



**2022 IAN RAMSEY  
CENTRE SUMMER  
CONFERENCE**

**Celebrating  
Four Decades of  
Achievements in  
Science and Religion**

On the Occasion of  
His Retirement as the  
Andreas Idreos Chair

**14-16 JULY 2022  
OXFORD**

**ALISTER  
McGRATH**

# Alister McGrath

Celebrating Four Decades of Achievements  
in Science and Religion

2022 Ian Ramsey Centre Summer Conference

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Mathematical Institute and Jurys Inn  
Oxford University

14-16 July 2022

Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion (IRC),  
Faculty of Theology and Religion, Oxford University

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Please be aware that we plan to film the public lecture on Thursday evening and to take some photographs at other events to help with online and educational materials.

If you do not want your image to be used, please inform the IRC.

# Aims of the Conference

Alistair McGrath will be retiring from the position of Andreas Idreos Chair after Trinity Term 2022. This conference will honour his four decades of achievement in science and religion.

Andrew Pinsent

Research Director, Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion

Faculty of Theology and Religion

July 2022

## Thursday 14 July (evening only)

*This event will be in the L1 Lecture Theatre of the Mathematical Institute*

6:30pm Doors open

7:30pm Andrew Pinsent (University of Oxford)

**Welcome to the 2022 Conference**

PLENARY PUBLIC LECTURE

Alister McGrath (University of Oxford)

**"Science and Religion:  
A Reflection on the State of the Art"**

8:45pm Finish

## Friday 15 July

*All these events will be in the L3 Lecture Theatre of the Mathematical Institute*

9:30am Tea and Coffee

10:30am PLENARY LECTURE

Revd Canon Dr Joanna Collicutt McGrath

**"Why Write Theology Books?"**

11:15am PLENARY LECTURE

Major Alex Fogassy and Adina Bezerita (University of Oxford)

**"Greatness in the Little-Big Things of  
Professor Alister McGrath"**

12:00pm Lunch Break

1:30pm

PLENARY LECTURE

Marston Bailey (University of Oxford)

**“Taking Up the Torch: A Conversation with McGrath and Barth on the Critical Realism of Bioinformatics”**

2:15pm

PLENARY LECTURE

Emily Qureshi-Hurst (University of Oxford)

**“A Tribute to Alister McGrath”**

2:45pm

Break with Tea and Coffee

3:30pm

PLENARY LECTURE

Adriani Milli Rodrigues

(Adventist University of São Paulo (UNASP))

**“The Contribution of Alister McGrath’s *Christian Theology: An Introduction For Theological Education: A Brief Analysis from the Perspective of Teaching Systematic Theology*”**

4:00pm

PLENARY LECTURE

Bethany Sollereder (University of Oxford/Edinburgh)

**“The Perils of *Curiositas* and the Opportunities of *Studiositas* in Pedagogical Imagination”**

5:00pm

Finish

6:30pm

Supper (a mainly fish buffet) at Jurys Inn

## Saturday 16 July

*All these events will be at Jurys Inn*

10:30am

SHORT PAPERS I (THREE STREAMS)

*Room A: Oriel*

10:30am	<b>“Revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’: Mining Alister McGrath’s Contribution for a General Philosophy of Science”</b>	Michael Borowski
11:00am	<b>“The Place of a Scientific Theology among Theological Disciplines”</b>	Humberto Coelho
11:30am	<b>“Paul Tillich on History and Socialism”</b>	Elena Draghici- Vasilescu
<i><u>Room B: Blenheim</u></i>		
10:30am	<b>“McGrath, Barbour, Harrison, and a New Fourfold Taxonomy of Science-Religion Relations”</b>	Andrew Loke
11:00am	<b>“The Territories of Human Reason: Rethinking the Scientific Approach to Nonreligion”</b>	Mari Ovsepyan– van Emmerik
11:30am	<b>“Never in the Shallow End”</b>	Mike Parsons
<i><u>Online: Cherwell</u></i>		
10:30am		
11:00am	<b>“Refuting the Critique of McGrath’s View of Atheism – Indian Perspectives”</b>	Augustine Pamplany
11:30am	<b>“A Scientific Moral Theology: A Constructive Critical Realist Framework For A Christian Engagement With The Contemporary Sciences of Morality”</b>	Adrian Rathieshan Kumarising- ham
12:00pm	Lunch break	

1:30pm	SHORT PAPERS II (THREE STREAMS)	
1:30pm	<b>“Modelling the Infinite from Midgley to McGrath: Methods, Maps, Models, and Metaphors”</b>	Buki Fatona
2:00pm	<b>“Alister McGrath and China: Theology and Science for the Third Millennium”</b>	Jacob Chengwei Feng
2:30pm	<b>“Conditional to What? Achieving Immortality in a Technological World”</b>	Stephen Goundrey-Smith
<i>Room B: Blenheim</i>		
1:30pm	<b>“Rethinking McGrath's Scientific Theology”</b>	Finney Premkumar
2:00pm	<b>“Alister McGrath: Laying Foundations for Science and Religion”</b>	Ravi Jain
2:30pm	<b>“Cognitive Science of Religion Debunking Arguments and Subjective Probabilities”</b>	Bradley L. Sickler
<i>Online: Cherwell</i>		
1:30pm	<b>“Faith in Experts: What the Social Epistemology of Science and Religion Reveals about their Conflict”</b>	Mark Boespflug
2:00pm	<b>“Alister McGrath and the Academic as Apologist”</b>	Joshua Chatraw
2:30pm	<b>“A Typology of Methods”</b>	Adam Chin

3:00pm	Break, with tea and coffee	
3:30pm	SHORT PAPERS III (THREE STREAMS)	
	<i>Room A: Oriel</i>	
3:30pm	<b>“Re-Imagining Natural Selection: Fitness, Biological Teleology, and Natural Theology”</b>	Seth Hart
4:00pm	<b>“On the Usefulness of a Christian Natural Theology: Advantages and Challenges to Alister McGrath’s ‘New Vision’ of Natural Theology”</b>	George Klaeren
4:30pm		
	<i>Room B: Blenheim</i>	
3:30pm	<b>“Teleology as Theodicy: The Problem of Natural Evil and the Fulfilment of Good Natures”</b>	Matthew Warnez
4:00pm	<b>“Blurring the Line Between the Natural and the Supernatural”</b>	Juuso Loikkanen
4:30pm		
	<i>Online: Cherwell</i>	
3:30pm	<b>“An Eclipse of the Sun: Reflecting on Alister McGrath’s Loving Science, Discovering God; Implications for non-Christian Theists.”</b>	Blessing Temitope Emmanuel
4:00pm	<b>“McGrath’s Scientific Theology and Unificationist Scientific Explanation”</b>	Gesiel B. da Silva



4:30pm	<b>“Worldview Evaluation: Epistemic and Non-Epistemic Considerations”</b>	Daryl Ooi
5:00pm	<b>“The ‘Scientific Interpretation’ of the Bible and the Conflict between Science and Religion” [RECORDING]</b>	James C. Ungureanu
5:30pm	Break	
6:30pm	FINAL CONFERENCE DINNER	
	A REFLECTION BEFORE DINNER BY PROF. WILLIAM WOOD CHAIR OF THE FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD	
	A TOAST AFTER DINNER BY DR STAN ROSENBERG FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF SCHOLARSHIP AND CHRISTIANITY IN OXFORD (SCIO).	

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## Abstracts of Keynote Speakers (14-15 July)

**Abstracts are listed in order of appearance.**

**All plenary presentations are held in the Mathematical Institute, Oxford**

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**Alister McGrath**

**University of Oxford**

Thursday 14 July, 7:30pm – 8:45pm, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L1

**“Science and Religion:**

**A Reflection on the State of the Art”**

In this talk, Professor McGrath will reflect on the development of the field of science and religion, as well as his own involvement in developing it. Among the issues to be considered are whether science and religion is a "field" or "discipline"; the diversification of the field, and its implications for its unity; the place of natural theology in these discussions; how the future of the field can be secured; the worrying absence of women in the field, and what can be done about this. Professor McGrath will also reflect on how he became involved in the field, and what he has learned from the process. He will also talk about some of the themes in his forthcoming book, *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary*, to be published by Oxford University Press later this year.

ALISTER MCGRATH is Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University, and Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion. After gaining first class honours in Chemistry at Oxford in 1975, McGrath began a DPhil in molecular biophysics under the supervision of Prof Sir George Radda in Oxford University's Department of Biochemistry, while at the same time studying for Oxford's Final Honour School of Christian theology. In 1978, he gained both his DPhil and first class honours in theology. He returned to Oxford in 1983 to teach theology, and has remained at Oxford ever since, apart from a 6-year period as professor of theology at King's College London.

**Revd Canon Dr Joanna Collicutt McGrath**  
**University of Oxford**

Friday 15 July, 10:30am – 11:15am, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L3

**“Why Write Theology Books?”**

Alister McGrath is famous for his books on theology and the Christian faith more broadly. This talk offers a narrative account of his writing career and engages with his motivation in relation to theological education and theology in the public square.

JOANNA COLLICUTT is a psychologist of religion and Anglican priest. She has a particular interest in bridging interdisciplinary boundaries, especially between Christian theology, the arts, and the sciences. She has published many books and journal articles across these areas, including several in collaboration with Alister McGrath. Alister and Joanna have been married for 42 years and have two children and four grandchildren.

**Major Alex Fogassy (USAF) and Adina Bezerita**  
**University of Oxford**

Friday 15 July, 11:15 – 12:00, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L3

**“Greatness in the Little-Big Things of Professor Alister McGrath”**

This joint paper presents a perspective on professor Alister McGrath as seen by the last two students he supervised in a full-time capacity in the Faculty of Theology and Religion. Alex Fogassy and Adina Bezerita recently completed the MSt in Theology and Science and Religion (2021-2022) – the Ian Ramsey Centre’s flagship graduate course into the field, directed by professor McGrath for the last decade: *“From our experiences, Alister McGrath has been a compassionate professor and brilliant forerunner in establishing meaningful cross-disciplinary debates, including science and religion. As his last students on the MSt course, each of us can attest to professor McGrath’s intellectual precision and patient care in developing our own ideas, voices and in finding the courage to expand our horizons in the quest for meaning and purpose.”*

In the case of Adina, professor Alister McGrath has been instrumental in providing her the scholarly framework that engages in dialogue the principles in ancient philosophy and modernity through science and religion on the topic of Self-knowledge. Alister’s legacy, including *Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities*, his invaluable views on Albert Einstein, C.S. Lewis and Richard Dawkins, raise new inter-disciplinary questions in a medium of openness to comparative thought and offers a reconciling syncretism that enriches knowledge and our approaches to

knowledge of life's great mystery. Alister's humility in respect to his luminous contributions in a burgeoning field with great potential was a living testament to our everyday experiences in his classes, supervisory and lecture teachings:

*"I am very fortunate and joyful to have learned from Alister who, among many little-big things, reflected to me the greatness of perseverance in the 'love of wisdom' that is vital and transformative. I also have to thank Fr. Andrew Pinsent for his receptive providence in facilitating this once in a lifetime opportunity that benefited both Alex and myself. I am sure that Alister's retirement is just the beginning of another life-giving vision."*

In the case of Alex, professor Alister McGrath, despite being world renowned and rated the top theologian in the UK, has still issued thoughtful and insightful lectures – week in and week out – tailoring his supervisory role to precise individual scholarly needs:

*"I found such care and focused attention as a welcome surprise, given the myriad sources that must be calling for Alister's time – all probably having much more "payoff" than spending efforts on the progression of his meager masters student. I note this facet of Alister as both an encouragement, and as an exemplar for him to take after."*

Another source of inspiration for both Alex and Adina, is Alister's maintenance of an unflinching moral constitution throughout his life. So many academics and prominent figures seem buried, so to speak, through non-trivial ethical slip-ups or harmful dispositions, of one kind or another: *"As a fellow Christian, [aspiring] academic, husband and father, I have been bolstered by Alister's example and I would not want this facet of my longsuffering to go unappreciated. All in all, I would like to express immense appreciation for all that Alister has done for me while supervising, and I wish him the utmost success in his retirement and future."*

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**Nikki Rae Marston Bailey**

**University of Oxford**

Friday 15 July, 1:30pm – 2:15pm, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L3

**"Taking Up the Torch:**

**A Conversation with McGrath and Barth on the Critical Realism of Bioinformatics"**

This paper honors Alister McGrath's unique contributions found in Volumes II and III of his seminal work, *A Scientific Theology*, by expanding McGrath's dialogue with Karl Barth in a novel way. I seek to apply McGrath's framework of critical realism and ontologically-determined-epistemological theory formulation to a crucial, yet thus far completely overlooked, thread within Barth's theology: anticipatory providence.

I coined this term to describe the following: Barth purports that from eternity, God always plans and prepares for a historical confrontation with *das Nichtige*, “the nothingness” which God rejects, by entering into creation as Jesus Christ. The “remnants” of an already-but-not-yet defeated nothingness are thus paradoxically providentially employed by God in an omnisciently anticipatory manner throughout created time to bring history to its new beginning in Christ. I find this epistemologically providential schema has parallels in present bioinformatics research, which hinges upon big data, essentially genomic “knowledge,” that might allow Christians to act in an “anticipatory” way in an emergently probable world.

How does this relate to McGrath? McGrath envisions a critical realism, inspired by Roy Bhaskar, which “affirms that there is a reality, which may be known, and which we are under a moral and intellectual obligation to investigate and represent as best as we can” (142). Additionally, he postulates that “theories ... are constructed in response to an encounter with an existing reality” (171). In the context of bioinformatics, reality is population genomics, which gives rise to theory in the form of predictive modeling. In contrast to previous epistemological limitations, AI, specifically deep learning, allows model “theories” to build themselves in a way that can much more accurately probabilistically represent and predict “real” phenomenon than humans can. I discuss how McGrath’s presentation of theory might be helpfully updated to account for this development, particularly regarding perceived limitations of models and analogies.

[\*The quotes here are from *The Science of God*, as McGrath tends to self-summarize there in a manner that is conducive for shorter quotations for an abstract.]

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**Emily Qureshi-Hurst**  
**University of Oxford**

Friday 15 July, 2:15pm – 2:45pm, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L3

### **“A Tribute to Alister McGrath”**

In this talk, Emily Qureshi-Hurst reflects on her experience of being supervised by Alister McGrath throughout her Master's and Doctoral degrees.

**Adriani Milli Rodrigues**

**Adventist University of São Paulo (UNASP)**

Friday, 15 July, 3:30pm – 4:00pm, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L3

**“The Contribution of Alister McGrath’s *Christian Theology: An Introduction For Theological Education: A Brief Analysis from the Perspective of Teaching Systematic Theology*”**

*Christian Theology: An Introduction* represents a remarkable contribution of Alister McGrath’s work to theological education. The textbook itself is a result of more than thirty years of his teaching experience and has been used in Christian theology courses worldwide for almost three decades, in six editions, spanning from 1993 to 2017. The work has received scholarly attention and several book reviews have been published about its different editions. In this short paper I intend to offer a brief conceptual analysis of the contribution of McGrath’s *Christian Theology* for teaching systematic theology courses at the undergraduate level. The conceptual analysis proceeds in three main steps. First, I outline the main points about *Christian Theology* that appear in several of its scholarly reviews, summarizing positive and negative remarks elaborated by the reviewers. Then, I describe how the textbook itself presents its contribution for theological education. In this second step I focus on the prefaces of each edition, with special attention to statements of improvement in comparison with previous editions. Moreover, I attempt to compare remarks of scholarly reviews provided in the first step with the contributions presented in the prefaces in order to observe whether scholarly points have been addressed by the content of prefaces in following editions. Finally, in the third step I narrow down the discussion to the last part of the textbook, which deals more directly with themes of Christian theology (God, Christ, salvation, etc.), after the necessary overviews of historical theology (part 1) and method in theology (part 2). In this final step I take into account the information presented in the two previous steps and evaluate the contribution of the textbook for theological education in the presentation of a theme in Christian theology, from the point of view of teaching systematic theology.

**Bethany Sollereeder**  
**University of Oxford / Edinburgh**

Friday 15 July, 4:00pm – 5:00pm, Mathematical Institute, Lecture Room L3

**“The Perils of *Curiositas* and the Opportunities of *Studiositas* in Pedagogical Imagination”**

In the theological tradition, curiosity (or *curiositas*) was considered a vice rather than a virtue. Curiosity was classified as a type of distorted intellectual appetite. Instead of pursuing study for the sake of loving one’s subject more deeply, *curiositas* was the desire for knowledge in pursuit of power, prestige, or riches. Learning out of curiosity was seen as a distortion of the proper desire to study (*studiositas*) which pursued learning out of a non-anxious love for the subject in itself. While the terminology has changed over the centuries, these two ways of pursuing an education are still with us and the road toward each can be deeply influenced by our pedagogical choices. Drawing on Alister McGrath’s approaches to teaching, both observed in the classroom and on display in his writing, and from other pedagogical sources, this talk will suggest how an alternative vision of teaching can shape education towards *studiositas* and away from the overwhelming pressures of *curiositas* that leave both students and educators anxious and exhausted.

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## Abstracts of parallel papers (Saturday 16 July)

**Abstracts are listed in alphabetical order of surname**

**All presentations are at Jurys Inn**

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**Mark Boespflug**

**Fort Lewis College**

Saturday, 16 July, 1:30pm (Session C4, Online: Cherwell)

**“Faith in Experts: What the Social Epistemology of Science and Religion Reveals about their Conflict”**

The conflict model of the science-religion relationship can be understood in at least 3 ways. First, the historical version has it that as a matter of sociological fact the scientific and religious communities have historically been at odds with one another. Second, the logical version has it that there exists a logical inconsistency or contradiction between the doctrines of religion and the best scientific theories. The third, and apparently most plausible, version of the conflict model is one on which science and religion are in conflict in virtue of their *endorsement of incompatible epistemic standards*—the epistemic conflict model, which will be my focus. Central to the religious enterprise is the doxastic practice of faith, which on certain conceptions involves believing in the absence of evidence, or observation. Scientific epistemic standards, in contrast, hold that it is never permissible to believe in the absence of evidence or observation.

This construal of the conflict model, I claim, trades on a tacit asymmetry among experts and laity, and that a systematic expert-laity asymmetry is bound up in formulations of the model: the epistemic standards of *expert* scientists have been compared to those of the religious *laity*. Once it becomes clear that the model depends on this asymmetry, the conclusion that science and religion endorse incompatible epistemic standards appears to be a fallacious moving of goalposts. I, however, go on to show that the doxastic practices of the scientific laity resemble religious faith to a remarkable degree. I present social psychological data along with my own empirical studies that suggest that lay scientific belief manifests 5 doxastic characteristic scholars have associated with faith. Such belief involves (1) trust in the reports of scientific experts, (2) the termination of a search for further evidence, (3) little corroborating evidence concerning the reporter is sought prior



to believing the deliverances of science, (4) a degree of credence that outstrips the believer's evidence and (5) resilience, or resistance to counterevidence.

**Michael Borowski**

**VU Amsterdam**

Saturday, 16 July, 10:30am (Session A1, Room A: Oriel)

**“Revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’:**

**Mining Alister McGrath’s Contribution for a General Philosophy of Science”**

‘Science’ has become increasingly important for Western democracies (cf. Heazle and Kane (2015)). In this sense, science exercises increased *Deutungsmacht* (i.e., the ability to *successfully* ‘point’ toward what is ‘important’; cf. Stoellger (2014)) in public discourse. Nevertheless, there remains a certain ambiguity about what science really is, and how it works (e.g., Cowles (2020)). My own original, transdisciplinary research in the praxis of teaching science indicates the praxis-driven need for a revision of the common picture of Science-in-general. The academic space for revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’ would be the General Philosophy of Science (Psillos, 2016).

My research also suggests that part of the challenge within revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’ stems from the cultural embeddedness of science within the modern West. Hence ‘science’ within culture should be brought in some sort of dialogue with another culture – ‘religion’, for instance (cf. also Sollereeder (2019)). Along these lines, this paper mines some of Alister McGrath’s more recent contributions on reason, science and religion (McGrath, 2007, 2011, 2016, 2018). By paying particular attention to the solutions he offers on how to *perceive* and how to *do* science, it seeks to contribute to a solution for the challenge of revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’ in the context of the GPoS.

The paper starts with a contextualization of the GPoS, and then relates this to McGrath’s contribution to the challenge of revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’. Finally, the paper argues for revisioning ‘Wissenschaft’ by (1) re-imagining science’s nature and (2) clarifying its overall task. It closes with assessing the options proposed by McGrath for dealing with a “*bricolage* of unintegrated insights” (McGrath, 2018, p. 222) of science, arguing for a fourth, i.e. a pragmatic approach for the praxis of science.

**Joshua D. Chatraw**

**Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Rayleigh**

**Director of the Center for Public Christianity**

Saturday, 16 July, 2:00pm (Session C5, Online: Cherwell)

**“Alister McGrath and the Academic as Apologist”**

As an internationally respected scholar and theologian, a unique aspect of Alister McGrath’s career has been his willingness and ability to “code-switch” for popular level venues. This is evidenced by his appearances on pop-culture podcasts, such as “Under the Skin” hosted by the popular comedian and actor Russell Brand, as a frequent guest on the radio show “Unbelievable”, and in public debates with well-known atheists. Similarly, his written works display not only his voluminous output but also his flexibility, writing to his fellow academics, non-specialists, and the general public. This paper will both explore McGrath’s contribution to apologetics in three categories—C. S. Lewis, apologetic manuals, and the relationship between science and faith—and briefly survey his influence on other contemporary apologists.

**Adam Chin**

**University of California, Irvine**

Saturday, 16 July, 2:30pm (Session C6, Online: Cherwell)

**“A Typology of Methods”**

Typologies in the religion and science literature are employed in two ways: as a first-order means of defining the possibility space of relations between religion and science, and as a second-order system of classifying contributions to the field. So, for instance, Barbour's fourfold typology can be used to characterize interactions between religion and science as representing, say, Conflict; and the same typology can be used to classify, say, McGrath (and in particular McGrath 1998) as a supporter of Dialogue. Perhaps somewhat trivially, the second mode of employment is derived from the first: scholars and their works are typed based on their characterization of the religion-science relationship. Even the more nuanced typologies like those of Drees (1996) and Stenmark (2004, 2010) follow this pattern.

In this paper I propose a different *kind* of typology, one based on the *methods* used by scholars to argue for their preferred characterization, which I claim more usefully classifies scholarship. In particular, I focus on methods often associated with history,

philosophy, and the social sciences: the use of case studies, historicizing, conceptual analysis, and (quite broadly) fieldwork. Typing scholarly work in this manner has three major advantages over traditional typologies: 1) it illuminates the ways in which contributions to the religion-and-science literature do and do not effectively engage with one another; 2) focusing on methods can reveal another dimension as to why certain forms of scholarship obtain more public uptake than others since different methods are more or less suited to different particular concerns; and 3) it is useful to a lay audience: once one understands one's specific concerns, one can refer to the typology to know what kinds of studies will be relevant to those concerns. I employ this typology to better understand a range of McGrath's work (e.g. 1998, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2019).

**Humberto Schubert Coelho**

**University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil**

Saturday, 16 July, 11:00am (Session A2, Room A: Oriel)

**“The Place of a Scientific Theology among Theological Disciplines”**

The demand for a scientific theology arose from the progressive demoralization of dogmatic theology throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. A variety of natural theologies, intended to purge theology from its – then despicable – religious traces and language, in order to achieve the “purest form” of a rational theology independent from cultural additions, such as Christology and the role of institutions. This movement produced at least two distinct reactions around the turn to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Romanticism and Systematic Theology. Romantics reacted to the dryness of natural theology by emphasizing the supernatural and the narrow limits of human understanding, usually degenerating in irrationalism. Systematic Theology, heavily inspired in German Idealism, tried to rehabilitate core theological concepts in a new, more respectable fashion. Friedrich Schleiermacher is a key name for both movements, and his theories are very symptomatic of the problems involved in these enterprises. Later, under the influence of traditionalists such as Karl Barth and John Henry Cardinal Newman, systematic theology stepped back to give space for a renewed dogmatic theology that would take the basic and original claims of Christian revelation more seriously. Borrowing influences from all that traditions, Alister McGrath speaks about a “perennial presence of the transcendent” across human cultures, defining transcendent as a matter of ultimate concern, dissimilar to the transitory and relative concerns of mundane life (McGrath, 2008, 26). But in the place of a theological reductionism of science or a scientific reductionism of theology, McGrath was probably the main advocate of a new perspective he called scientific theology. According to him, “A scientific theology conceives the theological enterprise as a

principled attempt to give an account of the reality of God, which it understands to be embedded at different levels in the world” (McGrath, 2002, xi).

**Elena Draghici-Vasilescu**  
**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 11:30am (Session A3, Room A: Oriel)

**“Paul Tillich on History and Socialism”**

Paul Tillich believes that the sacred and human history undergo a parallel development, which is ‘punctuated’ from time to time by the ‘breaking’ of the former within the latter during moments of special significance, *kairoi*; these become “centers” of human history. Such a ‘center’ must not be comprehended either in terms of quantity, or as a midpoint between past and future, or as a particular moment, but as something that makes coherent the manifestation of the Kingdom of God within the human collective existence. One of the understandings the German Theologian had concerning human history is that it is a succession of such ‘centers’.

This is an ‘evolutionary’ view within intellectual history, and one of the topics to which Professor Alister McGrath has also dedicated a substantial part of his work.

**Blessing Temitope Emmanuel**  
**University of Georgia**

Saturday, 16 July, 3:30pm (Session C7, Online: Cherwell)

**“An Eclipse of the Sun: Reflecting on Alister McGrath’s Loving Science,  
Discovering God; Implications for Non-Christian Theists”**

The immense contributions of Prof. Alister McGrath toward a constructive perspective on the relationship between science and religion, both within and outside academic parlances, cannot be overemphasized. Worthy of note is his discussion of erstwhile unacknowledged limitations of science, especially when it claims unequivocal explanations for non-scientific realities, while not debasing its contribution to knowledge. McGrath’s journey is particularly intriguing, beyond all reasonable doubts, because it reflects a deviation from metanarratives of religious convictions ingrained in supernatural encounters-*cum*-experiences. (*ref.* William James, Otto, John Hick etc.) McGrath’s *Through a Glass Darkly* is an impressive narrative that etches him as a bridge between the fields of science and religion (Christian theology). Having tasted both worlds, his convictions are rooted in

his conscientious enquiry into Christian theology with the conclusion that by it, humanity and creation can be better understood. A recurring quote in McGrath's writings (that most assuredly captures his heart) is C.S Lewis' "*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*" An important question this paper intends to contemplate in writing is whether the limitations of scientific knowledge are coterminous with Christian theology. In other words, does Christian theology have limitations or imperceptible inhibitions in providing a congenial outlook for non-Christian Theists, that may necessitate its partnership with the sciences? How does the 'sun' of Christianity and Christian Theology grapple with an 'eclipse'? Can individuals who are intellectually interested in the interactions between science and religion benefit from an exclusively Christian approach? This paper would attempt to unravel intelligible answers for non-Christian Theists from the eminent and uniquely Christian scholarship of Prof. McGrath.

**Buki Fatona**

**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 1:30pm (Session A4, Room A: Oriel)

**"Modelling the Infinite from Midgley to McGrath:  
Methods, Maps, Models, and Metaphors"**

Alister McGrath in 'The Owl of Minerva: Reflections on the Theological Significance of Mary Midgley' examines the works of the philosopher (1919–2018). In this paper, I am interested in McGrath's engagement with Midgley's conceptual tools. By 'conceptual tools' I refer to apparatuses human beings use to understand the world which include methods, maps, models, and metaphors. According to Midgley, human beings use a plurality of tools to understand the complexity of human experience.

I aver maps, metaphors, and models do not necessarily track discrete aspects of human experience. Sometimes there is an overlap in the use of conceptual tools. One class of models which is commonly used in philosophy, religion, and physical sciences are those that represent concepts which seem to exceed the boundaries of everyday experience. I term these everyday-experience-exceeding models, 'transcendent models.' An example of a transcendent model is 'the infinite' which serves important theoretical and doctrinal purposes in philosophy, science, and religion.

In theology, a philosophical proposition involving a transcendent model is put forward by John Scottus Eriugena (c.800-c.877) in his description of God as '*nihil per infinitatem*':

which roughly translates as, [God is] nothingness on account [of God's] infinitude'. Similarly, in geometry, Euclid's second postulate asserts that a line segment can be extended at either end *ad infinitum*. I agree with both McGrath and Midgely that human beings use models to imagine, and thus understand, even more complex propositions.

There is a paradox, however, lurking in the use of transcendent models. Although these models are meant to be imagined for the imaginer to understand a property or properties that they represent, what kind of imagery could possibly accompany imagining propositions which include these transcendent models? If this paradox is taken seriously, then, imagining these apparently imagery-less, transcendent models is a meaningless act and, by extension, so are the understandings we acquire from these models.

To resolve this potentially devastating paradox; in this paper, using cognitive neuroscience and geometry I present an alternative, imagistic—that is, imagery-based—account of imaginations involving transcendent models. I end by suggesting that the paradox lurking in the use of transcendent models reveals a fundamental nexus between philosophy, science, and religion.

**Jacob Chengwei Feng**  
**Fuller Theological Seminary**

Saturday, 16 July, 2:00pm (Session A5, Room A: Oriel)

**“Alister McGrath and China: Theology and Science for the Third Millennium”**

In the past three decades, Alister McGrath's popularity has been constantly on the rise in China. More than twenty of his books have been translated into Chinese. To the Chinese intellectual mind, most fascinating among McGrath's works are his writings on theology and science. This is not surprising due to China's ambitions to achieve scientific and technological dominance by boosting creativity. However, such a daunting task faces insurmountable difficulties due to a prevailing lack of innovation, which might contribute to the rising interest in McGrath's work of scientific theology. Due to the dominant political ideology in China, theology is by and large put aside, if not marginalized. This essay argues that the wide-scale reception of McGrath's works by the Chinese academy and churches not only opens a door for the public square to change their attitude toward Christian theology, but also challenges Chinese theology to contextualize McGrath's scientific theology on Chinese soil and to engage Chinese worldview with its pragmatic epistemology. In particular, transhumanism has received increasing scholarly attention from the perspective of traditional Chinese philosophies and religions, such as

Confucianism and Daoism. Sadly, Chinese theology has largely failed to grasp the opportunity to offer any significant constructive proposal to this interdisciplinary discussion. McGrath's scientific theology provides a suitable framework with its foundations on theological realism with great potential to engage with the contemporary scientific and technological advancement in China and Chinese traditional philosophies and religions. Such constructive theology not only serves as a conversation partner with, but also provides theological critique to the prevalent scientism and humanism in the name of Marxism.

**Stephen Goundrey-Smith**  
**Cuddesdon Gloucester & Hereford**

Saturday, 16 July, 2:30pm (Session A6, Room A: Oriel)

**“Conditional to What? Achieving Immortality in a Technological World”**

Humanity has long sought immortality - but now, with the prospect of life-extending medical enhancement technologies, immortality is closer than it ever has been previously. Or is it? And at what price?

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the doctrine of conditional immortality arose, as an alternative to the traditional belief of hell as eternal conscious torment, and has been the subject of some debate among evangelical scholars. The idea of conditional immortality has developed in part due to differences in interpretation of biblical texts concerning hell, and a desire for social progress and reform – but an important undercurrent in the debate has been a dissatisfaction with dualistic (body/soul) accounts of human nature in the light of modern natural science.

This paper brings together two important strands of Alister McGrath's teaching and research – the history of systematic theology, and the science-religion dialogue. In this paper, I discuss the theological concept of conditional immortality in relation to the prospects of biomedical immortality achieved through proposed radical transhumanist technologies.

Drawing on the work of Brent Waters and Juraj Odorjak, I highlight the points of divergence between biomedical immortality and a recognisably Christian eschatology and, in relation to conditional immortality, I explain why the achievement of biomedical immortality is both theologically problematic and a futile objective in relation to the spiritual health of the Christian believer.

I conclude by describing the implications of the doctrine of conditional immortality for the prospect of human enhancement, and vice versa, thus providing a preliminary worked example of the interaction of science and theology envisaged by Professor McGrath in *Scientific Theology*.

**Seth Hart**

**University of Durham**

Saturday, 16 July, 3:30pm (Session A7, Room A: Oriel)

**“Re-Imagining Natural Selection:  
Fitness, Biological Teleology, and Natural Theology”**

In his 2017 work *Re-Imagining Nature*, Alister McGrath contends the natural world is “only *rightly* understood when it is seen in the light of the information framework of the Christian faith.”<sup>1</sup> The Christian framework is, accordingly, able to “‘contain’ or ‘fit in’ what might otherwise seem disordered and disconnected.”<sup>2</sup> I will argue this assertion finds support in McGrath’s former field of biology—namely, with one of the key ingredients of natural selection. Defining the concept of individual fitness and fitness differentiations, one of the three criteria necessary for natural selection, remains a daunting and unfinished task within the philosophy of biology. Without such a definition, explanations appealing to selection “would become incomplete: the possession of a trait and reproductive success would cease to be related ‘causally’ and explanations would no longer rise above the status of mere statistical correlations between the possession of the trait and reproductive success.”<sup>3</sup> In the face of such difficulties, philosophers known as statisticalists have even proposed abandoning treating natural selection as a causal force in evolution. Against this, I will propose an Aristotelian-Thomistic teleological interpretation of fitness, arguing fitness results from the conjunction of four components: 1.) The perfection of a creature’s traits (proximal aim), 2.) The ability for those traits to accomplish their function within their given environmental context (distal aim), 3.) The performance of a given function assisting in the survival of the organism (proximal beneficiary), and 4.) the reproductive success of the organism (distal beneficiary). For both Aristotle and Thomas, God stood as a universal final cause giving rise to the teleological ordering of the cosmos. There is, then, a possible theological “reading” of this interpretation, one that not only resolves the issues

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<sup>1</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>3</sup> Santiago Ginnobili, “Missing Concepts in Natural Selection Theory Reconstructions,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 38:3 (2016), 19.



surrounding fitness but also offers a natural synthesis of the great Classical and Medieval traditions and modern biology.

**Ravi Jain**

**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 2:00pm (Session B5, Room B: Blenheim)

**“Alister McGrath: Laying Foundations for Science and Religion”**

This talk will address two of Alister McGrath’s contributions to the field of science and religion. First he insists that in both science and religion “ontology determines epistemology”. “The way things are” should determine how we seek to know those things.<sup>4</sup> Developed from the work of Roy Bhaskar in science, McGrath applies this principle to religion in novel ways illustrating both the reasonableness of Christianity and the mutual epistemic relevance of science and religion. The second contribution is McGrath’s retrieval of natural theology from its Barthian exile. Natural theology, according to McGrath, does not consist in trying to prove God without reference to revelation. Instead, natural theology shows that God’s revelation comports with human reason; once assumed revelation makes sense of many diverse phenomena. In McGrath’s own words, “Natural theology is to be understood as the enterprise of seeing nature as creation, which both presupposes and reinforces fundamental Christian theological affirmations.”<sup>5</sup> McGrath considers this to be Aquinas’ true approach in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.<sup>6</sup> In showing this, McGrath develops one of his signature lines of thought, the importance of abduction in both religion and science. McGrath’s principle can helpfully explain thinkers like Michael Polanyi and C.S. Lewis. Lewis says, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” It is by the fiduciary framework of God’s reality that everything else makes sense. Hence the writings of Alister McGrath have moved far beyond the conflict thesis to lay new foundations for a common conversation between science and religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>4</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 207.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, 113.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, 71–72.

**George A. Klaeren**  
**University of St Andrews**

Saturday, 16 July, 4:30pm (Session A9, Room A: Oriel)

**“On the Usefulness of a Christian Natural Theology: Advantages and Challenges to Alister McGrath’s ‘New Vision’ of Natural Theology”**

A prolific theologian on topics including apologetics, historical theology, and the interface between science and religion, Alister McGrath is particularly well-known for his work on natural theology, having written numerous books and articles on the subject (*The Open Secret*, 2008, *Re-Imagining Nature*, 2016). McGrath surveys previous arguments for the study of God from nature, identifies shortcomings in historical versions of the project of natural theology, and advances a new form of natural theology which unites science and religion. McGrath’s “new vision” is specifically Christian, calling for a new understanding of natural theology which sees the natural world as an indication of God but which is only fully understood when approached through the lens of Christian truth. As McGrath argues, “the enterprise of natural theology is thus one of discernment, of seeing nature in a certain way, of viewing it through a particular and specific set of spectacles.” (*The Open Secret*, chapter 1) In this paper, I first identify some of the key ways in which McGrath’s “re-imagined” natural theology has advanced the field of natural theology, connecting his work to other theologians (Cobb, Winslow) especially focusing on recent incarnational and trinitarian approaches to the study of nature. Secondly, I examine some challenges to McGrath’s proposal, including a challenge of the historicity of his natural theology (recently raised by Peter Harrison, *Zygon* 2022). Lastly, I question what is really meant by McGrath’s natural theology, and I assess whether it should be considered a fruitful field of inquiry. Here, I examine natural theology especially as it relates to apologetics. I conclude by arguing that McGrath’s vision is one which, although problematic in some areas, has great transformative power for Christian theology.

**A R Kumarasingham**  
**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 11:30am UK (Session C3, Online: Cherwell)

**“A Scientific Moral Theology: A Constructive Critical Realist Framework for a Christian Engagement with the Contemporary Sciences Of Morality”**

Between 2001-2003, Alister McGrath published his massive three-volume systematic work of theology called *A Scientific Theology*. Building on the “scientific theology” of

Thomas Torrance, the “tradition mediated rationality” of Alisdair MacIntyre, and the “critical realism” of Roy Bhaskar, McGrath’s *Scientific Theology* showed how theology can be “scientific.”

This paper seeks to show how the scope of McGrath’s *Scientific Theology* can be extended to help us think more clearly about morality and meaning, and consequently, how Christians can engage with the contemporary sciences of morality more fruitfully without giving in to a naturalistic, scientific atheology or resolving to a fundamentalist anti-scientific theology. With the term “atheology,” I am considering a form of scientism prominent in the science and religion debate of the day that is championed by the new atheists, where science is hailed to provide an all-sufficient basis for knowledge, truth, meaning, and morality. Against this naturalistic, scientific atheology, I argue for a Christian scientific theology based on McGrath’s *Scientific Theology* that takes the scientific method seriously as a framework for thinking about morality and meaning.

**Andrew T. Loke**

**Hong Kong Baptist University**

Saturday, 16 July, 10:30am (Session B1, Room B: Blenheim)

**“McGrath, Barbour, Harrison,  
and a New Fourfold Taxonomy of Science-Religion relations”**

Alister McGrath’s *Science and Religion* is one of the most respected and widely adopted textbooks in the field. It uses Ian Barbour’s fourfold taxonomy of science-religion relations as a helpful means of approaching the field, while noting some criticisms such as its inadequacies to do justice to the complexity of history (Cantor and Kenny). More recent arguments by Peter Harrison have led many scholars to abandon taxonomies altogether. In this paper, I argue that such an abandonment is unwarranted by offering a new 4C taxonomy which improves upon the pedagogical advantages of Barbour’s taxonomy and avoids its weaknesses. The four Cs exhaustively cover all possibilities as follows:

Either the relata are perceived to overlap, or not (Compartmentalization). If overlap, then either they are perceived as contradictories (Conflict), or not. If not, then either they are perceived to have a relationship of evidential support (Convergence), or not (Conversation). By clarifying that the relata can be aspects of science and religion, and that different ‘C’ may or may not be applicable to different time periods, communities, doctrines, theories, methodologies, and practices, my taxonomy takes into account the

complexity of history and its social, cultural and political aspects. In reply to the objection by Cantor, Kenny, and Harrison that the boundaries of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ have changed over time, I argue that we can nevertheless identify common properties that can be used to define continuous scientific and religious practices from past to present, and one can refer to entities having these properties and evaluate whether they have been in conflict. Citing Augustine’s rejection of Manichaeism and Xu Guangqi’s conversion to Catholicism on scientific grounds, I demonstrate the inadequacies of Harrison’s own approach and show that my taxonomy is helpful for studying science-religion relations historically and cross-culturally.

**Juuso Loikkanen**

**University of Eastern Finland**

Saturday, 16 July, 4:00pm (Session B8, Room B: Blenheim)

**“Blurring the Line Between the Natural and the Supernatural”**

The science-and-religion dialogue has taken place largely in the context of Western Christianity where, during the Enlightenment, empirical science became a separate discipline from traditional holistic philosophy and theology and a contradiction began to emerge between God’s actions and the laws of nature now seen as independent of him. In Orthodox Christianity, such a distinction between natural and supernatural has gained little ground. The reality is seen as indivisible, and God is viewed as a force influencing the entire universe. The idea of conceiving of nature as a research subject that can only be understood by reason is considered inadequate.

While many have speculated on how God influences the physical world, no definitive theory of divine action has been developed. In considering this, the Orthodox view of the futility of the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural may be useful. According to Maximus the Confessor, everything has been created by the power of the Word of God (*Logos*), and the manifestations (*logoi*) of the Word penetrate the universe, having been planted in creation already in the beginning. The laws of nature discovered by science reflect *logoi* that draw their power from God. Occasionally, *logoi* are believed to manifest as higher-level laws of nature incomprehensible to science, which sometimes bring about events that are interpreted as miracles.

So, what is often seen as supernatural in the West is quite natural according to Orthodox theology. Miracles do not happen because God momentarily overrides the normal laws of

nature but because glimpses of deeper laws, waiting to be revealed at the end of time, sometimes emerge. The world is thoroughly enchanted. Although more concreteness is called for in explicating the Orthodox view, I believe that the Orthodox tradition could contribute to the discussion on the relationship between science and religion more than it has traditionally done.

**Daryl Ooi**

**National University of Singapore**

Saturday, 16 July, 4:30pm (Session C9, Online: Cherwell)

**“Worldview Evaluation: Epistemic and Non-Epistemic Considerations”**

In recent work in the epistemology of disagreement, increasing attention has been given to the problem of worldview disagreement (e.g., Ranalli 2020, Loughheed 2020, Loughheed 2021, Ooi 2022). Roughly, since many disagreements over individual propositions turn out to be disagreements over worldviews, what criteria may be employed to determine which worldview is preferable? Examples of criteria for worldview evaluation tend to focus on criteria that scholars regard as *epistemically valuable*, in some sense: e.g., accuracy, simplicity, predictability etc. (e.g., Loughheed 2021). In addition to these epistemic considerations (e.g., McGrath 2019), this paper argues that Alister McGrath has consistently provided an important insight into worldview evaluation which centers around *non-epistemic* considerations (e.g., McGrath 2008, 2011, 2012, 2020). Examples of criteria which are non-epistemic (at least, they need not be thought of in merely epistemic terms) include which worldviews tell the most satisfying story, best captures important desires we have (such as ‘wonder’), and meet our deepest needs. While a potential objection to these non-epistemic criteria is that they are *merely* psychological (wish-fulfilment) and not truth-directed, this paper defends the importance of non-epistemic criteria by arguing that fulfilling psychological desires are not a weakness, but a strength of the criteria: these considerations are non-epistemic precisely because humans are *more than* mere epistemic agents.

The paper will proceed in three parts. First, I will introduce the existing debate on worldview disagreement and the epistemic criteria for worldview evaluation. Second, I will argue that McGrath has proposed non-epistemic criteria for worldview evaluation, and provide an account of these non-epistemic criteria. Finally, I will defend what I take to be McGrath’s account (which includes epistemic *and* non-epistemic considerations) against a potential objection, and argue that non-epistemic considerations are crucial to any anthropological account which takes humans to be *more than* mere epistemic agents.

**Mari Ovsepyan–van Emmerik**  
**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 11:00am (Session B2, Room B: Blenheim)

**“The Territories of Human Reason:  
Rethinking the Scientific Approach to Nonreligion”**

One of the major recent moves in the scholarship on nonreligion and secularism has been marked by turning away from the neat binaries and the negative identities signalled by atheism and agnosticism (e.g., Taves, Asprem and Ihm 2018). However, these binaries are deeply ingrained in the Western landscape of ideas about the nature of mind/ body relationship and the nature of belief/ unbelief and are saturated by a level of "somatophobia" berated by Manuel Vásquez (2011: 89).

In *The Territories of Human Reason*, a study of multiple situated rationalities, Alister McGrath writes that observations like this raise serious concerns about the ethnocentric bias as he argues that thinkers embedded within this Western philosophical tradition had made themselves "prisoners of their own sensorium" (McGrath 2018: 27). In this paper, I will compare McGrath's approach in *The Territories* to Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" and her critique of the disembodied scientific objectivity, arguing for the embodied and encultured nature of the "partial perspective", which considers both the agency of the theorist producing the knowledge and the historical placement of the object of study (Haraway 1988). I will apply this critique to the scientific approach to the study of nonreligion called cognitive science of religion (CSR) as I investigate the "C" (cognition) and the "R" (religion and nonreligion) models employed by this field. At the end of the paper, I will propose a biocultural approach, that replaces the computational paradigm in CSR with 4E cognition paradigm, which views the mind as physically embodied, culturally embedded, socially extended and enactive; and the belief/ unbelief binary with material nonreligion and secularisms.

**Augustine Pamplany**  
**Institute of Science and Religion, India**

Saturday, 16 July, 11:00am India (Session C2, Online: Cherwell)

**“Refuting the Critique of McGrath’s View of Atheism – Indian Perspectives”**

McGrath’s understanding of atheism (*Twilight of Atheism*) is criticised by some reviewers as antitheistic and as such parochial. For instance: “McGrath does not entertain other

beliefs .... Incredibly, he barely even acknowledges other versions of god-belief from the Roman and Greek gods to Hinduism (*Complete Review*);” “his zeal as a Christian apologist gives his argument a strident and parochial tone” (John Gray). This paper refutes such criticisms and argues that such reviews fail to see the transcultural implications in McGrath’s perceptions of atheism. Despite the largely Western European background of the *Twilight of Atheism*, its findings are significantly valid in plurireligious and multicultural contexts as well. This point is argued by showing how the Indian, especially the Hindu, philosophy and culture endorse certain observations of McGrath on Atheism. Ancient Indian religious epistemology and the profound religious metaphors of Hindu mysticism uphold the incomprehensibility of the existence and nature of God. It shares an analogical proximity with McGrath’s observation that “The belief that there is no God is just as much a matter of faith as the belief that there is a God.” The Indian epistemic paradigm of the absolute as *neti, neti* (not this, not that) complements McGrath’s view that the existence or non-existence of God are not matters of exhaustive proofs. In the Hindu tradition, belief in the existence of God, though a forceful rational compulsion, is not exclusively an absolute rational conviction.

Furthermore, a cultural appropriation of the origin and development of the atheistic systems in the Indian Philosophical Tradition offers an Indian corollary to McGrath’s observation that...” one of the most obvious lessons of history is that atheism thrives when the Church is seen to be privileged, out of touch with the people, and powerful.”

**Mike Parsons**

**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 11:30am (Session B3, Room B: Blenheim)

**“Never in the Shallow End”**

The report, by Nick Spencer and Hannah Waite of *Theos*, ‘Science and Religion: Moving away from the shallow end’, was published in May 2022. It makes a number of interesting observations, based on both quantitative and qualitative research, as to how the debate about the relationship between science and religion has changed over the last fifteen years. The report title draws on the humorous observation that in swimming pools all the noise comes from the shallow end! The debate certainly has been ‘noisy’ at times and their report outlines areas where serious discussion has moved into deeper waters and with recognition of multiple ways of approaching formerly contentious issues.

Alister McGrath's work over many years illustrates this concern for discussion and not confrontation, along with a concern for an inference to the best explanation as the way forward. In particular his taking up of Mary Midgley's suggestion of 'multiple maps of meaning' has significant resonances with Spenser and Waite's outline of the 'areas of deeper concern', key areas in the science and religion debate, and the evidence from their expert interviews. This paper will consider these areas in the light of the deeper, ultimate decisive questions that all human beings need to ask of themselves, as referred to by McGrath in his approving use of the work of José Ortega y Gasset. It will observe that McGrath, throughout his writings and verbal presentation, never inhabited the shallow end.

The paper will then consider what insights these considerations might have in the Christian tradition for a more grounded missiology in the twenty first century.

**Finney Premkumar**

**Azusa Pacific University**

Saturday, 16 July, 1:30pm (Session B4, Room B: Blenheim)

### **"Rethinking McGrath's Scientific Theology"**

Affirming critical realism along with the correspondence theory of truth in conjunction with Roy Bhaskar's notion of a stratified reality, Alister McGrath presents Scientific Theology as a unified explanation of reality.

First and foremost, although McGrath is non-reductionistic in providing autonomous space for various disciplines to develop strata-specific modes and methods of investigation, he reserves a certain kind of privileged status for the sciences. Secondly, McGrath explains that engagement with the sciences is necessary and proper because they are "not wearied by the distortion of theory by prejudice" as in other disciplines, thereby attributing to them a certain level of objectivity. Thirdly, his endorsement of critical realism and the aim to achieve extra-systemic correspondence with intra-systemic coherence extends the representational value of the sciences beyond what I believe is justified.

My response will be as follows: First and foremost, I will content that "privileged access or status" of the sciences cannot be sustained due to the discrepancy between method and truth; satisfaction of a given theory by the rules of method might warrant acceptance of the theory without thereby being truth conferring. This is due to the fact that methodological reliability or confirmation does not exemplify nor explain why it conduces



to truth in a non-epistemic sense. Second, contrary to McGrath's claim, the perceived objectivity of science results from a distorted view of its pragmatic output/benefits (usually via "no miracles argument"). Finally, the representational value of the sciences can be justifiably construed in terms of empirical adequacy rather than in terms of generating theories that are approximately true as McGrath maintains.

Accordingly, I will conclude that the privileged, relatively objective and representational power that McGrath ascribes to science in line with his commitment to critical realism seems dubious and makes one wonder about the true merits of a "Scientific" Theology.

**Bradley L. Sickler**

**University of Northwestern – St. Paul**

Saturday, 16 July, 2:30pm (Session B6 , Room B: Blenheim)

**"Cognitive Science of Religion Debunking Arguments  
and Subjective Probabilities"**

In reflecting on the theological and philosophical implications of cognitive science of religion (CSR), Alister McGrath has said, "The real interest in the cognitive science of religion lies in the idea that natural human cognitive processes seem predisposed towards some generalized belief in gods. This, of course, proves nothing; it is, however, consistent with the basic Christian idea that humanity bears God's image and thus has an innate propensity to seek for God or experience a sense of longing for God, even if this is not recognized for what it really is."<sup>7</sup> What McGrath is addressing is, in part, the fact that CSR theories are sometimes credited with debunking religious or supernatural beliefs (SBs). To date, arguments have been produced by proponents on both sides of the debunking question, with some claiming that debunking results from CSR and others claiming that it does not (McGrath being an example of the latter). In this paper I try to approach the debunking question by using Bayesian methods of updating subjective probability assignments, considering classical Bayesian formulas as well as comparative ratios and Jeffrey conditionalization. I argue that the debunker must show that specified conditions are met. One way to argue for debunking would be to show that the probability of some CSR theory naturalistically explaining SBs diminishes when it is postulated that SBs have epistemic warrant. Another alternative would be to show that CSR theories are less likely to succeed in explaining the origin of SBs if SBs have warrant than if they lack warrant. Any debunking argument must also consider the role played by uncertainty and ineffable

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<sup>7</sup> Alister McGrath, *Enriching Our Vision of Reality: Theology and the Natural Sciences in Dialogue*, Templeton Press (2017), p. 163.

experiences. Building on McGrath's treatment of scholars such as Robert McCauley and Justin Barrett, we will see that debunking SBs does not follow simply from CSR but must be considered in light of prior epistemic commitments and the role they play in evaluating probabilities.

**Gesiel B. da Silva**  
**University of Missouri**

Saturday, 16 July, 4:00pm (Session C8, Online: Cherwell)

### **"McGrath's Scientific Theology and Unificationist Scientific Explanation"**

My goal is to discuss Alister McGrath's view of explanation in his scientific theology regarding contemporary debates on scientific explanation. McGrath claims that a scientific theology should not only provide a coherent internal description of reality but aims at explaining reality in ways that are compatible with the way natural science does (McGrath, 2003, 133-234; 2004, p. 207-233). However, it's not clear whether his view could be included under the umbrella of any of the dominant models of scientific explanation (Woodward & Ross, 2021), or even whether it would consist of a distinct model.

I argue here that McGrath's view of explanation can be considered *unificationist* (as opposed to causal-mechanical, unificationist, and pragmatic). My reasons for this are two: first, unificationists claim that an explanation is scientific when it provides a unified account for a range of different phenomena (Kitcher, 1989), and this is compatible with McGrath's understanding of the role of theological inquiry. Second, a unificationist account is consistent with McGrath's understanding that a scientific theology is able to explain how different religious phenomena (e.g., revealed texts, tradition, worship, and religious experience) can be unified under the same theological theory. Moreover, I think this approach can successfully deal with objections to McGrath's project.

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**James C. Ungureanu**  
**University of Dallas**

Saturday, 16 July, 5:00pm (Session C10, Online: Cherwell) [RECORDING]

**"The "Scientific Interpretation" of the Bible and the  
Conflict between Science and Religion"**

In 1986, a young and ambitious Alister McGrath published his *The Making of Modern German Christology*. This study, which was based on a course of lectures delivered at Oxford University, aimed at introducing to English-speaking readers the main themes, problems, and personalities associated with the development of the Christology of modern-speaking Protestantism. But McGrath would soon leave this field behind for yet a more ambitious undertaking: the field of science and theology. However, in this paper, I would like to show that the rise of biblical criticism in general, and the issues of Christology in particular, greatly influenced perceptions of the relationship between science and religion at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the so-called "cofounders" of the "conflict thesis," John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White, were greatly affected by this literature. I argue that developments in biblical criticism had a direct impact on how White and Draper constructed their historical understanding of the relationship between science and religion. By examining more carefully how historical criticism in general played a significant role in the thought of Draper and White (among others), I hope to relocate the origins, development, and meaning of the science-religion debate at the end of the nineteenth century.

**Matthew Warnez**  
**University of Oxford**

Saturday, 16 July, 3:30pm (Session B7, Room B: Blenheim)

**"Teleology as Theodicy:  
The Problem of Natural Evil and the Fulfilment of Good Natures"**

Inspired by issues raised in Alister McGrath, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology*, I will be addressing the problem of natural evil. As is well known, the problem of natural evil poses a significant challenge to post-Darwinian natural theology. If the universe is goal-directed, why has it produced eons worth of animal suffering? I will argue that Christianity's traditional response to this kind of question—that nothing truly evil is truly natural—remains highly serviceable. On this account, the non-human creation is good in all its parts and activities, animal suffering notwithstanding.

I will engage the major objections to this view and, by way of a second-personal hermeneutic, will explore the implications of sharing in God's "eucreational" perspective.

































# 1978–2022

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