

George MacDonald's Insights into Science and Religion

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In the Introduction for his book *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, C.S. Lewis praised MacDonald's closeness to the Spirit of Christ. He also expressed his indebtedness and gratitude to George MacDonald. I want to express my indebtedness and gratitude to C.S. Lewis, because his book introduced me to George MacDonald, whose writings have enriched all aspects of my life.

The most publicized disputes today between religion and science focus primarily upon our world views, what we believe about the origin and purpose of the earth and life on earth. What I'm calling the "My World View Is Better Than Yours" contest may not be the only game in town, but our individual world views either enhance or damage our true humanity. In fact, our world views influence our entire attitude toward ourselves, other humans, and all life. These are not frivolous matters.

I believe George MacDonald's insights can help us find our way through current disputes. I will first offer my interpretation of George MacDonald's world view. I will then submit three alternative world views together with MacDonald's specific comments about each of the three.

MacDonald respected religion and science as two honorable, nonconflicting realms of human activity that have differing methods, goals, and knowledge. In the midst of various contradictory views popular during the nineteenth century, George MacDonald shaped an exciting, scientifically reasonable, and spiritually invigorating world view in terms of God's *intent*.

MacDonald distinguishes what he calls God's *intent* from what he calls God's *ways* and *means*. MacDonald views God's *intent* as God's desire for a material world that allows free and independent creatures to exist and reach fulfillment by choosing truth and compassionate

goodness. In contrast, he views God's *ways* and *means* as the world of nature and natural law that science investigates. His evenhanded description of the distinction between the *Why* questions asked by religion and the *How* questions asked by science can give us guidance as we seek to understand differing world views today.

MacDonald's answer to the big *why* question in religion, "Why do we and the universe exist?" is that God seeks to share with creatures the blessedness that can be enjoyed by a life dedicated to truth and love. MacDonald's answer to the big *how* question of science, "*How* do things come into being and *how* do they function?" is that God uses natural physical phenomena and natural laws as the *ways* and the *means* to accomplish the divine *intent*.

MacDonald points out the difference between God's *intent* and God's *ways* and *means* with this illustration:

"The truth of a flower is, not the facts about it, be they correct as ideal science itself, but the shining, glowing, gladdening, patient thing throned on its stalk, the compeller of smile and tear The idea of God is the flower; his idea is not the botany of the flower. Its botany is but a thing of ways and means—of canvas and colour and brush in relation to the picture in the painter's brain."¹

This was not a put down of God's *ways* and *means*. MacDonald was intensely attracted to the study of science and taught it occasionally. He welcomed the emerging nineteenth century astronomical, geological, and biological understandings of the evolving nature of the cosmos, the earth, and life upon earth. He stated:

“The ways of God go down into microscopic depths, as well as up into telescopic heights—and with more marvel, for there lie the beginnings of life.”²

As he continued to explain the *ways* and *means* of God, MacDonald tossed out a startling conjecture: “All things are possible with God, but all things are not easy It is not easy for him to create . . . and divine history shows how hard.”³ Condensing this thought, MacDonald stated: “The whole history is a divine agony to give divine life to creatures.”⁴ Switching from a description of *intent* to a description of *ways* and *means*, MacDonald declared: “I imagine the difficulty . . . of such creation so great, that for it God must begin inconceivably far back in the infinitesimal regions of beginnings, . . . eternal miles beyond the last farthest-pushed discovery in protoplasm—to set in motion that division from himself which in its grand result should be individuality, consciousness, choice, and conscious choice.”⁵

Support for the plausibility of MacDonald's world view is coming from two refreshing movements currently taking place, one in science and one in theology. In science, a growing recognition of an incompleteness in the classical theory of evolution is suggesting that life's inherent ability to create surprising novelty needs to be given an integral place in evolutionary thinking. Similarly, in theology, a mode of speaking of God as the source of all forms of newness and novelty, past, present, and future, is emerging. These two movements suggest an open future. This openness can supplant a determinism implied by an interpretation of evolution that says that nothing is going on except mutation and natural selection. This openness can also supplant a determinism implied by any theology that limits God to a detailed blueprint.

These new scientific and theological ways of thinking are attempts to express the puzzling concept that MacDonald had in mind when he spoke of God as “the present living idea informing the cosmos.”⁶ To illustrate such moment by moment, lively, natural creations, ones visibly informed and interpenetrated by God, MacDonald describes three common occurrences. He wrote,

“See the freedom of God in his sunsets—never a second one like the one foregone!—in his moons and skies—in the ever-changing solid earth!—all moving by no dead law, but in the harmony of the vital law of liberty, God's creative perfection—all ordered from within.”⁷

The “*all ordered from within*” was difficult for me to understand, until with great excitement I followed and deluged my friends with what appeared to be a whole new way to look at the world based upon the discoveries of self-replication in fractal geometry, the unpredictability in natural patterning and chaos theory, and the systems and information approaches to self-organization found within simple one-celled organisms as well as within the most complex. MacDonald was right! Everything *is* ordered from within, but in concert with an indwelling freedom rather than according to a precise predetermined plan.

George MacDonald's remarkable insights can help us understand alternate world views. Although MacDonald supports the objectivity of science, which is essential to modern life, he points out that scientific objectivity limits its realm of competency by choosing to exclude from its studies important aspects of human life, such as friendship, purpose, meaning, and compassion. MacDonald did not fault science for this, nor should we. Science is unbelievably successful at doing what it is designed to do.

Rather than getting bogged down in the disputes between participants in the contest I'm calling “My World View Is Better Than Yours,” we can choose to consider what each world view values and seeks to preserve.

The first contenders are scientists who value and seek to preserve the objective facts of science, but because they find no scientific evidence for God or meaning or purpose in human life, they conclude that neither God, meaning, nor purpose exist. Only the physical world has any reality. This leads them to reject outright the idea of creation by God.

When George MacDonald was faced with this same world view, he drew a fine but interesting distinction that still holds true. Science teaches a scientist not to state as fact something he or she does not know, but science does not teach a scientist to state as fact that what he or she does not know has no existence. MacDonald's pithy statement reads:

“Scientific men may be unbelievers, but it is not from the teaching of science. Science teaches that a man must not say he knows what he does not know; not that what a man does not know he may say does not exist.”⁸

MacDonald also gave this more personal response:

“If a man tells me that science says God is not a likely being, I answer, Probably not—such

as you, who have given your keen, admirable, enviable powers to the observation of outer things only, are capable of supposing him; but that the God I mean may not be the very heart of the lovely order you see so much better than I, you have given me no reason to fear. My God may be above and beyond and in all that.”⁹

The second contenders in the contest “My World View Is Better Than Yours” vigorously oppose any exclusively physical, Godless interpretation of the world. They endeavor to uphold more than an intellectual belief in God as creator. They value and seek to preserve the essential religious meanings of creation and the implications for human life associated with the concept of creation by God. Supporters of Creationism and Intelligent Design Theory are two examples. There are differences between the two movements, but they both appear to prefer thinking that God uses supernatural rather than natural *ways* and *means* to create humans.

Intelligent Design Theory is especially attractive to those who place a strong emphasis upon God as the intelligent designer of the world. MacDonald referred to William Paley's analogy of a man finding a watch and concluding that just as a watch requires a watchmaker, design in the natural world requires an intelligent designer. MacDonald was not satisfied with the idea that the design we perceive in the world is proof that God exists and is its intelligent designer. MacDonald states:

“That was how Paley viewed it. He taught us to believe there is a God from the mechanism of the world. But, allowing all the argument to be quite correct, what does it prove? A mechanical God, and nothing more.”¹⁰

For MacDonald, who dedicated his total being to a God of unlimited love, this idea of God was completely inadequate.

The third contenders in the “My World View Is Better Than Yours” contest tend to be unobtrusive, unorganized, and widespread in the Western world. This world view is supported, sometimes consciously but for the most part unconsciously, by everyone who fails to question a common assumption that nature and the laws that govern nature are separate from and independent of God.

MacDonald rejects this common assumption. He believes that nature and the laws of nature originate in

God, are encompassed by God, and are God's loving *means* and *ways* to further the divine intent. He challenges us to consider what it would be like to live in a world where no love exists at the source of natural law, life, and conscious beings. He describes such a world this way: “Nowhere at the root of things is love—it is only a something that came after, some sort of fungous excrescence in the hearts of men grown . . . superior to their origin. Law, nothing but cold impassive, material law, is the root of things,” luckily unconscious and lifeless. Otherwise this power would be “a demon.”¹¹

This passage puzzled me. It seemed excessive, especially the word *demon*. Gradually I realized that events of the twentieth century alone have forced us to recognize that thousands of individuals in numerous areas of our world have suffered cruelly atrocious treatment because immense *human* power, alive, conscious, but without love, proved itself to be excessively demonic.

MacDonald offers a glorious alternative to this common belief that nature is separate from and independent of God: the belief that a loving God both dwells within and encompasses the complex marvels of nature. These marvels are not the result of a power independent of God. It is God who originates, informs, pervades, and sustains all natural laws as God's *ways* and *means*. The laws are God's *intent* in action.

Notes

¹George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: Third Series* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), 64,65.

²*Ibid.*, 254.

³George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: Second Series* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885), 139.

⁴*Ibid.*, 143.

⁵*Ibid.*, 140.

⁶George MacDonald, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (London: Strahan & Co., 1870), 247.

⁷MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: Second Series*, 79.

⁸George MacDonald, *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1870), 240.

⁹MacDonald, *Miracles*, 36.

¹⁰George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination and on Shakespeare* (London: Edwin Dalton, 1908), 246.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 61-62.

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