BOOK CRITIQUE

of

Alister McGrath’s *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*

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Introduction

After reading the first few pages of Alister McGrath’s book Christianity’s Dangerous Idea, the author’s intent and purpose for the work are made obvious; that all Christians have the capacity and authority through the Holy Spirit to read and interpret the Bible on their own (McGrath, 2). Throughout the 476 pages, McGrath paints a broad and comprehensive portrait of the rise of Protestantism along with the advancements and issues that were inevitably linked to such a “dangerous idea” (3). The following review will seek to analyze McGrath’s interpretation of this “Dangerous Idea” of the Protestant Reformation, its successes and failures, from the early sixteenth century until the present day.

Alister McGrath was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1953; and holds several graduate degrees and has achieved high honors in chemistry, molecular biophysics and an Oxford D.Phil. for his research in natural sciences.¹ He has excelled throughout his scholarly endeavors, and is a prolific author, educator, lecturer, debater, theologian, historian, Christian apologist and devotee to the natural sciences. Dr. McGrath earned an Oxford Doctorate of Divinity in 2001 for his research on historical and systematic theology and in 2008 he assumed the Chair of Theology, Ministry and Education in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King’s College in London.²

Brief Summary

Comparing the structure of his book with Julius Caesar’s Gaul, McGrath sections his book into three parts, as he says “…dealing with the origination, consolidation and transformation of Protestantism” (11). Beginning with the first section, “Origination” (15), McGrath outlines the political, social and religious atmosphere surrounding the birth of Luther’s

² Ibid.
Reformation. From 1513 to 1516, McGrath underscores Luther’s wrestling with the soteriological truths of the Bible (42); leading to the most “radical aspect of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith and its conceptualization of the relationship between humanity and God” (43). This opening section gives an overview of the German, Swiss, French and English reformers, with specific attention given to Luther and Calvin, and continues through the nineteenth century.

The second part, “Manifestation” (197) delves deeper into the convictions and beliefs of the individual groups and immediately establishes the heart of the Protestant Reformation, the phrase *sola Scriputra*, Latin for “by Scripture alone” (199). Along with a lengthy section on the relationship between the believer and the Bible, McGrath moves to the doctrine of justification by faith, known as *sola Fide*, Latin for “by faith alone” (247). The work continues with the movement’s interaction with culture, society, political matters, arts and natural science; the latter will be examined later in the critique, as McGrath correlates the “Dangerous Idea” to the rise of the theory of Darwinian Evolution (381).

“Transformation” (387) is the final section, and emphasizes the development of Protestantism in the Southern Hemisphere, specifically the rise and explosion of Pentecostalism (415-438). Finally, McGrath evaluates the present state and postulates about the future of Protestantism.

**Critical Interaction**

From the first few pages of introduction, McGrath lays out the framework for this work; giving five reasons why he composed *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*. First, he determined to contradict recent scholarship which has sought to “underplay the social and economic aspects of the emergence of Protestantism in order to emphasize its religious and political elements” (8).
Secondly, that the Catholic reforming movements were not simply reactions to the Protestants, but had been in place previously. Third, he purports that the Reformation and Protestantism should not be lumped together as one entity; Protestantism was a response to the Reformation, what McGrath calls the “movement of movements” (9). Fourth, the modern misrepresentations and distortions of John Calvin and other Protestant leaders demand addressing (Ibid.). Finally, McGrath believes that because of the rapidly changing nature of Protestantism, a new study is necessary to maintain a current scholarly analysis of the movement (Ibid.).

He carefully and effectively brings to life the issue that plagued the Reformation nearly from its inception, “Who has the authority to define the faith?” (3). McGrath points out the even Luther couldn’t contain Protestantism from becoming inflammatory, as evidenced by the Peasants’ War of 1525 (Ibid.). The author proceeds throughout the rest of the book to highlight issues that have resulted as the movement has spread and mutated around the globe. With a nod to his biological and scientific underpinnings, McGrath says “Protestantism turns out to be more like a micro-organism; capable of rapid mutation and adaptation in response to changing environments, while still maintaining continuity with its earlier forms” (4).

Dr. Alister McGrath’s pedigree lends itself to the final construct of this great work. The comprehensive study of five hundred years of Protestantism is outstanding, well written and above all else, easy to comprehend. As an Evangelical Anglican theologian, McGrath writes with a passion for God’s word and at the same time, a sense of wonderment for the way in which God has taken these historical events and used them to glorify Himself. Interestingly, according to McGrath’s biography, he is a former atheist who is both “respectful yet critical of the movement”3 and frequently engages in public debates with respected atheist scholars. His background in natural science and biology lends to his analytical and critical thinking with

regards to the effects of a movement such as the Protestant Reformation on the shaping of Western life and beyond.

With this in mind, it would be important at this stage to interact with a concerning theory that McGrath puts forth in his book; that the Protestant iconoclastic “hostilities” fostered a distrust in objects that had been granted spiritual significance (374). This “de-sacralization” or “disenchantedment of nature” has ultimately led to the rise in natural sciences, as well as atheism and secularism (Ibid.). The major thrust of this was in the literalist mentality towards the Bible, along with the “insistence of empiricism in the field of science” (373). This is a powerful correlation that McGrath purports, one that has caused much grief among Protestants, and lends fuller to the description of the Protestant model as a “dangerous idea”. This reviewer cannot, however, acquiesce to Dr. McGrath’s theory of the rise of atheism, as it is nothing new. Psalm 14:1 says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God’” (ESV). While dogmatic Fundamentalism has done significant damage to the respectability within the scientific community, and an often lukewarm response of Christian apologists and theologians to secular agendas, can Protestantism be ruled as the cause of the rise of atheism? The evidence is not overwhelming. McGrath’s correlation of Copernican theory of heliocentricity is well done; exposing how an incorrect interpretation of Scriptures can lead to erroneous scientific hypothesis and potentially undermine scriptural and even orthodox Evangelical theology.

One issue that was troubling to this reviewer was the correlation that McGrath arranged between the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the Darwinian Evolutionary Theory. However, the author succinctly and indelibly makes a valid point that the “dangerous idea” of Biblical interpretation would continue to challenge Protestant history. He says “The history of Protestantism has been one of constantly revisiting and reevaluating existing interpretations of
the Bible…including scientific advance” (381). The four views of creation; Young-Earth creationism, Old-Earth Creationism, Intelligent Design and Evolutionary Theism (383-385) are all theoretically “valid” under the premise of the Protestant hallmark; that all people are capable of interpreting the Bible on their own. McGrath reveals that even within the realm of evangelicalism the Darwinian viewpoint has not been entirely rejected; B.B. Warfield and J.I. Packer have each voiced opinions that accommodate Darwin’s theory (382-383).

McGrath spends a great deal of time on the rise of Pentecostalism. He outlines the rise of Pentecostalism among the “poor, marginalized and dispossessed, who had little interest in matters of theology or church politics” (436) and reveals the factor of that particular movement that has added the most to its growth globally, the adaptability of Pentecostalism (437). McGrath believes that Pentecostalism has responded sympathetically and rapidly to local customs without the inherent restraints of the “modernist Western assumptions” and has become the “global religion best adapted to the global religion itself” (Ibid.). This assessment is accurate and provable, particularly in Africa and more recently, Latin America (450).

McGrath discusses the effects of colonialism in Africa and the false theory that when Britain and France left colonized areas, that Christianity would leave along with them. This was proven untrue. McGrath actually points out that while the colonizing nations left, they took with them the dogmatism that hindered the cultural growth of Christianity among the indigenous people group (443). The political freedom eventually led to a theological freedom among poorer, Third World countries.

Interestingly enough, this pattern of reinterpretations within Protestantism ultimately led to the emergence of Pentecostalism within the twentieth century. As the patterns of interpretation have changed, radical new forms of Protestantism have emerged (475). This trend can now be
seen among Muslims in the Western world, as Islam grows into new cultural contexts, it will become increasingly fragmented (Ibid.). McGrath contends that just as Protestantism rose as a reaction to usury, based on its “foundational biblical text” (476), Islam may very well do the same thing in the near future. He continues to compare the Protestant movement with Islam, as he points out that neither have “centralized power and no institutionalized authority as to limit or regulate their uncontrollable development” (477). In other words, McGrath is predicting Islamic “Protestantism”, an issue he says “raises questions that Western political and religious leaders cannot afford to overlook (Ibid.).

Justo L. Gonzalez’s *The Story of Christianity Volume Two: The Reformation to the Present Day* is very comparable to McGrath’s work. Both cover a tremendous amount of history in just as many pages and are excruciatingly detailed and comprehensive; the major difference is that Gonzalez focuses on Christendom as a whole, McGrath specifically deals with the Protestant movement. McGrath sees a necessity for American evangelicals to reclaim the political culture to reverse the overwhelmingly antireligious direction that the United States is currently suffering through, by reinvesting in “political engagements and activism” (477). Considering the current state of our Western society, this reviewer would have to agree fully with this sentiment. For too long, Evangelicals have removed themselves from society, politics and secular life; leading to the removal of prayer from public schools, the rise in homosexual “marriage”, and the increasingly liberal agendas that permeate our daily life.

Dr. McGrath’s view of the future of Protestantism is that as it continues to be shaped by cultural contexts, as in Asia, Africa and the Global South, the denominational dogmatism in
America could soon bring it to an end (5). This theory is made abundantly clear in Gonzalez’s assessment of Protestantism’s future as the Northern Hemisphere is being “de-Christianized.”

Without question, this reviewer would wholeheartedly encourage anyone wishing to broaden their “Protestant” horizons to read this book. As a pastor, I would definitely recommend it to one of my peers, or even a member of the laity who is seeking to understand Protestantism better, however, due to the sheer scope of material, the average congregation member may not appreciate the detail to which McGrath goes. Dr. McGrath’s conversational style of writing is very fluid and is injected with his (often curious) questions and remarkably thoughtful answers, adding tremendously to the wonderful tapestry that he creates.

**Conclusion**

Five hundred years of Protestantism has impacted nations, rulers and kingdoms. From Luther’s initial desire to put God’s word into the hands of everyone, to the spread of Pentecostalism in the “Global South” (439), McGrath expertly takes the reader through half millennia of Protestant history.

Writing from an Evangelical Anglican viewpoint, combined with Calvinistic overtones, McGrath’s book is well researched and scholarly, while maintaining a conversational feel. In McGrath’s book *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, he regards “evangelicalism as the only future for Protestantism and as the rising center of Christianity globally.”

It is my contention that McGrath’s perspective is that while the Protestant Reformation continues to multiply through division, the former dynamic of Protestantism influencing cultures, societies and political powers has shifted to the degree that the latter are now influencing the

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former. With such issues as homosexuality, evolution, atheism and secularism continuing to be issues among Protestants, this in itself is a very dangerous idea.
Bibliography


