

## 書評

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McGrath, Alister. *Glimpsing the Face of God: The Search for Meaning in the Universe*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. 124pp.

Readers of this journal should be familiar with the work of Alister McGrath, principal of Wycliffe Hall and professor of historical theology at Oxford University. No fewer than fifteen titles of his works are now available in Chinese. *Glimpsing the Face of God* is the second title after *The Unknown God: Searching for Spiritual Fulfillment* (Eerdmans, 1999) targeted at non-Christians, specifically the "purpose-seekers." The smaller size of the volume, glossy paper finish, sparse text, and rich graphics are all designed to reach out to a larger group of audience outside his usual readership. Whereas the *Unknown God* offers a series of brief meditations designed to draw the reader from her own persistent desire for deeper personal fulfillment to the Christian gospel, where McGrath claims the ultimate meaning lies, *Glimpsing* takes an outward look and locates the equally persistent phenomenon of human search for meaning in the empirical universe in our deeply ingrained longing for God. McGrath is undogmatic about his proposition. In his words, "In the end, every worldview rests upon trust, in that none can be conclusively demonstrated to be true-atheism included." (p.120) But this admission also forms the crux of his strategy. Again, "Our decision must rest on our assessment of what is the best explanation of the puzzle of existence." The result is an exposition which combs through some of the major questions posed by humanity, in a style that is at once leisurely yet serious.

The first chapter poses the question: What if the psychologist (as we found in Freud) and the materialist (like Marx) are wrong and the nature is "studded with clues to our true meaning and destiny, and fingerprinted with the presence of God?" Yet a consideration of some of the clues seemed inconclusive one way or another. Whichever worldview one assumes, certain clues are "anomalous," others ambiguous. The question is how any worldview deals with anomalous data that cannot be neatly incorporated into the system. McGrath then proceeds to demonstrate heuristically the absurdity of the postmodern sensibility which regards a concern with truth as misguided (ch. 4). On this count not all views on a given issue are equally valid, and *mutatis mutandis*, not all worldviews, whose subject is the reality, can be equally valid. The point is to base our lives on something secure and reliable, and yet also relevant. This is where the Christian worldview enters, beginning with a story of beginnings crafted no less by the creator God himself.

The resulting logic is a familiar one: according to the Christian story God created the universe purposefully (ch. 5). Part of that purposefulness is intelligibility. This is in complete correlation with the conviction of modern science. Moreover, that purposefulness also rests on our ability to know God by being created "in his image." It does not take long for one to see that if these statements are trusted, then the same stars that proclaimed the transience and insignificance of the human species now become artifacts bearing witness to the wisdom and providence of the creator God for mankind. The only question is then how one might draw close to this God.

From this point on McGrath moves beyond the ideal but unfeeling Platonic form to the biblical personal and loving God, through the significance and inner necessity of divine incarnation (ch. 7) in the person of Jesus Christ to its outer necessity: redemption of the human race plagued by a corrupt nature (ch. 8). Then McGrath discusses what he considers to be the Achilles' heel for the Christian worldview: the problem of suffering (ch. 9). He has previously argued that all worldviews have their vulnerabilities. As things turn out, the problem of evil and suffering is generally considered to be the most intractable issue in any given framework. In this instance, McGrath considers incarnation to be the best answer offered by Christianity to the perennial problem of suffering. Not only that, incarnation also brings hope, for the story of Jesus did not end on a note of suffering, but on the conquering of death.

A regular exposition of the good news to the uninitiated would probably end there. But McGrath is no regular theologian. As a professor of historical theology, he is well aware of the important role doctrines occupy in the Christian faith. In fact Christian doctrines, although never flying in their true colors, have been proposed, discussed, and defended throughout the previous chapters. But this is probably also where most of his Western readers would have sneered. The *d-* word is indeed a dirty word in Western culture. It smacks of authoritarianism, parochialism, and anti-intellectualism. It is to McGrath's credit that he dares to confront the potential wrath of his readers by sparing a chapter (ch. 10) on the necessity of doctrines. He works on two fronts. First, instead of being anti-intellectual, he argues that doctrine actually gives intellectual shape to beliefs, for they are considered statements of what one believes in. Doctrines come from understanding, not ignorance. Second, instead of betraying a kind of narrow-mindedness, doctrines actually safeguard what one believes to be true. If truth is a virtue at all, it is certainly not to be corrupted, neither should it be stated in a vague and incongruent fashion. Although he did not state it this way, a third point for the necessity of doctrines (the example given is the doctrine of the Trinity) is that the Christian God is after all not the same as the philosopher's God. The incarnation expresses the nature of the Christian godhead in all its specificities and nuances unattainable in philosophical speculation. McGrath has stood his ground against those who have long been nurtured to distrust doctrines by being gentle and reasonable, not doctrinaire.

The last two chapters draw the reader back to where he begins: the very human trait of longing for purpose and fulfillment. Can the Christian story be proved? McGrath says no, but insists neither can its alternatives. The issue is how well it explains reality, how well it speaks to our minds, to our hearts. The issue is faith. For McGrath, it is not so much that truth can be proved conclusively within a finite span, but that untruths would eventually give themselves away.

It is generally the way things are that theologians write for the consumption of fellow theologians. One might stoop a bit lower to accommodate theological students. McGrath is a rare breed. He writes for theologians and for students, for the general Christian and for the man-on-the-street who is willing to hear sensible talk about the Christian faith. McGrath is empathetic to the postmodern condition that most of his readers are in, but he is too good a theologian to let postmodernity dominate his agenda. He premises his discourse on the basic human condition, not of sin, but of yearning for meaning and fulfillment, and proceeds to demonstrate that the Christian God is the end of all human longing via a strategy of "best-fit." In this his work differs from the traditional evangelistic strategy of moving to achieve the effect of "Just as I am, without a Plea." McGrath's approach is not without merit, however, and shares in a distinguished pedigree; and he has done his job well. Whether one comes to Christ as a seeker or as a pleader, one eventually will have to face Christ as the Lord of all. McGrath's work will no doubt bring a few more closer to this stage.

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