

The Reenchantment of Nature, by Alister McGrath

reviewed by [H. Paul Santmire](#) in the [January 25, 2003](#) issue

Alister McGrath, professor of historical theology at Oxford, began his professional career in the natural sciences (molecular biophysics). That scientific training has served him well, especially in books like this. His deepest passions, which emerged when he converted to Christianity (evangelical Anglicanism), have been theological. He began his professional theological career in the mid-1980s with a number of scholarly studies in historical theology. His 1986 history of the doctrine of justification, *Iustitia Dei*, has been regarded as a landmark work by some critics.

More recently, McGrath has shifted his focus to works of a systematic and apologetic character. Enormously productive, he has published some 20 books in the past five years alone. Clearly at home in the world of academic theology, he has also authored a number of helpful popular works on Christian thought, as well as a widely noticed study on the cultural influence of the King James translation of the Bible. Any new work by McGrath must therefore be taken seriously.

Though McGrath does not say for whom he has intended this book, it quickly becomes apparent that it is a work in apologetic theology written for those who either are without faith or whose faith needs intellectual bolstering. In an engaging, often personal style, McGrath takes on some of the most noted cultured despisers of Christianity: critics like the historian Lynn White Jr., who blame Christianity for the environmental crisis, and polemical atheistic scientists like the zoologist Richard Dawkins, as well as a variety of philosophical "deconstructionists." These are relatively easy targets for a writer as well tutored in the history of Western thought and the dialectics of debate as McGrath (one hears the echoes of many after-dinner discussions at places like Oxford).

McGrath singles out the Enlightenment as the metaphysical and environmental villain par excellence. It, not Christianity, has been the driving force behind the modern environmental crisis, he argues, given the Enlightenment's tendency to reject God and to exalt human autonomy and the human will-to-power over nature. The Enlightenment's coronation of the mechanical view of nature and its easy alliance with developing industrial technologies set the stage for today's global environmental crisis. When McGrath began college in the early '70s he was a committed Marxist. But here he presents atheistic Stalinism's devastation both of the earth and of humans as the logical outcome of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment dethroning of God and the ensuing technological desecration of nature.

The often neglected and sometimes totally rejected historic Christian understanding of creation appears to be just what our ecologically ravaged world needs, McGrath contends. Belief in the Christian God brings with it, on the one hand, a sense of profound human limits with regard to nature and, on the other hand, a thoroughgoing respect for and wonder at nature--a reenchantment of nature for which many, especially such exponents of the romantic tradition as Wordsworth and Thoreau, have long been searching. Many Christian churches of all denominations have been calling for such a theological reenchantment of nature in recent years, McGrath points out.

While McGrath is a forceful and frequently convincing critic of the cultured despisers of Christianity, his argument is less successful when it comes to his own theological exposition. Although he knows the history of theology well, particularly the Christian doctrine of creation (discussed at length in his 2001 systematic work, *Scientific Theology I: Nature*), he here presents that doctrine and its mandate of "respecting, tending, and preserving the natural order" without any real historical specificity. He presents it as a kind of unchanging,

abstract truth, almost as if it were not implicated in the ambiguities of history.

In response to critics like White, he allows that "there are doubtless many 'bad' Christians, who fail to appreciate what their tradition demands of them, or who prefer to overlook the implicit ecological dimensions of their faith. That is, however, a criticism of individual Christians, not of the fundamental vision of Christianity itself." But McGrath gives us nary a hint that, historically speaking, the doctrine of creation was and is in fact many doctrines of creation, sometimes widely divergent and not always ecologically friendly. If Christianity has been ecologically at fault, it is the fault of bad Christians who failed to grasp the full meaning of the doctrine.

On the contrary, as I have argued in my 1985 study, *The Travail of Nature*, historical Christian theological understandings of creation, and particularly of nature, have been profoundly ambiguous. True, there is a strong tradition of the affirmation of nature in Christian thought, which McGrath rightly highlights. But there is also a strong strain of antinature thinking, beginning dramatically with Origen, surfacing more subtly in thinkers like the early Augustine and then Thomas, and finally taking a commanding position in modern Protestant theology, at least until very recently. At one point McGrath observes that evangelical theologians (like himself) have come only very lately to the ecological discussion. Why? Could it be that the historical Christian emphasis on God and the soul (and/or the Savior and the soul), together with a certain neglect or even denigration of the rest of the creation--evident in the early Augustine, in liberals like Harnack and then, via Pietism, dominant in Protestant revivalism--has had some influence? Is White's critique of Christianity totally wrong, as McGrath seems to believe?

McGrath's abstract view of the doctrine of creation appears all the more problematic when we consider the ideological underpinnings which have bolstered that doctrine, especially in the modern era. Strong in their fix--fixations?--on God and the soul, abandoning the wider creation to neglect or to other cultural forces, American Christians often enthusiastically bought into the "manifest destiny" ideology of being "nature's nation," without noticing the ravages of that manifest destiny on African slaves, Native Americans and the environment. The author of "Nature," the great Emerson--one of McGrath's cultural heroes--was also the great champion of the railroad and of the "civilizing" of the Western reaches of the North American continent. In the 19th century and thereafter, generation after generation of American Christians celebrated the devastating advance of industrial society and the transformation of nature for the sake of "progress," often in the name of the traditional Christian doctrine of dominion over the creation. Again, is White's critique of Christianity totally wrong?

The most compelling apologetic arguments for the Christian faith have always been those that take notice of the ambiguities, even the failures, of Christian theology. The lack of historical nuance in this respect seriously weakens McGrath's otherwise engaging book. Even so, if I were a parish pastor I would eagerly make this book available to my congregation, perhaps even use it for a study group. But I would add my own clarifications about the ecological and ideological ambiguities of Christian thought and practice. *The Reenchantment of Nature* is an accessible and forceful introduction to how Christians can fruitfully contend with the secularizing trends in academia and in the popularizing media.