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***George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment* by Timothy Larsen**

GEORGE MACDONALD IN THE AGE OF MIRACLES: INCARNATION, DOUBT, AND REENCHANTMENT. Timothy Larsen. Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2018. 142 p. 9780830853731. \$18.00.

AS ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CHRISTIAN FANTASY WRITERS of the nineteenth century, George MacDonald had an enormous impact on later authors, including C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and others. Despite his enduring legacy, however, the theology that underpins his fiction is complex and often unorthodox, possibly leaving contemporary readers confused about his belief system. In Timothy Larsen's book, *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment*, some of the beliefs that shaped MacDonald's fiction are elucidated. Larsen attempts to unravel the theology that shapes MacDonald's writing and discusses the effects that his novels, poems, and sermons were intended to have on their readers. The book has three main sections, with each one followed by a response from another scholar. This structure creates an interesting multiplicity of perspectives on the topics covered.

The first section, "George MacDonald in the Age of Incarnation," focuses on how MacDonald's literary career exemplifies the shift in the nineteenth century away from the "age of atonement" of previous eras. For MacDonald and many other Victorians, the religion of earlier generations, with its focus on sin, atonement, and crucifixion, lacked the true message of the love of God. MacDonald instead preferred to focus on the idea of God made flesh, and how the Incarnation was the greatest expression of God's love. As Larsen observes, "Around 1850, the theological climate changed to one in which the central doctrine was the incarnation and along with it came an emphasis on themes such as the love of God and the fatherhood of God" (13). MacDonald's writings reflect this shift, as his works stress love and redemption rather than punishment and atonement. Larsen also spends a great deal of time discussing the rise of Christmas during the Victorian era, which he credits to the increasing importance of atonement (21). Many of MacDonald's novels and poems were either about Christmas or took place at that time. Christmas for Victorians was a time for spirits and supernatural events, and Larsen points out that even if some of MacDonald's works were not explicitly about Christmas, they were conceived of as being a part of Christmas activities. *Phantastes*, for instance, was described by MacDonald as a fairy tale for the season. Larsen's focus on the centrality of the incarnation to MacDonald's oeuvre gives this work a solid grounding in MacDonald's religious beliefs, and how he expressed those beliefs in his fiction.

The next section, "George MacDonald and the Crisis of Doubt," situates MacDonald's writings as a response to the "Age of Doubt." Rather than

viewing doubt as sinful and negative, MacDonald found it to be a necessary and beneficial aspect of spiritual life. Larsen says that MacDonald championed “a better way for Christians to respond to doubt” (52) and that, in MacDonald’s view, “complaints directed against God demonstrate a passionate engagement that can lead on to a healthy faith and are thus a far better portent of the future than spiritual indifference” (53). Doubt was a major aspect of many of MacDonald’s most important characters, and Larsen argues that many of MacDonald’s heroes “have fundamental religious doubts but whose quest for truth leads them on to a deeper, more profound faith” (58). MacDonald was committed to the idea that no soul could ever be eternally separated from God, that every soul went on a journey ultimately leading back to Him, and so no amount of doubt or sin could ever alter that destiny. The more a character in MacDonald’s works doubted, the more heroic their journey became. As such, doubt was a gift that led to greater spiritual fruits. As Larsen puts it, some people “tend to assume that doubt is just a way in to unbelief, but the spiritual wisdom of George MacDonald is that it can also be a way out” (61).

The concluding section, “George MacDonald and the Reenchantment of the World,” explores how MacDonald’s life shaped his theology, and vice versa. It is wide-ranging in scope, and it touches on many different issues, including MacDonald’s education and his somewhat reluctant acceptance of the pastorate as a profession, his theories about the spiritual aspects of suffering and death, his love of roses, and his un-Protestant belief in Purgatory. All of his beliefs ultimately connect to his idea that, as Larsen puts it, “Sanctification is the great business of life” (109). MacDonald’s fiction elucidates this idea, and it does so in a time when many Victorians faced spiritual crises. It was not just that time-honored ideas about religion were eroding, but the whole world was changing as well, socially, politically, culturally, economically, and even environmentally. As Larsen eloquently puts it, “Many Victorians felt oppressed by Enlightenment rationalism, philosophical materialism, scientific dissection, procrustean logic, Utilitarianism, mechanization, rationalization, urbanization, industrialization, by the black soot that continually hung in the air, by the relentless ticking of factory time” (122). MacDonald’s writings were a way to fight back against the despair of the age, to once again enchant the world with wonder.

This work, originally composed as lectures, is brief but packed with important observations about MacDonald’s writings. It succeeds in critically examining MacDonald’s work and linking it to his life without relying on jargon or obfuscating theory. Larsen’s study should be a useful introduction to George MacDonald in undergraduate or graduate seminars, or for any general reader who wishes to know more about the religious beliefs of this seminal British fantasy writer. One of the strongest points of this book is how it explains some

of MacDonald's more unorthodox beliefs and how they actually fit into traditional interpretations of Christianity rather than being outlandish or *sui generis*, as is sometimes said about MacDonald's ideas. Moreover, this work demonstrates how MacDonald was both a visionary and also a man of his times, a voice of hope in a world that had gone dark, a reassuring presence in a world that seemed destined for chaos.

—James Hamby



HARRY POTTER AND THE OTHER: RACE, JUSTICE, AND DIFFERENCE IN THE WIZARDING WORLD. Edited by Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. University Press of Mississippi, 2022. 330 pp. **Hardcover:** 9781496840578, \$99.00; **paperback:** 9781496840561, \$25.00

OPEN AT THE CLOSE: LITERARY ESSAYS ON HARRY POTTER. Edited by Cecelia Koncharr Farr. University of Mississippi Press, 2022. 270 pp. **Hardcover:** 9781496839312, \$99.00; **paperback:** 9781496839329, \$25.00.

IN 2022 COMEDIAN ELEANOR DORTON posted an online skit in which she mentioned J.K. Rowling as “that author [who] goes after transgender lassies.” The pointed snub of Rowling’s famed literary efforts demonstrates how her reputation has cratered since 2020. Interestingly, the big reveal in that essay that cost Rowling her reputation is her discussion of personal experience of sexual assault. Had the piece been published three years earlier it might well have been commended by the #MeToo movement. But it was not, and Rowling’s misjudgement of public mood probably prevents her from ever making another public appearance. As actor Sebastian Croft explains that he signed to appear in a Potter video game back when doing so was socially acceptable (qtd. in Tinoco), who on Earth would risk hosting the witch herself?

This need not surprise anybody. Resistance to Harry Potter by a small number of Evangelicals made the story a rallying point for an awful lot of liberal secularists. And to paraphrase journalist Michael Kinsley, where conservatives seek converts, liberals police heresy. Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s collection *Harry Potter and the Other* shows the best and worst of this methodology in action.

Anything with the phrase “and the Other” in the title runs the risk of devolving into an airing of grievances. It is to the credit of Dahlen, Thomas and their contributors that large parts of their book transcend this. Things lead off, for example, with Jackie Horne’s parsing of exactly how Harry enacts the anti-racism Rowling did her level best to write. Horne’s use of the distinction