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Why Write Theology Books? A Reflection on Authorial Collaboration with Alister McGrath

This article is a personal reflection on the process of collaboration between the author and Alister McGrath on a number of writing projects in the area of science and religion and natural theology. It sets out a biographical context, describes some of the projects in detail, and explores the motives and principles behind McGrath's writing. It concludes that these principles should be intentionally employed by those who write for publication in these areas.

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If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.[1]

This article is a reflection on the experience of writing books with Alister McGrath. It begins with some contextual biographical and autobiographical material; continues with a brief consideration of the five books we have worked on together; and concludes with an exploration of McGrath's motivation for writing and some of his values as a writer, researcher, and most importantly, teacher. These are well illustrated by the quotation above from William Morris; for McGrath writing is a craft whose main purpose is practical usefulness, and in recent years has increasingly been marked by theological wonder at the beauty revealed by scientific research.

Biographical context

I met Alister McGrath at Oxford University when I was nineteen and he was twenty. I was a freshman studying for a degree in experimental psychology and he was in the third year of a four-year degree course in Chemistry. Both of us were active members of our college Christian Unions; I had been a Christian for nearly six years, he was a fairly recent convert.

At that time Oxford took very few female students and they were confined to 'ladies' colleges'. This was about to change; some of the men's colleges, including McGrath's college of Wadham, were about to admit a small number of women on an experimental basis. This caused some anxiety on the part of the

1 Morris, W. *The Beauty of Life*, a lecture before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design (19 February 1880).

College Christian Union; they thought it possible that their usual practice of welcoming and befriending freshmen might be mistaken for what would now be called sexual harassment. So, they decided to consult the Christian Union at the nearest ladies' college. This was Lady Margaret Hall, my own college. This is how we found ourselves in the same room, making awkward conversation on a late autumn evening in 1973.

McGrath asked me what I was studying and what I hoped to do afterwards. I told him that I hoped to be ordained as a priest in the Church of England, but that this was a long-term aspiration as, in addition to being excluded from most Oxford colleges, women were also excluded from the orders of priest and deacon in the Church of England at that time. In response, he told me that he hoped to be a career scientist.

I was interested to hear this, and took the opportunity of asking him a question that had been perplexing me for the last few years: 'Is the uncertainty in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle located in the phenomenon or in the observer?' I had asked this question of other physicists and chemists of my acquaintance and it usually evoked a look of boredom and a fairly rapid change of subject. But McGrath was different; he did not answer the question, but neither did he dismiss it. 'Now that's very interesting…', he began. Two Christians were starting to form a friendship whose currency was philosophy of science.

After I finished my degree, I moved away to London to train as a clinical psychologist and we lost touch for a time. When we reconnected, things had changed. McGrath was finishing off his doctorate, having made a move into molecular biology via biochemistry while studying for a BA in theology in preparation for training as a priest in the Church of England at Westcott House in Cambridge. I, meanwhile, had set my thoughts on ordination to one side, and had become a career scientist working on psychophysical models of auditory hallucinations. The tables had turned entirely.

The circumstance of our meeting again was a road trip around Ireland with some friends. He and I spent much of this trip arguing about theories of the origin of the universe and their theological implications. The way the relationship developed is well summed up by CS Lewis:

Aravis also had many quarrels (and, I'm afraid even fights) with Cor, but they always made it up again: so that years later, when they were grown up, they were so used to quarrelling and making it up again that they got married so as to go on doing it more conveniently.[2]

After our marriage in 1980 McGrath was ordained and began work as a curate in Nottingham. We quickly had two children, and it was at this very busy

2 Lewis, C.S. *The Horse and his Boy*, London: Geoffrey Bles (1954) p.199.

and intense time that he began work on his first book, *Iustitia Dei*, a history of the Christian doctrine of justification based on research he had carried out in his Cambridge years, during which time he had developed an intense interest in the thought of Martin Luther. It was a big piece of work and progressed relatively slowly by McGrath's later standards, mainly due to difficulties with the publication process. By the time it was published he had taken up a post as lecturer in doctrine and ethics at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford.

My first contribution to McGrath's writing was to suggest that he choose a local publisher with a broad rather than specialist academic appeal, and we decided to approach Blackwell. This proved to be an excellent idea, and the beginning of a lifelong association. Blackwell published McGrath's first book *Luther's theology of the cross* in 1985, a year before *Iustitia Dei* finally appeared.

As the 1980s progressed, there followed a steady stream of books. McGrath was gaining a great deal of experience in teaching, each year refining his approach in order to be responsive to the learning needs of his students. It was in this context that he decided to write a Christian theology textbook, which is discussed further in the final section of this paper.

Collaborating on books

McGrath had begun to write books for the popular Christian market. The first of these, and perhaps his best, was *Understanding Jesus*, published by Kingsway Press in 1987. The commissioning editor knew that I was a psychologist and approached us about the possibility of working jointly on a book that brought the Christian faith and psychology together. I was working in the area of neuropsychological rehabilitation with young adult survivors of severe traumatic brain injury and related conditions. At that time cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) was being developed by a group of Oxford psychologists with whom I had quite close contact.[3] It was becoming very influential, and I had been exploring ways of adapting it to my own clinical specialty.

My work seemed increasingly to be focusing on self-esteem. This is because most of my patients were individuals who, due to injury or illness, had lost the things that people usually rely on to feel that they are worth something: attractive appearance, being able to walk or speak, cognitive capacities, employment in a high status profession, friendships and romantic relationships. CBT approaches specifically directed at low self-esteem were beginning to emerge,[4]

3 Hawton, K, Salkovskis, P.M., Kirk, J.& Clark, D.M. (Eds.) *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Psychiatric Problems: A Practical Guide,* Oxford: Oxford University Press (1989).

4 Fennell, M.J.V. *Overcoming Low Self-Esteem : A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques.*
London: Constable & Robinson (1999).

but I was troubled because these (and CBT more generally) seemed to be based on trying to build confidence and a sense of self-worth on perceived successes in life; improving self-esteem was thus directed at supporting the individual in achieving goals and helping her positively re-appraise their significance by correcting negative biases in her thinking caused by conditions such as depression.

While this made intuitive sense in the clinical settings in which CBT was applied, it seemed at odds with the dominant discourse in church settings, in which human sin, the need for self-loss, and the importance of humility were all emphasized (to varying degrees depending on local church culture). I wondered if this apparent tension could be explored, and perhaps even reconciled in a book.

McGrath had often talked to me about his work on justification by faith (though I was much more familiar with Paul than with Luther), and I began to wonder if this theological concept would be of help in relation to self-esteem. In particular I wondered if there was such a thing as authentic positive self-esteem, and whether this might be the psychological counterpart of what E.P. Sanders refers to as being 'righteoused' by God,[5] together with a more fragile inauthentic sense of self-esteem that was dependent on external sources of reward corresponding to Pauline 'works of the law' (e.g. Rom.3:27). Subsequently the distinction between a self-esteem based on unconditional love and one based on external reward has proved a fertile area of exploration for psychology.[6]

I also began to link some of this thinking to attachment theory,[7] looking at faith as the ability to apprehend God as a reliable parent figure who offers a 'secure base' and a 'safe haven'. The book, *Self-esteem: The Cross and Christian Confidence*, came out in 1992, the same year the psychologist of religion Lee Kirkpatrick published his seminal article on the theory of God as an exalted and non-corporeal attachment figure,[8] but at that stage psychology of religion was not my discipline, so I remained unaware of his work.

I wrote most of the book, but McGrath provided the pivotal chapter on theories of justification together with a chapter on criticism for the second edition. Perhaps most importantly, he provided strong editorial direction, repeatedly reminding me of the audience at whom it was aimed. Until he drew my attention to this issue, I had simply not considered it; I had seen the book as a way of

5 Sanders, E.P. *Paul: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001).

6 Crocker, J. & Park, L. 'The costly pursuit of self-esteem', *Psychological Bulletin* (2004) 130, pp392-414.

7 Bowlby, J. *Attachment and loss,* London: Hogarth Press (Three volumes 1969, 1973, 1980).

8 Kirkpatrick, L. 'An Attachment-theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion', *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* (1992) 2, 3-28.

clarifying my own ideas, with any benefit to the readers viewed as a happy but barely intentional side-effect.

While McGrath helped me with *Self-esteem*, I had some small reciprocal input into some of his later books. These were the second volume of his trilogy *A Scientific Theology* (2001), to which I contributed a short section on the stratification of reality, an area in which I have a longstanding interest;[9] and the biographical *Dawkins' God* (2004), to which I contributed some psychological reflections.

Finally, we worked collaboratively on two projects: *The Dawkins Delusion?* (2007) and *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (2008). They ran in tandem, with the *Open Secret* a planned leisurely exploration of natural theology and *The Dawkins Delusion?* produced as a rapid response to the publication of the polemical *The God Delusion*.[10] In both these books we brought psychology, neuroscience, and theology together, something that I was by then able to engage with in a more informed way, having taken a career break to study academic theology in Oxford a few years earlier.

My reflections on the process of collaboration are that it was relatively easy when targeting a common intellectual opponent, as in the case of the *Dawkins Delusion?*, but much more challenging when attempting to do theology together, as in the case of the books on self-esteem and natural theology. I am still at heart a scientist, and I think McGrath finds my relentless demand for empirical evidence and theoretical rigour wearing; I in my turn find theology a subject area whose rules of engagement remain opaque to me. This is one reason I appreciate McGrath's *Scientific Theology* trilogy, with its aspiration to establish greater methodological clarity in theology. One issue on which we both often reflect is the interest that career scientists have in theological ideas as contrasted with the fear, disdain, or simple lack of curiosity with which many theologians approach science, its philosophical underpinnings, and its methodology, keeping it at bay with terms such as 'reductionist', 'positivist', 'simplistic', or 'mystery'.

Why write books at all?

The motivation behind McGrath's books is best illustrated by his most well-known publication, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* that first appeared in 1992 and has gone through several subsequent editions. It has always been appreciated by reviewers and students alike, but I came to a deeper personal understanding of its impact when undergoing residential training for ordained ministry in the Church of England in 2005, some 30 years after my first sense

9 Collicutt McGrath, J. *Jesus and the Gospel Women*, London: SPCK (2009), pp. 90-98.

10 Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Press (2006).

of calling.

Late one night I heard a cry of despair coming from the room of a fellow-student. She ran out into the corridor and shouted, 'Help! I need Alister McGrath!' On seeing my quizzical expression she explained. 'I am stuck with my doctrine essay'. Later she told me that she thought McGrath's textbook was the theological equivalent to another book that was popular in the 1990s, Delia Smith's *Complete Cookery Course*. The student explained to me, 'You can always rely on Delia, especially in a crisis – she's clear, unpretentious, reassuring to those with little knowledge or skill, and guaranteed to give excellent results. Alister McGrath is the Delia Smith of theology.'

This is a surprisingly apt comparison, and it extends to the motivation behind the books. They were responses not to a gap in the market but to the real human need to learn of that which is life-giving. All through the 1980s and into the early 1990s McGrath had been teaching courses on Church History and Christian doctrine and becoming increasingly frustrated by the absence of high quality but at the same time accessible resources for his students. In the end he decided that the only solution was to write something himself, pitched it to Blackwell, and then produced something that opened up the life of the Christian mind and the historic tradition free from the mustiness, pretentiousness, opacity, and elitist language that so often taints theological writing.

One might think that it was his scientific training that lay behind this achievement, and there is something in that, but more fundamentally it was a passion to communicate something of the intellectual depths and delights of the Christian faith that had played such a big part in his own conversion, combined with an Irish pragmatism, and the sort of humility that does not care about snobbish accusations of dumbing down or loss of sophistication or nuance. This is William Morris' principle of producing something that should actually be useful, both to God and to other human beings, and that also expresses in a small way the justice, truth, and beauty of the Gospel. The book is an authentic outworking of the craft of teaching.

The key point here is that people read this book and they often go on to read other books by McGrath. This is not a trivial observation because the whole enterprise of writing in order to be read is arguably dying in contemporary academic culture. Many contemporary books are destined to end up on what has been referred to as the 'alumnae shelf'.

The 2017 film *The Wife* includes a telling scene set in a ladies' college in the USA in 1958, in which a famous visiting novelist has a conversation with a young aspiring writer, who begins, 'I love to write – it's my life.' The novelist replies, 'Don't do it. You want to know where your books will end up? Right there – on the alumnae shelf.' She reaches behind her and takes down a book, inviting the younger woman to open it. There is a creaking sound, and she continues, 'That's the sound of a book that's never been opened…' The younger

woman objects, 'A writer has to write.' The novelist retorts, 'A writer has to be read, honey.'[11]

Yet, much of what gets written in academia is barely read or not read at all. The reasons for this are complex but can broadly be categorized under the headings of perfectionism; instrumentalism; and citation. In my experience as a theological educator students often delay the writing phase of essays and dissertations, procrastinating by reading more and more material so that they can lose their way in it. This can sometimes be an expression of reluctance to express their ideas in written form for fear that they will be inadequate. It is a form of perfectionism with fear of exposure at its heart. Where this perfectionism is surmounted and an acceptable piece of work produced there can then be a similar reluctance to publish in book or article form. There is a continuing fear of being judged, this time by readers and critics rather than supervisors or examiners. The connection with the issue of self-esteem discussed earlier in this article is evident. Rarely does the idea figure that the piece of writing, though not perfect, might be useful to people, that this might even be its primary purpose (rather than to enhance or detract from the public profile of the writer).

Instrumental publication is also increasingly common. A young academic needs publications in high impact journals or with reputable publishing houses in order to enter and maintain a place in their particular academic guild and to achieve the glittering prize of an academic post. In the humanities doctoral theses are published in the form of prohibitively expensive specialist monographs which remain largely unread in library stacks. Higher education institutions are judged on the basis of their research outputs which are essentially pieces of writing. Grant-giving bodies often require conferences to be held and the proceedings written up, typically as a special issue of a journal or a multi-author book. The process of managing multiple authors can be unwieldy with the result that the contents can be out of date by the time they are published.

Thirdly, with the ease of accessing publications electronically there appears to be an increasing tendency to cite works without actually reading them, as a form of defensive ritual to insure against criticism of potentially weak points in an argument.[12]

There is no simple answer to this problem. Nevertheless, some wisdom may be gleaned from returning to the principles behind McGrath's writing, whose origins are now a generation ago. First, engage with questions that people are actually asking rather than the ones you think they should be asking. Second, communicate clearly, something that is itself a mark of mastery of a field. Third,

11 Screenplay by Jane Anderson. *The Wife*, Sony Picture Classics (2017).

12 Simkin, M.V. & Roychowdhury, V.P. ' Read before you cite!', *Complex Systems* (2003)14, 269.

be content with work that is - to use a term of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott – 'good enough'. This will ensure that the product is timely, if not perfect. Finally, reflect theologically on the concept of 'intellectual property' Writing is a participating in God's ideas, and the tendency of the writer to grasp them as his or her own creations should be subjected to critical scrutiny. Publishing is not an exercise in building up the writer's ego but in sharing God's bounty. Taking this perspective has the effect of lightening the enterprise and liberating the writer.

Conclusion

This is the philosophy that McGrath has lived out over a long career of serving his God in the academy and the church, always striving to integrate insights from theology and the sciences into an account that does justice to the richness of the Christian gospel.

We write, not just to bear witness to what we have seen, or because we have something to say; but to address a question, meet a need, or feed a hunger, as he did for me as an Oxford freshman 50 years ago.

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