath "as a clear, consistent and passionate spokesman for a biblically faithful, intellectually grounded, evangelistically attuned, and culturally engaged evangelicalism."

Finally, let me add a personal note. From 1988 to 1993, I was pursuing doctoral study (PhD) at the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto. Professor James I. Packer advised me to seek counsel from McGrath, who was at that time the principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University and a widely esteemed theologian. Since 1998, when my Centre for Mentorship & Theological Reflection (Centre) was founded, I have been in frequent correspondence with McGrath. He was honored by the Centre as the Senior Scholar (2009); he too was the plenary speaker for the Reformation 500th anniversary (2017), together with Drs. Victor Shepherd and Dennis Ngien, hosted by the Centre and held at Tyndale University College & Seminary Chapel in Toronto. I often visited with him in Oxford, enjoying consultation with him and informative interactions on various topics ranging from history, theology, philosophy, science, and religion. McGrath has contributed very much to the advancement of my scholarship and spirituality, particularly in Luther's theology.<sup>14</sup>

Gregory Nazianzus' statement befits McGrath's passion as a faithful theologian whose prime interest is the well-being of the people of God: "But the scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God."<sup>15</sup> In the spirit of Nazianzus, McGrath bestirs his

14. See McGrath's generous foreword to my *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, ix: "In recent years, Dennis Ngien has established himself as a leading interpreter of Luther, with a most welcome emphasis on the importance of Luther's ideas for the life and witness of the church, as well as for the personal spiritual journeys of individual believers."

15. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Apologeticus de Fuga*, ed., Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Volume 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), Oration 2.22.

audience through various disciplines to soar on eagle's wings, enabling them to break new ground and reach new height. Recognized as one of the most influential and potent living theologians, his numerous writings have made immense contribution to the on-going task of theology. The depth and breadth of knowledge he possesses, the intellectual rigor and judiciousness with which he writes, the irenic spirit and charity typical of his character—all of this adds to the delight of sitting under his tutelage.

Lord, give us more, like McGrath!