

**Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2012), 197 pages**

I've had the pleasure of hearing McGrath speak a few times before, including interviewing him once. So apart from enjoying his very easy-to-read style in his new book *Mere Apologetics*, I've had his voice stuck in my head as I've done so.

All facetiousness aside, this is a very good book. For one thing it's short—197 pages. It also has a list of further reading at the end of each chapter from a wide variety of authors. But, most of all, I think this book is excellent because it focuses on *approach* rather than content (hence its size). *Mere Apologetics* is about attitude and ideas, common areas of concern, and developing your own apologetic style—not copying someone else's.

After defining apologetics and its basic themes of defending, commending and translating the faith, distinguishing it from evangelism and discussing its limits, McGrath looks at a number of key areas. Chapter 2 traces the movement from modernity to postmodernity and the need to address this properly. Apologetics can no longer be merely about rational argument. While recognising that the game has changed, McGrath believes dipping into church history uncovers resources for this new apologetic challenge with a return to incarnational apologetics. However, most of the book seems to focus on delivery with the following steps: understand the faith, understand the audience, communicate with clarity, find points of contact and, communicate the whole gospel.

Always concerned to ground his thinking in the bible, chapter 3 is about the theological basis for apologetics. I particularly appreciated his point that apologetics is not about making the faith attractive or relevant. Relevancy can be a curse and, at any rate, it is merely temporary. Instead, the goal of apologetics is to open up the truth, beauty and goodness of the faith. In doing so, knowing the audience is essential. In chapter 4, McGrath finds biblical basis for this in Acts, where Peter addresses Jews differently to the way Paul addressed Greeks or Romans in his legal speeches. He also briefly summarises C.S. Lewis' strategies of reason, human longing, and imagination. It's all a matter of what medium or, as McGrath puts it, gateway hearers will respond to.

It wouldn't be a McGrath book without a chapter on the reasonableness of the faith given his long-running crusade against the irrational arguments of Richard Dawkins. Rational arguments do not create belief but allow it to flourish. The goal is not certainty but the best explanation. This should make us modest but no less eager in the face of much criticism of the irrationality of religious belief. For instance, in my role as tutor in a course in science and religion, I find this not to be an uncommon view and often set myself the goal of showing that Christianity has a strong inner logic and cohesion, indeed reasonableness (not 'big R' Enlightenment 'Reason'). Indeed, McGrath shows Enlightenment reason to be anything but that, and that its metanarrative doesn't really explain anything of importance.

The best chapters are 6 and 7. In chapter 6, McGrath develops eight pointers or clues to the Christian faith. These are not *proofs* in any foundationalist sense. They won't clinch any deals on their own. Instead, they are tantalising suggestions of something beyond this world. They include truth, beauty, eternity, desire, morality and order. Of course, one can argue each of these individually. As a

scientist I see great appeal in order, yet arguments about 'multiverses' tend to make the whole discussion turgid and complicated. McGrath glides over details like these—again, not because he doesn't care about them but because that's not the point of this book. Chapter 7 is about 'gateways': how does one present the clues? Explanation is one gateway; telling people what Christianity really is all about. I often find that if you explain the gospel as not basically about "going to heaven when you die", but expand on the biblical story's concerns for the restoration of creation or explain the central place of peace and justice, people actually listen. This is a big job because it entails giving some insight into how the New Testament relates to the Old (or as Tom Wright put it in his new book and expressed in the title: *How God Became King*.) It's a very big job to do this as apologetics since too many in the church share a Sunday School level view of the faith with the general populace and often one is countering bad explanations that people have heard.

Beyond explanation is argument, a mode many of us would be familiar with in apologetics. There are many arguments and many good books to read on them. As indicated earlier, McGrath responds to the postmodern turn in society by showing the role stories and images can play in apologetics. He helpfully expounds Tom Wright's view of Scripture to show that the biblical metanarrative is one of love and not coercive power or threat as it is often portrayed. Not only is the Bible a story but contains mythic elements ('myth' in the non-pejorative sense) that can be utilised to make apologetic points. There is other Christian prose we can turn to that appeals to the imagination that provides us a gateway to McGrath's clues about reality. The imaginative worlds of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are rich, vivid, stirring and more compelling than their secularizing counterparts in Dan Brown or Philip Pullman. McGrath's treatment of images is somewhat briefer given his self-confessed preference for words, yet he sees their value. From *Cheers* to Plato's cave, images abound that can be used for apologetic value.

Chapter 8 is the closest McGrath comes to holding himself up as someone to imitate. In dealing with questions, he models a graciousness and humility towards listeners as he uses examples to show how he has dealt with difficult questions in public speaking. Yet, as if to limit that temptation to imitate, the last chapter of the book talks about developing one's own style rather than becoming McGrath clones.

I'd have no hesitation in recommending this book to aspiring apologists; indeed it good as a first good book in the area, not because it has all of the right answers but because it gets you asking all the right questions

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