

Book Reviews

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Timothy Larsen, *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment*. Hansen Lectureship Series (IVP Academic, 2018). \$16 (paperback), 135 pp.

As the second installment in the Hansen Lectureship series, Dr. Timothy Larsen's book presents three broad "movements" that took place in the span of MacDonald's lifetime: the shifting theological center of gravity from Atonement to Incarnation, the movement from regimented doctrinal assent to embracing doubt as a healthy component of faith, and the departure from rigid rationalism towards seeing God's mystery in the ordinary. This valuable model for examining Victorians enables us to view MacDonald's work from a broader historical, theological, and ecclesiastical perspective. It enables us to appreciate MacDonald's place and role among his generation of Victorian writers and theologians. Through this threefold model we can discern subtleties and layers of meaning unnoticed before. The book is rich in doors and windows to other authors, which is a joy and an educational bonus. Additionally, responses by Jim Beitler, Richard Hughes Gibson, and Jill Pelaez Baumgartner add illuminating dimensions to the discussion and suggest new connections and avenues for further exploration.

In the first chapter, Larsen traces the sources behind and history of MacDonald's theological development which positioned him as both "an early adopter of the gospel of incarnation" and a friend and disciple of F.D. Maurice—one of the key agents behind the shift towards the gospel of incarnation (15). Everyone familiar with MacDonald's novels will at once recognize the battle over 'the divine plan' and the 'correct formulation of the doctrine of Atonement' and will recall the writer's protagonists refusing to accept what to them was a mean and less than human representation of God the Father (18). Along these lines, Larsen fleshes out the meaning of Christmas (and thus Incarnation) for MacDonald by quoting from his poems, fairy stories, and novels, convincingly demonstrating that for MacDonald and his family December 25 truly was "the Day of Days" and that MacDonald himself was "a fine representative of the Age of Incarnation" in all his work and life (21, 28).

Larsen then uses his own research background to paint a wider religious context of Victorian Britain in chapter two. Initially, he outlines the history of the movement towards religious freedom, sincerity, and open proclamation of personal creeds, where merely formal assent to institutionally accepted doctrine was no longer a sufficient marker of faith. He astutely points out

that the Age of Faith /Age of Doubt does not mean it was “the Secular Age or an Age of Unbelief”; rather, it presumes a context where “faith is the norm” (50). Within this backdrop, Larsen provides a detailed discussion of how MacDonald treated the themes of faith and growth in faith in his fiction and sermons. Larsen hails MacDonald as a pioneer for pointing out “a better way for Christians to respond to doubt” (52) and for treating doubt not as a threat but as a needful companion, a guide or even a midwife to the truth. He also presents MacDonald as a champion of “the Romantic Road” and the Affirmative Way, where love of nature, poetry, music, woman or man is also a road to God and a channel of God’s “love, not a rival to it” (61, 65). He shows how MacDonald, ever a shepherd of souls, provides readers with concrete “how-to models.” For example, his “reverent doubters” and “holy fools” model shows us how to celebrate Christmas, navigate doubt, understand secular poetry, meet Christ in the Bible, and grow in faith (69). Larsen also draws our attention to the consolation that MacDonald offers to fearful disciples by peppering his books with practical advice on life-long Bible reading and compelling examples of trust (without full understanding but with existential assurance of goodness), recovering faith, and learning obedience. Through these examples MacDonald reclaims faith as action, rescuing the very word “faith” by boldly setting it aside for a time and finding other words in order to redeem the idea tarnished by and tired from much abuse.

After a long immersion in the golden elegance of Dr. Larsen’s reflections, the beginning of chapter three feels like a sudden cold shower amidst a glowing warmth. Larsen sketches a startling portrayal of MacDonald as “a bad pastor” and a smug, haughty, arrogant, and vain person who (even if subconsciously) blamed others for his failure in ministry (97-99). Some of the logic here seems a little dubious: just because other congregations (even conservative ones) welcomed MacDonald as a preacher, it does not follow that his first congregation in Arundel did. Self-narratives are, certainly, very powerful, and MacDonald may well have subconsciously sabotaged his pastoral ministry, but official records do state that some of his congregants were indeed unhappy with his views because they were “not in accordance with the Scriptures and quite differed with the sentiments held by the Ministers of the Independent Denomination.”¹ A few other assessments of MacDonald’s attitudes, character, and choices seem somewhat less than fair, and the supposition that he chose to be a minister out of financial considerations, on the evidence that later he vehemently condemned such behavior in his novels, appears debatable, at the very least. MacDonald may not have been a great pastor, but some of Larsen’s interpretations seem a little one-sided and unnecessarily harsh, although this could simply be a matter of differences in understanding primary sources—or a reflection of a commendable desire to

1. Greville, MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*. Johannesen, 1998, p. 180.

correct what is seen as the too-positive one-sidedness of preceding scholarship. Nevertheless, MacDonald's self-accusations of pride and vanity were, undoubtedly, not unfounded. He certainly "needed to stick that hand into the rosefire" (101)—and clearly did so.

In the end, Larsen's astute analysis of MacDonald ought to be appreciated. He rightly confirms MacDonald's "extraordinary, unwavering commitment to submitting to the will of God" (105). Additionally, he offers a thorough, nuanced, and much-needed presentation of MacDonald's theology of evil, suffering, hell, spiritual formation and purgation, and afterlife (which remains one of the most controversial and ever relevant topics in discussions of MacDonald's work). By contrast, one may argue with his evaluation of MacDonald's "eccentric and dubious assumption that every illness was a manifestation of a spiritual problem" (106). Indeed, this description almost makes MacDonald sound like one of Job's friends, when in fact he only expressed shared beliefs of Christians mystics. For example, he shared their beliefs that all troubles, ultimately, do have a spiritual cause; that sickness and death are non-threatening and insignificant in comparison to sin (and the idea of someone dying from resentment actually seems refreshingly accurate); and that full abandonment to God's will does make things infinitely better even if no physical healing follows. Yet one can't help but affirm Larsen's strong and comforting conclusion which echoes much of MacDonald's own thought: the gates of hell (including Victorian attempts at hell, listed on p. 122) will never prevail against the reality of God's love. By picking up the theme of purifying fire by fire from T.S. Eliot, highlighted in Ken Hansen's introduction (121, 6-9), Larsen demonstrates, in a truly Bakhtinian fashion, the timely relevance of MacDonald's contribution to the never-ending dialogue between poets and thinkers of all times and cultures. Ultimately, he invites the reader to become part of this ongoing conversation—with and through George MacDonald and his masters and disciples—in which we learn from and sharpen each other in our joint quest for truth, meaning, beauty, and holiness.

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