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Review of George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment

Carol Propst

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Timothy Larsen, *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018). 150 pages. \$16. ISBN 9780830853731.

Thanks to scholars like Timothy Larsen and the late Colin Manlove, new generations of readers are enjoying a fresh look at underappreciated writers like Scottish Victorian novelist George MacDonald. Although modern readers often dismiss the Victorians as repressed, uptight prudes, Larsen in this incisive series of Hansen lectures focuses on MacDonald's refreshingly nonconformist religious views and literary expression and brings the reluctant clergyman to life in a way that is well suited for our platitude-weary and doubt-ridden times. *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment*, although scholarly enough for the most erudite reader, is pleasingly digestible even for those who are only tangentially interested in literary and religious history or criticism. Larsen's discussion of MacDonald's lifelong grappling with vocational and spiritual challenges underscores his humanity and illuminates his fiction, particularly his fantasies.

Larsen's emphasis on MacDonald's intellectual eclecticism is especially engaging. For example, MacDonald's interest in the Sumer-Babylonian (and later Hebrew) myth of Lilith distinguishes him from other Christian authors who have hesitated from addressing the moral complexities of the story of Adam's first wife, before Eve. Because of Lilith's insistence on equality with Adam, she is banned from Eden and becomes a demon, the "night hag" of Hebrew scriptures who motivated anxious mothers of antiquity to place near their vulnerable infants amulets with the inscription *Lilu-abi*, which translates "Off, Lilith." MacDonald's surprisingly compassionate treatment of her character in his novel of her namesake places him apart from his theological contemporaries and shows him to be ahead of his time, although MacDonald could not have envisioned the "feminist" Lilith movement of the late twentieth century. Larsen notes that MacDonald, like Donne, considered suffering a treasure, as he exemplified by Lilith's profound suffering followed by her eventual redemption at the end of the novel. Although MacDonald's characterization of Lilith is far from the Beatrician ideal, she is nonetheless more morally nuanced than the stereotypical vampire or succubus. MacDonald, whom Larsen dubs

“The first Red Letter Christian” (69), proves himself to be more in line with the Age of the Incarnation than with the Age of Atonement, a position that often found him at odds with his stodgier congregations.

Another of Larsen’s topics that is especially elucidating for those who seek to understand MacDonald is his discussion of the rose fire, the symbolism of which is featured on the cover of Larsen’s book. In its symbolism, the fire of hate can only be conquered by the fire of God’s love. Walter Hansen, whose parents inspired the lecture series, quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his introduction: “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that” (6). Larsen’s analysis of MacDonald’s clash with the religious orthodoxy of his day opens the door for meaningful discussions of tradition for its own sake versus the sincere quest for understanding. While MacDonald’s works may be legitimately analyzed through a broad variety of critical approaches, especially the archetypal, Larsen’s careful scholarship clarifies that MacDonald’s biography and cultural milieu significantly color his characters and his attitudes toward them, lending his works the sincerity and authenticity craved by modern readers who may be inclined to question the *status quo*.

One small caveat concerning the organization of the book: while the commentaries by other scholars at the end of each lecture are interesting and insightful, it might have been better to place them in an appendix at the end of the book. The constant shifts in perspective make it too easy for the reader to lose track of whether the comments belong to Larsen or another scholar. Readers of Larsen’s excellent book may find it helpful to read all the lectures first, then the commentaries.

The sweep of Larsen’s scholarship—literary, historical, Biblical, theological—is vast. His skill in weaving together these broad disciplines to underscore MacDonald’s unique perspective and considerable talent makes these lectures a pleasure to read. Unlike literary critics whose comments become so bogged down in minutiae that the reader loses the point entirely, Larsen—while incorporating a satisfying bevy of concrete supporting detail—paints the big picture so clearly that the reader sees his analyses with 20-20 acuity. These lectures clarify why the works of

MacDonald and their timeless themes caught the imagination of writers like Lewis and continue to engage thinking and feeling human beings in general.

CAROL PROPST
Bristol, Virginia

Alister McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019). 166 pages. \$15.99. ISBN 9780801075773.

In the world of Lewis studies, one occasionally comes across the claim that C. S. Lewis gave up formal apologetics and wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* (and other imaginative literature) in response to losing a philosophical debate with Elizabeth Anscombe. An alternative version says that Anscombe had nothing to do with it but rather that Lewis came to realize that fiction was better at slipping past the “watchful dragons” of prejudice against religion.

Both of these accounts rely on a narrow understanding of apologetics and an incomplete picture of Lewis’s apologetic work. While *Reflections on the Psalms* and *Letters to Malcolm* are less overtly apologetic compared to *Miracles*, both books defend the reasonableness of orthodox Christian belief in the Bible and providence against modern skepticism, and both books come several years *after* Lewis finished writing *Narnia*. More significantly, Lewis’s first foray into apologetics did not come in the form of the pithy yet prescient *The Problem of Pain* (1940), but rather in the narrative works, *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933) and *Out of the Silent Planet* (1937).

Lewis’s allegorical autobiography is easily recognized as apologetics. *The Pilgrim’s Regress* features the character Reason as he rescues John the pilgrim from the Giant of the Spirit of the Age and compels him along his journey to “Mother Kirk.” The assertion that *Out of the Silent Planet* is apologetic in nature may be less obvious, but the book’s final chapter illuminates Lewis’s intentions for the text. Lewis, who includes himself as a character in the book, describes how he came to write about Ransom’s interplanetary adventures: