

How can doubt and disbelief become transforming faith?

A conversation with Alister McGrath

TRANSCRIPT



NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

SPEAKERS

Alister McGrath, Mark Turman

Mark Turman 00:01

Welcome back to The Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, Executive Director of Denison Forum and host for today's conversation. We'd like to talk about faith and culture where they intersect, where they sometimes challenge and compete with each other. Our goal at the Denison Forum is to help the church to help believers to understand today's culture from a biblical perspective, and to respond with redeeming grace, influence and truth through God's word and through God's Spirit. Thank you for being a part of this conversation.

Over the last couple of decades particularly, there's been a lot of conversation about how science and faith either compete or combat with each other. Today, we're going to talk about how they complement each other.

You may have heard of this movement called the New Atheism that started to arise about 20 years ago, right after 911, somewhat sparked and maybe even ignited by the 911 attack. But we're going to talk today with Dr. Alister McGrath, he and his friend Dennis Alexander have compiled a very powerful and interesting book that is called [*Coming to Faith through Dawkins*](#).

You may have heard of Richard Dawkins, Peter Singer, Christopher Hitchens, they are sometimes referred to as the new atheists, who have said that, that religion is of no value to our world and that science is the only way to discover actual truth. Well, Dr. McGrath and Dr. Alexander challenge that notion.

So through a series of essays from scientists, journalist, a graphic designer, a pastor who started out as atheist, but through the questions of Richard Dawkins and others, actually started to ask even deeper questions that ultimately resulted in their conversion to Christianity, and they're becoming defenders of Christianity.

Let me remind you who Dr. McGrath is. Alister McGrath is a former atheist himself, who studied natural sciences at Oxford until he was led through his own questions to switch to theology. He just recently retired as professor of science and religion at Oxford, and is author of the very well-known book [*The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*](#).

Today, we have a very interesting, powerful conversation about how science and faith actually work together to bring us closer to God. So we're excited to have you along for the journey. Thanks for joining us. Dr. McGrath, welcome to The Denison Forum Podcast. We're glad to have you with us.

Alister McGrath 02:42

And I'm delighted to be here. Thank you for having me.

Mark Turman 02:45

Well, this is an exciting and unique form of writing. Based on some of the other things that you've done. The book is called [*Coming to Faith through Dawkins: 12 Essays on the Pathway from New Atheism to Christianity*](#). I look forward to getting into some of the details about this book in the background of the

book. But it's something of a unique approach for a Christian apologist, a cultural apologist, such as yourself.

But I wondered, before we talk about some of the stories that are contained in the book, if you would tell our listeners a little bit about your own journey of faith and what you are doing now in ministry.

Alister McGrath 03:27

Well, thank you very much for asking me to do that. I mean, I was an atheist teenager, I rebelled against Christianity. And one of the reasons was that because I felt that science and religion were oppositional, and I loved science as a teenager, so that drove my atheism, I felt I had to choose, I couldn't be a scientist and a religious believer. So I chose science.

And I think I began to become very dogmatic about my atheism, and feeling that in effect, people who believed in God were mad or bad, or sad, or possibly all three. And it wasn't really quite arrived at Oxford University where I met some very intelligent Christians who, in fact, were very happy to talk about their faith, about the relationship with science and faith whole series of things like this.

I began to realize I had misjudged things that actually what I had done really was to reject a caricature of Christianity rather than the real thing. And I think it just shows how you when you encounter a living an exciting version of faith that really does make you rethink things.

And I think that's one of the reasons why I started becoming an apologist because I rejected Christianity because I did not understand it. So for me, one of the great things about apologetics is trying to be able to explain to people what Christianity really is, and showing them why it's so exciting and so relevant. So that's my story. It's an ongoing story, but I made a good choice or rather, God I hope made a good choice in choosing me. And I'm delighted to be here. In his service at this moment,

Mark Turman 05:01

and what is your area of ministry and service looked like now? Are you currently teaching at Oxford? What is what is your position in and work today?

Alister McGrath 05:11

Well, I've just returned from an endowed professorship at Oxford. So I now have much more time at my disposal to be able to write, to speak to visit people, and so on. That's very exciting. So really, if you like, I'm someone who spent my academic career understanding Christian theology and talking about

relationship science and faith and doing apologetics. And I now have more time to do all of these things, which is, in my view, really wonderful.

Mark Turman 05:37

Well, that's exciting to hear. And your work has already been extensive and impactful, and certainly confident that this new compilation of essays will be impactful as well.

Many of our people that listen to this podcast are active, healthy, engaged believers in local churches, we would wonder, I would wonder, your general assessment right now of the movement of faith in Christianity within the UK, obviously, deep, deep connections on so many levels between the United States and the and Great Britain.

But we hear various reports, both positive and negative about what God is doing and how God may be stirring. In the United Kingdom, what would be your general view of that right now?

Alister McGrath 06:29

I think we're seeing different things in different places. One of the frayed rather, sad patterns we're seeing in many established churches is that congregations are aging, and young people are not coming forward to take their place.

But elsewhere, what we're seeing is very dynamic churches emerge with lots of young people who are very excited about their faith and want to do things for God. So here's a mixed picture.

I mean, as someone who attends my local church on Sundays, I'm one of the younger members of the congregation, I have to say, I do worry about this. But I'm just very grateful. There are so many younger people in university cities in all over the place who are really excited about their faith. And so I think that it is a mixed picture. But happily, there are some very good things happening. And I'm delighted to be involved in some of those.

Mark Turman 07:21

Yeah, fantastic. Well, we'll pray for that to expand across generations.

But let's, let's talk about this book, and the compilation of the book, obviously unique in that it has a multiplicity of voices that are here sharing their own journeys.

Can you give us a little bit of the background of how the concept of this book came about? What was the purpose of a compilation of essays? Help us understand a little bit of the background of what gave rise to this work?

Alister McGrath 07:56

Yes, thank you. That's a very good question. And Dennis Alexander and I know each other very well. And we talk a lot. And one of the things we talk about a lot is the impact of the new Atheism.

And one of the things each of us noticed is that we had met people who wanted to do various things like study science and religion. And very often when we asked them, what got you interested in these questions, don't say, Well, you know, we read Richard Dawkins, we were atheists then. And then he made us rethink things. And we went and read some Christian books, and we decided we'd become Christians instead. And we were quite surprised by this.

And as we compare notes, we began to realize this, that this is actually was a systematic pattern. A lot of people were reading Richard Dawkins expecting their atheism to be reinforced. In fact, it was called into question, because he's very shrill. He's very superficially, he's very aggressive. They're all kinds of arguments, the shortcuts.

And people were saying, Well, I think I need to check the site for myself. So they would read people like CS Lewis, and Tim Keller, and others, and we'll discover something very, very different that they liked. And so they become Christians as a result.

And so what we found was a lot of these people didn't want to put into print their ideas, because they felt this might be difficult for them. But in the end, we found 12 people from five different nations, who were very happy to tell their stories. And the story is that of Dawkins being a catalyst either into the faith or growing in that faith.

And Dennis and I both felt, wouldn't it be wonderful to let these people tell their stories in their own way, in their own words, because in effect, each of these stories is about a life that has been transformed. Dawkins, in effect became a catalyst or not, I think, in the way he would have hoped or intended for that discovery of Christian faith. So that is the background. So eventually, we found 12 People who said we're willing to go into print and were delighted they did, and I think they tell some really fascinating stories.

Mark Turman 10:02

But it is a fascinating approach to the conversation for sure. Let me pause for a moment and ask you to define for those who they may have bumped into one of these New Atheists, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Peter Singer, that type of thing. There will be some listening to us who are not familiar with the term new Atheism and new atheist, can you kind of define those for us?

Alister McGrath 10:29

Certainly, the term the New Atheists began to be used in 2006. Now, that's when Richard Dawkins published his book, *The God Delusion*, when Sam Harris wrote his letters to a Christian nation when Daniel Dennett wrote *Breaking the Spell*, and a journalist called Gary Wolf put these three names together and said that there's something new happening here. It's a different kind of atheism. It's very slogan driven. It's very certain about its beliefs. It's very aggressive.

And he said, Look, this is something new. Christopher Hitchens published his book *The Next Year*, so at the stage of just three people in the movement, but Gary Wolf sketched out this new form of atheism, which I think it was very, very media friendly and really drew a lot of favorable media attention, until the media began to look more closely and discovered that was rather shallow, rather simplistic, and actually really quite aggressive.

So we're talking about a movement that really came into being in 2006, with the publication of Richard Dawkins book, *The God Delusion*. And when Christopher Hitchens came along in 2007, with *God is Not Great* that kind of way, meant these four guys were seen as being at the forefront of a new cultural movement. And for a while, for several years, people thought, this is the future. And then it began to become obvious, it was nothing of the sort. And that's really where this book comes in.

Mark Turman 11:56

So in that sense, it feels like in some of the observations I've had, that there was a great deal of emotional anger behind some of these writers and thinkers, a great deal of maybe a desire for attention, popularity, celebrity, if you will. And some of that started to come across.

In your study of the New Atheists. Have you found that they are driven by any of those things? Are they are they driven by some kind of hurt, relative to faith and journeys of faith, as we often see, with people who become shrill and angry, about, you know, contrasting beliefs to Christianity or to any faith? And and do you sense that? Are they collaborating? Are they pursuing a collective agenda? Over the last two decades or so?

Alister McGrath 12:56

Well, thankfully, the dominant emotion that I see is anger, they are angry that religion exists in the first place. They are angry that people take religion seriously. They are angry with critics of faith, who simply use argument they want to use ridicule, they want to make fun of religious people, they want to shame people about their faith.

I think that's a very important point, because what we find here in England, is that many teenagers who had Christian faith found themselves under real pressure at the high schools, because the French were saying, Have you read Richard Dawkins? He, he will rubbish your faith, you know, in effect, you can't stand up, you know, you haven't got a faith worth defending. So it was really very aggressive. I don't think really, Christian leaders were prepared for the sheer aggressiveness and nastiness of the new atheist agenda.

So I think it did take a lot of people by surprise, but it became very clear, I think that the movement was simply critical, it rubbished religion, but it didn't really have an alternative vision of reality to offer. I think that was one of the things that really made people begin to ask questions, know what exactly is this? It's very, it's very, very clear. It's very, very certain about its beliefs. But actually, it's not really clear what good this does.

So in many ways, I think the new Atheism thrived for a short period because of its novelty value. Indeed, here in Britain, we have an atheist philosopher called John Gray. And John Gray said, Look, really, this movement is simply an educational media show. It's not about intelligent ideas. It's simply about garnering media attention, and that's all there is to it. It's shallow, it's superficial. There's nothing significant to say.

Having said that, the influence of the new Atheism still lingers, even though I think it's fading but what I think Dennis Alexander and I hope is that this book will in effect redirect the conversation entirely. Because by allowing these people to tell their stories, in effect, each of these is a personal testimony to faith. It's much more interesting and arguments. It's about someone telling the story of how they began thinking this and then began to rethink and rediscover and suddenly find Christianity. And it was wonderful. So it's a very moving, very exciting read, both in terms of motivation, but also in terms of the ideas that will give its readers for how they can talk about their faith to their atheist friends.

Mark Turman 15:37

Yes, and as I was working through some of the book, I was just, it is a very unique approach to apologetics both what we might call traditional apologetics, as well as current cultural apologetics. And there is, there is a great irony in this book, that, as you point out in the preface to that, as instead of Dawkins really dismissed it diminishing religion across a broad spectrum, he actually has triggered a fresh interest for many people in not only faith generally, but faith with depth.

Now, you've spent a lifetime already helping people to understand the faith, intellectually. But one of the things that's interesting, I think about this book is the combination of rigorous intellectual pursuit as well as personal emotional investment. Can you talk about the combination of those two things as essential to Christian witness?

Alister McGrath 16:43

Thank you again. That's a really good question. Certainly, as we read these people talking about how they came to faith through Dawkins, part of the reflections are, what Dawkins are saying doesn't actually really make all that much sense. In other words, they're intellectually assessing Dawkins or saying, this doesn't really stack up, he's inconsistent, his arguments, his arguments don't take him or he thinks they do. Or Dawkins uses criteria to judge religious people that he doesn't use to assess his own beliefs. So there's a very strong intellectual element in many of these writers, who very often have an academic background, not all but many.

So alongside that, there is a sense of joy, delight, the sense of inner transformation, which results from coming to faith. So we have this remarkable synergy of head and heart in these stories. And that's one of the reasons why I find them so moving, they are in effect, talking about the transformation of their lives.

I think readers will find them really interesting because they say, Well, I can relate to that one, oh, that's really good to help me. And it will, because these people are in effect. If you like that they're almost like representative, most people reading this book, be able to say, that guy is where I am, that's really helpful, and helps me to work out how to talk to my friends. So I think you're right head and heart both matter. And many of these stories really make that connection very powerfully.

Mark Turman 18:13

I'll give you one example that really just caught my attention. I was reading the essay by Johanna Erasmus, an African. And at the end of his story, he says, You know, I sometimes feel like I have to be converted every morning, at least through a couple of cups of coffee, his honesty and his description of

continuing battles, off and on with various levels of doubt, and the ongoing pursuit of faith, I just resonated very deeply with some of those thoughts. I've made statements, at times similar to that of, you know, I feel like I need to be converted all over again, and speaks to the journey of faith not just simply to the events of faith, both of which are important.

I was wondering, you're very careful, especially in the beginning of this book to say, look, this is not intended to be some kind of an attack upon Richard Dawkins personally. And I've even had others say to me, you know, Richard Dawkins is fabulous, and these other so called New Atheists are in certain categories of science and intellectual pursuit, they are exceptional thinkers. But as one apologist said to me, Richard Dawkins just needs to stay in his lane. Is that a fair statement?.

Alister McGrath 19:38

Well, I think it is, I mean, you can be a world expert in science, and not know very much about anything else. And I think that's one of the things we see that when Richard Dawkins talks about Christianity, he gets it wrong a lot of the time. And the problem is if I'm put like this, he doesn't know what he doesn't know he, he really thinks is, I know what Christianity is. I'll bother asking Christians I just tell people here for Christians think isn't loads of rubbish.

But when you start looking at is a terribly inadequate understanding, he gets things wrong all over the place. And if he had bothered to talk to Christians, he might have written a rather better book.

So I think that that's a very important point to make that actually many of our contributors here make the point that they simply felt that Dawkins was presenting a deficient and a very misleading account of what Christianity was, and we're angry with him for that, I have to tell you,

I think we don't criticize Dawkins, I think we're more concerned with really just saying, Look, here are people who initially thought Dawkins was right, nevertheless took them very, very seriously and read him and then discovered, actually, he was not.

And I accept an interesting story to tell, because since Bernstein discovered these people, we come across lots more people who have similar stories to tell. And I am sure there are a lot of people out there who will be willing to tell those stories and churches on the media, because we need these stories to be told, we need people to say in effect, that Dawkins does not get things right, that he in effect misunderstands a lot of things. And it's really important that we make sure people understand what Christianity is, and why it's so transformative, not an example of someone who discovered that as why it's so important for me.

So I think we've got a lot to say, and I hope this collection of essays will kind of help people grow in confidence about faith, because the 12 people, they write very well. And they tell very, very good stories, which are true stories. And I just think we need to get those stories out there. And I think there'll be really helpful in the field of apologetics.

Mark Turman 21:44

Yes, I think so. I want to get to some of those contributors in just a moment. But I can hear somebody in perhaps in their own mind listening to us asking, wondering, Dr. McGrath, do you know Richard Dawkins? And do you know him personally? And if you do, what, how would you characterize your relationship to him?

Alister McGrath 22:03

Well, I told him first he and I've met personally and talk about things. But I have to say that I did not feel we had a meeting of minds or an engagement of ideas. Maybe I'm being unfair, but I very often felt when I would ask Richard Dawkins, a question the answer I got, was almost like a pre-recorded as you know, the horse like it's been scripted in advance, and I didn't really feel he was engaging the questions I was asking.

So I, my feeling is that what Dawkins does is raised some very good questions and gives very inadequate answers to them, and does not want alternative answers to be heard. And I think one of the things that does disturb me a little bit is that suddenly here with Richard Dawkins, also, Christopher Hitchens, that the chosen weapon for engaging Christians is not intellectual argument, it's ridicule, it's abuse, it's an effect, you know, you are evil, you are mad, you are bad, you know, it is very much about in effect, there is this thing called religion, if you are religious, you're stupid, you are evil.

And in fact, it's about a categorization of people in a way that is, I think, really quite unsettling and deeply disturbing. So I think it's very good that the tone of this book is very positive. You know, where that, that these people are saying, Look, Richard Dawkins had this effect on me. Here it is, I'm telling my story. And I want you to look not so much at Richard Dawkins at the arguments he uses, and the responses I make, in fact, engaging him.

PODCAST AD 23:49

Should Christians boycott his Christian nationalism, biblical? Should Christians send their kids to public school? We tackle these questions and seven more in our latest volume of biblical insight to tough questions, support the mission of Denison forum and request our new book today at DFpodcast.org.

MARK TURMAN

Yeah, so, so important. And I don't think we would have necessarily use these terms back in the early 2000s. But it sounds like that, in some ways, the new atheist helped to promote the idea of canceled culture, that if you have a contrasting idea, then you should be shamed, or you should be silenced or you're dangerous. You're a threat that that is essence what the idea of canceled culture is all about.

I'm wondering, could you give us some description, a little bit more of the kinds of people that are included in this book through their essays? Tell us a little bit more about who the contributors are, what some of their backgrounds are. How did you choose? How did you find them? How did you choose who you would include.

Alister McGrath 25:02

Well, what we did was we, we tried to persuade some people who had been speaking to us to put their thoughts down. And some of them did have to say, but many just said, Look, this is this is slightly dangerous, you mentioned canceled culture that actually, some people felt that actually, this might make their professional lives difficult. So we respected that.

But we kept on looking into Alexander in particular had access to very good networks. And we came up with a group of people who in effect, as we conversed with them, as we got got sense of who they were, where they're coming from, we began to realize each of them was telling a quite distinct story, coming from a geographically different place from an intellectually different place. And that really, if I put like this wasn't as if we put a big notice up saying wanted people to talk about moving from Dawkins, faith, and much more people kind of wait came to us with possibilities. And we found, in effect 12, that we felt had a wide range of different stories to tell different geographical origins, different issues being raised different genders, different social contexts. And we wanted to do was to have a diverse set of stories, which in effect, raise all the right questions.

So people would feel on reading this, you know, oh, that's where I am. Well, that's my friend is I could use that story to really help them move on. So it is a very diverse group of people. And as you have noticed, Dennis Alexander and I both stand back, we simply say here, these people are idle introduction, saying, remember what a new Atheism was, because it has faded away. And then we're into the narratives, the stories, the testimonies, and really, what Dennis and I were simply saying is we're standing back here, here are the stars of the show. And so we're very happy to make those 12 presentations, those 12 essays, the centerpiece of this book.

Mark Turman 26:58

So in Yeah, and they are incredible to read, they're just just different angles that you'll find your you, like you said, you can find yourself or find someone you know, in one of the stories, oftentimes, this is dangerous for me to ask, and you may not want to answer but of the various essays and stories.

Which one do you feel like is most transformative? That may be a polite way of saying, Dr. McGrath, do you have a favorite? Which would be probably not the best way for you to answer. But is there is there one that you regard as either personally insightful for you, or that held your attention, for some reason in a way that surprised you.

Alister McGrath 27:47

But I have to say that I read them all with delight. I mean, I just thought this is so good. But one did stand up because of the background. This is Sarah Irving Stonebreaker, who is an Australian journalist. And she tells the most wonderful story of how, in effect, as a journalist, as someone who reflected on these things, she began to really have some very significant doubts about Dawkins and how this motivated her to begin to think again, about everything.

And what I think move me was that she was extremely good with words. And they're all these are all great stories, but she just seemed to have a particular ability to put her finger on the nub of the issues, what we're really talking about here. And as I read that, when I thought that that one will really speak to a lot of people, particularly women, who I think will feel that there's a problem with Dawkins as a way of thinking about women. But certainly she speaks very powerfully.

What I will say, again, is I think each of these essays, has its own distinct integrity and identity. And actually it was will speak in different ways to different people. So you will find something in here you like?

Mark Turman 28:59

Yes, absolutely. And I'm grateful for you bringing up stone breakers work. I had a couple of questions. I wanted to parse out with you a little bit in that regard.

Part of what she talks about is the new atheist, which she would, I think, describe as misuse of history. And one of the interesting and wonderful dynamics of getting into apologetics and to the story of Christianity and the story of the world as they weave together is to discover all of the good that Christianity and faith have ignited and inspired.

But we live in a time when so many things, the foundations of, of society, institutions are being questioned and being doubted and we're seeing fresh levels of chaos on a broad scale that come from that level of doubt and that level of, of questioning of the very foundations and institutions of society. History being one of those, I wonder if you would have a comment or two about the importance of understanding the value and pursuit of seeing history in its correct light. And maybe how you might comment on the misuse by the new atheist of history and historical pursuit.

Alister McGrath 30:33

Yes, I guess that's a very good point. I mean, for me, the New Atheists cherry-pick history. In other words, they, they tell a story, which in effect deliberately excludes anything good Christianity has done and simply focus on things that either represent or are misrepresented as Christianity doing bad things like many of my atheist friends are really very, very angry about this because it says, gives atheism a bad name. If we can't be truthful and honest doing why we're here. I think that's a real concern.

And also in Dawkins, really? Miss read history at many points, he says, Look, atheists don't believe anything. So there's no reason atheists will ever do acts of violence. Well, I'm sorry, that's just not right. If you are an atheist who believes that religion is evil, then you're going to want to eliminate religion. That's what happened in the Soviet Union.

And Dawkins, I think, is rather naive, rather, well, how should I put rather anxious not to talk about that, but certainly, many of his atheist critics, like for example, I mentioned philosopher John Gray, would say, look, you've got to be honest about this, atheism has done some very bad thing, just open up the honest here. And I think is a very fair point. And certainly, several of our contributors do explicitly critique this. misrepresentation of history, a very good counter to this will be for example, Tom Holland's book, Dominion, which is a very good account of the impact Christianity has had on history, which actually, many secular authorities here in England think is very, very respectable, very, very important needs to be read. So I think Dawkins is seen by a lot of people now is in effect, having to miss read or misrepresent history in order to make his case for atheism. That's no good place for Dawkins to be I think,

Mark Turman 32:29

and yes, and very important. Am I on the right track with you, Dr. McGrath, that if we cherry pick history, if we miss us, the pursuit of historical understanding, then we're stoking a level of doubt that is dangerous to us personally, and collectively, am I on the right track with you?

Alister McGrath 32:55

You're on the right track. I think history is very, very important. We need to learn from history. If we don't, we simply repeated mistakes. But we also need to be able to challenge people who offer us an interpretation of history, which is, for example, very anti Christian, and say, Well, that may be how you see it. But actually, there are other ways of looking at this. And they're much more reliable. And I think what you're doing this simply offering a misreading a misrepresentation of history. And we need to be able to talk about this.

And that's one of the reasons why we do need Christian pastors who know their history, who can say, Look, this is simply nonsense. Let me give you an example.

This is from Christopher Hitchens, but God is not great. But he makes the point that a particular American writer who was religious in the early 19th century was against smallpox vaccination. And he says, that's just the way religious people are. They're against scientific advance. Well, I mean, anyone who knows anything about history will make two points.

Number one, Jonathan Edwards, probably America's most famous historical Christian, died because he wanted to prove to his students at Princeton that smallpox vaccination was safe. In other words, he was absolutely committed to it.

And number two, in a 20th century, George Bernard Shaw, a well known British atheist, ridicule smallpox vaccination, as kind of a fantasy nonsense. So, you know, history is complicated. And these guys should be telling incredibly simple narrative that, in effect, blanks out everything that's good about faith, and simply allows them to focus on what suits their purposes. We did challenge that say, there's a better way of reading history.

Mark Turman 34:33

And that brings to mind this this question I wanted to ask you about which is, **there is this what I would call myth that there is immunity between science and faith?** Has, has that idea that science and faith are incompatible that they are in conflict with each other, that they cannot ever be reconciled? They're, they're one must overcome the other Has that always been with us? Or is that something that the new atheist revived in some way?

Because when you start reading just world history as well as Christian history, you'll find that many of the best scientists were also people who have very deep faith. Can you give us some context and understanding to how we've gotten to this place where even something like new atheist and New Atheists, new Atheism can rise as it did so rapidly following 9/11. And, and over the last 10 to 20 years?

Alister McGrath 35:36

Well, the new Atheism depends on the idea that science and religion are incompatible, because then they're able to say look to science is much better. But what I think any historian would say is this idea of a conflict in science and religion, is really a 19th century invention, actually originated in the United States, with a number of writers who had very aggressive books, like the warfare of science, with Christianity and things like that. And that kind of a created an impression. And it's one of the new Atheism, kind of way repeats again, and again and again.

But as a historian, I do not see this tension there before the 19th century. And you've made the point very clearly, if you read earlier, scientists, like for example, Kepler, Kepler, basically was very, very clear. His Christian faith informed his astronomy is understanding of how God created the world. And him meant that in some way, we are able to use our minds and mathematical abilities to understand how the solar system works, he was absolutely clear. He was thinking God's thoughts after him, it was very, very clear his faith was reinforced by it.

So we find this again and again and again, that early scientific research was governed by this basic principle, we are learning to appreciate the richness to complexity of nature, and in doing so we learn more about God is an extremely important point, only science was saying, the more we know about the creation, the better we appreciate the wisdom of God. That's a very important theme.

For many people in the early modern period, their religious faith was a motivation to do science, because they were studying God's creation, and thus enhancing their appreciation of who God was, and what God had done that, I think we need to use, in effect, tell that story, and make sure it doesn't get drowned out by New Atheists, writers who do not want that story to be heard.

Mark Turman 37:41

It's really quite astounding, just working my way through the very first essay, which is the story of, of a man that was a young Christian when he started to encounter Dawkins, and how that was initially threatening or troubling to him, but became the trigger for him to do further investigation, even to the

point of learning that even the scientific method was the work of Christians seeking to understand the world as a way of knowing God deeper. Am I saying it right? Am I summarizing him?

Alister McGrath 38:20

yes, you are, the site got a wonderful piece of testimony. And again, if there's anyone listening to this, who wants to think about relational science and faith, that opening essay will be a very good starting point. It's historically reliable, it explains very clearly how his own journey of faith proceeded. And the questions he is a scientist kind of way, engaged along the way. So I think that's a very important point to make. There are other scientists, of course, in the volume, but that's the opening essay, and it's very well done.

Mark Turman 38:51

So I want to pivot for just a moment you in contrast to the new atheist, Dawkins and others you've mentioned, other atheists such as John Gray, give us the kind of difference between this category of New Atheists versus others who unashamedly describe themselves as atheists, but would have had some of their own real problems with the way that Dawkins and Hitchens and others have approached some of these topics.

Give us a little bit of an understanding about I don't know if we would call it traditional atheism, if there's a term for them, but can you kind of give us an insight and an understanding of who they are and what their approach is compared to the New Atheists?

Alister McGrath 39:43

Well, let's call them the old a, was a kind of way of thinking about them. I mentioned the philosopher John Gray and John Gray wrote a very interesting book called seven kinds of atheists, seven types of atheism. And in it, he's really just talking about what he thinks atheism as like, as an atheist, and what he thinks is wrong with some of its versions, and the new Atheism is clearly very much in his gunsights.

I think there are two things I would point out number one and older atheists writers would say something like this. There are some intellectual difficulties with arguments for existence of God. Let me tell you what they are. In other words, it's, it's engaging ideas. Dawkins and Hitchens say, religious people are idiots. They're dangerous, they're damaged, they're deluded. In other words, they're, they're attacking people. It's very, very different. I think that that's one of the most disturbing features about this.

I mean, for example, think of Sam Harris's op ed piece in The New York Times saying, in effect that Francis Collins shouldn't be involved in government service, because he was a Christian. Yeah, he believes these ridiculous Christian things definitely should not be involved in national institute of healthcare. And of course, people reacted against that very aggressively said, Look, this guy's good. We need him there. And they were very angry Sam Harris. So that's one thing to think about the the focus on religious people, individuals rather than religious ideas.

The second thing that's really worrying is that in effect, the new Atheism, in effect, is simply sloganizing. It's all about in effect, slogans that are going to grab newspaper headlines, but in effect, don't engage Christianity.

And for me, I think the most disturbing thing is that in effect, what Dawkins and Hitchens present us Christianity would not be recognized as such by ordinary Christians. And the problem is there are a lot of people outside the church who say, Well, this must be what Christianity is, because Dawkins and Hitchens are saying it's like this. And so they aren't gaining that understanding of Christianity from Dawkins and Hitchens, that's not good news. So that's why it's so important that any Christian was involved in the media takes the time and trouble to make sure people understand what Christianity really is.

But the other thing we think, is really disturbing, but new Atheism is its evidential asymmetry. In other words, the new atheist writers, in effect will critique Christianity, but will not apply the same critiques to their own views. And it's extremely important point. If you if Dr. Dawkins says to me prove you are right about God, I would say back, we'll try and do that. Can you prove that you are right about your atheism? He will say, Well, no, I can't do it. You can't prove a negative but I'm sorry.

What he is saying in effect is, you've got to prove what you believe. I don't need to prove what I believe I'm immune fullness. In other words, I stand above assessment and criticism and accountability. So there's a real problem that I think, and those are some of the reasons why I think many atheists will breathe a sigh of relief that a new Atheism is so obviously on its way out. But I want to emphasize that this does not give Christians a cause for rejoicing, though, there'll be new challenges to face. But certainly I think we can begin to build on what's happened to new Atheism and thinking about how we preach how we teach our faith, and also about how we engage with the public domain.

Mark Turman 43:18

So, so helpful, as you alluded to, earlier, in our conversation, some indications that to be open about your faith in in various, in environments, particularly the scientific Academy, that type of thing, some

people have been cautious, to say, well, if I'm open about my faith, then that could be damaging to me professionally. Do you think that that is changing?

Do you think that there is a fresh openness within the scientific community within the academy, that being people of devout faith not necessarily mean hopefully Christian faith, but not necessarily faith, Christian faith, it could be Islam or other faith? Do you sense that that is turning to where the general academic and scientific community is now more turning away from these New Atheists toward a respectability about faith and an open that scientist and other professionals can be more open about their faith? Is that changing?

Alister McGrath 44:27

I think there's still a cloud over things backwards like that, that kind of aggressiveness of the new Atheism does continue to hover over the scientific landscape because many of these people were were scientists, and hence kind of way were seen as having some sort of authority within the scientific community. Now things are getting better.

I think five years ago, Marilyn Robinson wrote that faith had virtually been shamed out of the public square. I think we're coming back in but I think you know, we just have to say A, we've got to work very hard to build relationships with people to in effect, talk about our faith in a way that's responsible and gracious and winsome. But it can be done. And I think that there is a sense in which people are now reacting against new Atheism.

And what Dennis Alexander and I very much hope will be the case is that in effect, these essays, which are very well written, very cautious, very modest, in many ways, actually may help model the kind of way we might talk about faith and engage with our culture. Because I think there are real possibilities here. And I think that we are coming out of the woods, so to speak, but still quite a long way to go. But if the right people are there, and if we do this properly, I think in five years time, we may be in a better place.

Mark Turman 45:51

Well, there's it's a great expression, I think of what Tim Keller talked about when he talked about when some faith intellectually robust. But, as you said, joyful and the pursuit of truth, the pursuit of truth, not just simply the winning of an argument or the injury of a particular person. Dr. McGrath, how do you see this operating today within the academy within institutions of higher education? Are the New Atheists

still holding court? Primarily there are? Are they receiving in the upper echelons of education globally? Do they get preference?

We have a colleague here in the United States who likes to say that ideas have consequences and bad ideas have victims. That's why this book and this conversation is important to engage people like Dawkins and others. But is there a continuing presence, even domination of thinking, like the New Atheists still in the upper echelons of the academy?

Alister McGrath 47:09

I think that is definitely receding, certainly in the humanities, because people like Richard Dawkins, are very, very dismissive of the humanities that that hasn't helped them. I think they're there, they have been unwise. I think, in that respect, I think even amongst the scientific community, there's, there's a growing feeling that these guys have overstated that in effect, they have perhaps failed to do justice to the complexity of issues, and that there is room for more to be said. So I think it's very important that people who read this book, or people who listen to a podcast will, in effect, say, maybe I could help to move things ahead by doing certain things. And if that happens, that will be wonderful.

I think that, broadly speaking, if I have code like this, there's a new generation of academics rising up. And it's really important that they think about things in a different way. And that means that church leaders, people like us need to, in effect, think about how we help them to see that Christianity is intellectually respectable. But that's also life-transforming, and that's very, very important, and model, a graciousness, which is in effect about what Christianity does to people.

And again, that's one thing was by a lot of friends who I know were turned off atheism, because they said, Richard Dawkins is so aggressive is so nasty. I don't be like that. Right. But that's good to know, I think, but that could be said about Christians as well, if we, if people say that guy's really aggressive and nasty, don't you be like that? They might well say, and therefore Christianity is not, not for me. So we don't think about these things.

But I think there are good signs here. And really, we're looking to a rising generation of people who are in effect coming up through the ranks, who will be tomorrow's standard bearers. And I think there's a lot they can do. And obviously, we want to do all we can to encourage and enable them.

Mark Turman 49:07

Yes. And that's been, you know, over I would say, the last 10 to 15 years. One of the things it's most encouraged me, and I just would want to add this to our conversation is, you know, I remember when

one of my own church members, I was pastoring, a church, he gave me the work of Francis Collins first piece of work from Francis Collins that I had ever encountered. And it was difficult for me to understand since I am not a scientist, in some ways, but it was also incredibly affirming and empowering, as in in this work. He not only described his intellectual pursuits, but also his personal journey of faith and wove these two things together.

And you start meeting people like that you start meeting people like yourself, John Lennox, a scientist here in the United States named Jim tour, and and all of a sudden you're like, you find that Christianity can very much hold its own in the discussion of ideas and in the category of respectability. I'm wondering wanted to get your thought or comment on this.

I wonder to the extent that the new atheist have been the promoters of what would be called scientism, the religion of science, do you think that the global experience of the pandemic has brought doubt to those who have started to subscribe to science is ultimately the only way we find truth?

Alister McGrath 50:39

I think that the pandemic has, I think, helped science in one way, because clearly, it was saying, Look, we need professional help to be able to deal with this virus, which is causing such chaos. But I think also there was an anxiety, a growing anxiety that in effect, there are bigger issues on science here, there's a whole series of questions about human wellbeing, about human liberties, and so on. And certainly, there were people who were a bit worried that maybe science was driving us in some directions that were not really helpful for us.

So I think that if I'm pulled like this, that the COVID pandemic has brought home to us that science is important, but it has its place. And there's more that needs to be said. And of course, there's always this anxiety, which isn't really discussed very much that maybe the COVID pandemic itself actually might have been the result of some, some accidental leak from some of the brochure, I very much hope that's wrong, but they're in the background. So I think there are, there are questions there. I think those who would say, sciences are religion, I think really, science may help you in some ways.

But when it comes to really big questions, like how do I live my life? Well, what's the point of life? How can I flourish as a human being, so it's may help you a bit. And that's great, but actually a lot more than that. And that's why, you know, we need to have a resilient faith, which is able to help us to cope with difficult times, he has a vision of the difference we can make, and give us a sense of hope that we can finally get through this and live again.

Mark Turman 52:22

And that's one of the things that comes through this book strongly as, as we might talk about common threads through these 12 essays, hope, joy and hope, as, as well as depth are at least three of the consistent themes throughout every one of these essays. As I've experienced them, it and it has been interesting to watch what might be the crest of the new atheist movement over the last two decades.

I'm just wondering, in we now live in a world where the term identity is front and center and disgust at various levels. And the idea that we can make up our own identity and the the urgent need that the church needs to articulate what a Christ formed identity might look like. I just wonder, how do you think the new atheist might deal with the current questions of identity that we see being so hotly debated in our culture?

Alister McGrath 53:28

I think the new Atheism is very modernist in the sense of going back to the the enlightenment, and they will take what I think would not be seen as a very traditional view on these questions. I think Dawkins in particular was very critical of post modernism. He's very critical of anything that comes after that.

And that's, that's one of the reasons why a lot of young people just say this is since from the past, I think from a Christian perspective, it's so important to say an identity does matter. And that actually, our identity is in Christ, that we have this god given identity, which in effect gives us dignity, meaning and significance. And whatever other subsidiary identity we may choose, this is what really matters.

I think one of the things that church leaders need to do is help help people to understand the difference that this makes, why it's so important, and how it in effect gives us a sense of purpose, significance, and also our sense of calling to be something in this world. So I think you're right, a very important category. And that's why I think Christians really need to say, you know, my identity is in Christ. And this really gives me the specialness, the sense of importance as significant, which will keep me going through life.

Mark Turman 54:50

Very, very important topic for us to delve into deeper so many things I'd like to talk to you about in this book, morality, sense of right and wrong other things. But I wonder as we get ready to close here, again, just the unique, wonderful and winsome approach of this book.

There's also I sense in this Dr. McGrath a call to Christians, one of the things we are the thing that we're passionate about here at the Denison Forum, is helping people to be deeply, deeply grounded in Christ in every way at every level, to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength and their neighbor as their self.

But talk a minute, if you would about the importance and the power of both intellectual pursuit and personal story. we've alluded to it already. But how is this book, a call for Christians like these who wrote the essays to take their faith not only for their own personal benefit, but as an opportunity of witness? Because that's so much what this book is, it is a powerful expression of Christian witness, on a very deep level, can you talk to that a little bit?

Alister McGrath 56:11

So again, I got a very, very good question. In this book, there are 12 essays in which people talk about how they grew in their faith or makers came to faith. What I wonder is, you could say to people who are wondering what they could be doing, what story would you tell? What if you were to tell the story of your own faith journey? What would it look like? How might help somebody outside the faith community, discover what Christianity is all about?

CS Lewis, is very, very clear, we'd be able to tell a better story, you know, just as to show that there's something different distinct about Christianity, and very often telling our own story of discovering faith, flourishing. And faith is in effect, a way in which people begin to realize what the Christian faith is all about.

So I think the question I'd leave you with is this, if anybody listening to this is thinking about this? What story would you tell about yourself, that would help your family, your friends feel beyond the churches say, I suddenly understand what Christianity is all about? And why it makes such a difference? That'd be a wonderful thing to do.

Mark Turman 57:23

So yeah, a great, great admonition, and we don't all have the same questions. But we all are building a story that becomes influential and impactful that becomes that salt in light that Jesus asked us the last.

The last word I want to just share with our audience comes out of the essay by Johanna Erasmus, at the very end of his essay, talking about the rise of atheism, new Atheism, he says, you know, the problem is not atheism, it's apathy. That's our biggest threat. And if we could leave our audience with any admonition today would be, as Lewis said, the one thing that Christianity cannot be is moderately

important. It either means everything or it means nothing at all. And we need to understand that on a daily basis.

Dr. McGrath, thank you so much for this wonderful conversation. Thank you for making time for this thank you even more, for this book, and for the creative idea of presenting it as you have. And we would encourage all of our listeners to get the book you can get it at all major book outlets. And a final word that you'd like to share Dr. McGrath before we go.

Alister McGrath 58:44

Well, it's been wonderful talking with you like this. But my final word is simply please be encouraged. Read this book and think this is good news. And maybe I could do the same.

Mark Turman 58:55

Amen. Thank you, to our audience for listening to us today. If our podcast has been helpful to you, please rate and review us on your podcast platform. Please share this with family and friends so that they can be encouraged as well. And Dr. McGrath we hope to have another conversation with you in the near future. Thank you for your time.