

RICHARD HARRIES

New Atheism – New Apologetics: A Response to Alister McGrath

My first welcome duty is to thank Alister McGrath, on behalf of everyone, for a wonderful lecture. Clear in language and clear in theme, he has drawn on his wide reading in science and religion to illuminate a contemporary issue of great importance. We could not have been better served. In my response I want to make four points, which are also in the nature of questions. Vast issues which I will have to state with absurd brevity.

First, McGrath stresses that science proceeds on the basis of induction, the collation of observed phenomena in order to explore how they might fit together in a wider picture, and he suggests that this is not dissimilar to theological method. But I always understood that at the heart of science this wider picture arrived at by observation also enables us to make assertions or predictions that can be tested in practice for their truth or falsity. This gave rise to a great debate in the 1950s about whether theological assertions could be put to the test in a similar way. If not, it was suggested that they were meaningless. This resulted in the attempts of people like John Hick to affirm the idea of eschatological verification. So the question arises about whether or not the ability to make assertions that can be tested out is a fundamental aspect of scientific method and, if it is, what the implications are for theological method.

Secondly, in referring to the idea of a big picture which makes most sense of things McGrath says, ‘The best theory is the one that is able to fit in observations and experiences most elegantly, most simply, most comprehensively and most fruitfully.’ He described how he, like C.S. Lewis, found that the Christian faith did this for him.

I would want to suggest, however, that whatever may be the case in science, when it comes to wider world-views about the nature of life as a whole, making sense of things cannot of itself tell us whether or not that view is true. It might hold things together in a wonderful elegant, unified pattern but still not be true. I hold this position because of what I have always understood Kant’s arguments against the traditional proofs for the existence of God to entail. Quite simply, we do not know whether the kind of reasoning which we know works in helping us understand phenomena within the world is applicable to the universe as a whole. To assume that it does, to assume for example that because nothing in this life happens without a cause or causes, there must be an uncreated cause for the universe to be here in the first place, is to beg the question. Similarly, because we can create big pictures relating to scientific phenomena that make sense of multiple facts in the world, it does not follow that there is rational purpose

for the existence of a universe – or a multiverse – itself. The implication of this is that we can never say for certain, from a totally impartial point of view, whether the universe is the product of a rational purpose or is a tale of sound and fury signifying nothing. We simply do not know one way or the other. There is nothing sinister about this. It is just that we have a limited, human eye's view of the world. It is hugely satisfying to believe that the universe as a whole makes sense; but from a strictly detached point of view, we simply do not know.

Thirdly, I do believe that things can be held together in an all-embracing explanation of life's meaning and purpose: but only on the basis of the Christian faith as a whole. Indeed I think Alister would agree with this, as he was careful to affirm that the kind of issue he was concerned with in this lecture, though very important, must not be seen apart from wider Christian issues. I emphasise the Christian faith as a whole because I suspect that for most people the central issue for faith is not its alleged incompatibility with science, but the incompatibility of life as we know it with the idea of a just and loving creator. Last week it was reported that before he died Mikhail Kalashnikov, the designer of the deadly killing machine the AK-47 that bears his name, wrote to the Patriarch of Moscow in great spiritual torment because he felt responsible for the deaths of millions who had died as a result of armed groups in every part of the world using it. As he wrote 'The longer I live the more this question drills itself into my brain and the more I wonder why the Lord allowed man the devilish desires of envy, greed and aggression. Yes! An increasing number of churches and monasteries in our land. And yet evil does not decrease!' Or as another Russian, a fictional one, Ivan Karamazov put it. 'It's not God that I don't believe in, Alyosha, it's just that I return him my ticket.' I used to enjoy teasing Richard Dawkins by saying, 'Richard, there are so many good arguments against the truth of religion why do you keep dragging science into it?' I believe these arguments, this challenge presented by the character of life, can only be lived with (not finally solved) on the basis of the full panoply of the Christian faith: faith that God himself shares in human anguish to the full in Christ, his resurrection and its fulfilment in an eternal order in which the loving purpose of divine love prevails and suffuses all things. That for me, is the only way life can be seen to have a logic to it – but it is the logic of love, of Divine Wisdom. Yet, as I argued for my third point: just because it makes sense it does not mean to say it is true. So I come on to my fourth and last point.

Alister mentioned that Austin Farrer has been a big influence on him, and indeed quoted him with approval. He, together with Donald MacKinnon in a very different way, and Reinhold Niebuhr in the application of the Christian faith to the political order, have been the biggest influences on my theological thinking, and Farrer probably the biggest. The paradox of Farrer is that though he was described as the one genius produced by the Church of England in the twentieth century, he flowered in his less techni-

cal writings at the end of his life, not least his sermons, out of each one some theologians, as C.S. Lewis, a great admirer of Farrer put it, would have made a whole book. Farrer wrote what must be the most remarkable Lent Book ever written, 127 tiny pages entitled 'A Science of God?' in which he reflects on the process of evolution and on how, if at all, we can see God in the process. He takes his cue from a saying of Thomas Aquinas:

Practical science studies things we can work. But God is not to be worked by us. On the contrary, we men are God's work.

Farrer wrote once about creation, 'Because we have God under the root of our being we cannot help but acknowledge him at the root of all the world's being.' The Christian believes that her being is moment by moment held in existence by the fount of all being, that she is utterly dependent on the ground of all that exists. If this is the believer's personal experience, she cannot help but acknowledge the same power as the ground of the length and breadth of the universe, including its origin *ex nihilo* some 13½ billion years ago.

Secondly, as Farrer put it:

To make you or me, God must make half a universe. A man's body and a man's mind form a focus in which a world is concentrated, and drawn into a point. It may be in that point that I know existence; but it is an existence which involves the world.

Again

If we are concerned about a creative cause, it is because, in creating all things he is creating us; and it concerns us to enter into the making of our souls, and of one another's. To enter into the action of God thus is what we mean by religion; and it is something we do, it is a matter of experience.

In short, a believer seeks to align their life with the divine illumination and leading. But because we exist as the product of evolution, that divine and illumination and leading has been present at every point of the whole process. We read back from our own interaction with the divine will that there is a divine will working in and through all secondary causes, all those causes that can be mapped out by scientific exploration. The divine leading cannot of course be located by scientific scrutiny. But the religious believer who claims to be aware of this will in their own life cannot but help posit this will as the basis of all life, cannot help, in the sense that consistency of thought demands it. R.S. Thomas gets the paradoxical nature of that divine leading in a late poem when he writes

To yield to an unfelt pressure that, irresistible
In itself, had the character of everything
But coercion?

It is described as a pressure, but unfelt. It is described as irresistible but having the character of everything but coercion. In this way, as Farrer put it ‘We acquire experimental acquaintance with the work of God.’

By the same process of mind, we can come to see that a faith that makes sense of my personal life is a faith that makes sense of life as a whole; the big picture painted by the mind is rooted in a daily life and practice, and that practice illuminates life as a whole. Induction in science collates many observations to form a big picture which can be tested out in the laboratory. Induction in theology collates not only observations of how the world works, but insights from living, to form a big picture of God that can be tested in personal experience. ‘For God is not to be worked by us. On the contrary, we are God’s work.’

With that I would like to end by once again thanking Alister for his illuminating and helpful lecture.

Professor Lord Harries of Pentregarth
