

Alister McGrath, *The passionate intellect: Christian faith and the discipleship of the mind* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010). 210 pages, ISBN 978-0-8308-3843-1, Hardcover, \$24.50. Reviewed by Christina Belcher, Ph.D. (cand.), associate professor of education, Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario.

Alister McGrath, formerly of Oxford University and president of the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, now holds the chair of theology, ministry, and education as well as the headship of the Centre for Theology, Religion, and Culture, at King's College, London. His publications include articles on apologetics, the relationship between science and religion, and the 'new atheism.' McGrath's scholarly articles have appeared in leading academic journals, and he has authored several books which link faith and culture. Indeed, his passion is to engage Christianity and the public square. Central to his writing is the notion that faith and a Christian worldview are significant to every discipline and also to the wider conversation regarding disciplinary particularities.

My interest in McGrath's latest book arises from my vocation as an educator. From such a background, I appreciate the aspects of creating a community of faith and engaging an educational 'worldview' perspective; a perspective, which may see faith in learning as a way of 'leaning into life'¹; a way of embodying and expressing a particular world and life view. This stance engages a capacity for what McGrath would call 'robust intellectual and cultural engagement.' It also adds to the conversation and thought about worldview both as a 'claim' and a 'way of life,' as noted in James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), while, at the same time, provoking the question of character formerly raised by Frederika Oosterhoff in her review² of N.T. Wright's book *After You Believe*.

McGrath describes theology as both a discipline and a passion with which to engage particular academic fields (such as science), and also to encounter and reconcile issues arising in society/the public square. Books written by other scholars passionate about the same issues (which can be found by typing such key words as 'faith, discipleship and mind' into the Google search engine) have emerged which confront aspects of how the Christian 'mind' and 'heart' may minister to a broken world. What makes this book a helpful addition to such work is the strength of its first section containing McGrath's personal faith story and his passionate conviction about the significance of theology as a discipline for life. With humour and gravity he engages us to open a conversation on how faith in life operates in significant and mysterious ways: "Believing that religion is a 'botched attempt to explain the world' is on the same intellectual level as 'seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus' " (p. 10). Although this quote is rather frivolous, its humour and – in contrast - sobering reality grabbed my interest and kept me reading.

The Passionate Intellect incorporates two key themes. The first one (Chapters 1-6) explores the purpose, place and relevance of Christian theology which McGrath aptly describes by quoting C.S. Lewis: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else" (p. 12). This quote in the first section of the book not only provides the focus in McGrath's writing for six chapters, but also poses interesting reflective opportunities for readers regarding the place of theology in life and cultural debate.

¹ H. Fernhout, "Christian schooling: Telling a world view story", in I. Lambert & S. Mitchell (eds.), *The crumbling walls of certainty: Towards a Christian critique of postmodernity and education* (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997), pp. 75-99.

² F.G. Oosterhoff, Review of N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (HarperOne, 2010), published at *Reformed Academic* (29 November 2010); online at reformedacademic.blogspot.com/2010/11/nt-wright-on-why-christian-character.html.

McGrath's use of metaphor helps achieve his goal of urging Christians to be intentional about their scholarly engagement, particularly through his picture of theology as a map and the gospel as a landscape (pp. 22f.). Similar metaphorical ways of seeing and thereby initiating conversation on the meaning of faith and life have been employed by N.T. Wright in his view of Scripture as a five-act play.³ This use of metaphor to say things about faith too grand to express in literal language is not unusual.⁴ McGrath is passionate about both the journey and the end. His focus is on the positive role of theology in shaping, nourishing and safeguarding the Christian vision of reality and applying it to the challenges and opportunities that Christians face today (p. 8). McGrath's perception is that Christianity offers a more comprehensive, coherent, and compelling account of reality than the atheism he had embraced in his teenage years: "Christianity made sense in itself, and it made sense of everything else as well" (pp. 57f.). I personally found this first section inspiring, especially because it expressed a desire for an *embodiment* of faith, rather than just intellectual assent to a cognitive idea about faith.

McGrath does a solid job of showing how inhabiting the Christian 'interpretive community' provides a basis for cultural engagement. He refers to the biblical doctrines of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. From this biblical framework, one which I acknowledge as well, he encourages a view of faith as an active voice in social discourse. However, my critique is that one should not stop at redemption, in the same way that Evangelicals have formerly stressed and stopped at salvation. One must consider the reconciliation of God and man as the next step. How does one realize this in a broken world? McGrath recognizes the dilemma: "Surely the better way is to pursue a generous orthodoxy, seeing disagreements in the context of the greater arguments that bind us together? ... The surest way of enhancing the identity, coherence and cohesion of a community is to help it see what it loves more clearly, and thence, to love it more dearly" (pp. 20f.). That is the basis of and reason for Christian engagement in culture, and I would have liked to hear McGrath say more about how he sees that occurring.

In light of the last citation above, it surprises me that as a scientist, theologian, and expert in apologetics, McGrath restricts himself largely to providing answers involving the purpose, place and relevance of Christian theology in his discourse, rather than also raising questions that allow those who think otherwise to consider unfamiliar answers which may make Christianity more relevant. For example, McGrath states, "The Christian gospel mandates a vibrant engagement with our culture, not an isolationist withdrawal from it" (p. 13). I agree wholeheartedly. But saying something is not engaging it. The New Atheist whom he presents in the second section of this book would agree that he should engage in and not withdraw from culture. It seems to me that the question for the New Atheist is *not* whether Christianity should engage culture, but rather: What does such an engaging add to culture that the engagement of the New Atheist — since this is McGrath's target in the second part of the book — does not? This question can also be asked in reverse by Christians. Often it seems to me that Christian writing is excellent at stating what it does not like (which provides a binary opposite between the Christian and the New Atheist), but weaker at promoting the things it loves — even though McGrath says it should, as he does in many places in this first section. Raising a question such as "What does a Christian's vibrant engagement with culture in science, politics, education, etc., add to the world that benefits everyone?" may give rise to more intense public conversation regarding the relevance and benefit of Christian thought in cultural engagement — without stressing opposites. As it

³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

⁴ One helpful author, among many, in seeing the significance of the use of metaphor in meaning making and education is Elaine Botha. I suggest further reading in M. Elaine Botha, *Metaphor and its moorings: Studies in the grounding of metaphorical meaning* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007) and M. Elaine Botha, "Why metaphors matter in education", *South African Journal of Education*, v. 29 n. 4 (2009), pp. 431-444.

stands, the first chapter appears to advocate more intellectual assent for the faith than embodiment of it.

In the third chapter, McGrath returns to the tension between intellectual faith and action. He notes two things in this essay: Theology is about *discernment*, about seeing reality in a certain way and attempting to resolve its ambiguities through an interpretive framework that heals “the eye of the heart” (p. 46). Theology makes possible a new way of seeing things; it is “a means of envisioning a transformed reality,” thus creating the ability to see our world in a new way (p. 52). While discernment and interpretation are essential to a transformed reality, they are also essential to the ‘embodiment’ of a worldview practice in encountering disequilibrium between faith and the world. That to which we give merely intellectual assent we do not always put into practice. I would have liked to hear more about this.

My key questions as an educator for McGrath are:

1. Why, when, and how do you engage what it means to be a person of faith *in* (not *and*) learning within a particular discipline?
2. What questions need to be raised in relational and cultural engagement between Christians and ‘the world’ that do not create binary opposites which make proper conversation difficult?
3. In educating and engaging others in their respective disciplines, science, education, politics, etc., from a Christian worldview and faith perspective, what kind of a transformed ‘citizen of character’ — as outlined in N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (HarperOne, 2010) — are we looking for? How are we going to accomplish this at the university/scholarly level?

The second section of the book (Chapters 7-11) was not, in my perspective, as interesting as the first. Although the ‘New Atheism’ is a central theme of the section, and is of interest to the faith and science debates (of which McGrath has written a great deal in other works), I find it rather unstimulating compared to the first section of his text. It is best left to those whose expertise and interest lie in such debates — and mine does not. There is a plethora of work in this field already.

These final chapters deal with how faith and the world both encounter struggle. Special emphasis is placed on the writings of Charles Darwin, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. However, the section does give helpful perspectives for engagement with the scientific community regarding the inaccurately supposed view of a war between science and religion. The most helpful quote in this section, and the most hopeful for me, is this:

The scientific method, when properly applied, is no enemy of faith. The problems begin when enthusiastic atheists start smuggling in their own presuppositions, hoping nobody will notice, or when enthusiastic Christians start believing that science challenges core beliefs or essential ways of reading the Bible and circle their wagons defensively. The reality is rather different and much more interesting. The Christian faith offers us a robust intellectual vantage point, which makes sense of the historical origins and the explanatory successes of the natural sciences — and if used rightly and wisely — might even become a gateway to discovering the glory of God. (p. 118)

This book provides the basis for robust conversations for those in education who are interested in how faith can be more readily present in their subject disciplines.