



The Theology of George MacDonald

The Child Against
the Vampire of
Fundamentalism

John R. de Jong



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“If we are not little ones of a perfect love,
I can see no sense in things.”

GEORGE MACDONALD, LETTER TO LADY MOUNT TEMPLE, 1893.

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Preface

GEORGE MACDONALD'S PROSE IS somewhat wearing on the modern reader; a tendency towards prolixity, detours into prolonged "preachments" (to use C. S. Lewis's term), and Scottish vernacular—combined with liberal helpings of Victorian sentimentality—all make for a challenging reading experience. Despite the packaging, there is, nevertheless, a pertinence and an urgency to MacDonald's work which, I believe, is relevant to every generation for he is pondering the deep, perennial theological questions at the heart of faith—of life. For although quintessentially Victorian, MacDonald is also quintessentially human and I admire him for his transparency and dogged determination not to be satisfied with conventional answers. His work is essentially a theodicy. He asks that most difficult of theological questions: If God is love, why does evil exist? Trite answers about human free will simply do not wash. He may not have the "right" answers about the *mysterium iniquitatis* (no one does), but he is asking the right questions.

On re-reading *Lilith* many years after receiving it as a gift, I realized that George MacDonald's work directly addresses many of the issues that we struggle with in the twenty-first century, particularly in relation to religious fundamentalism. For MacDonald, fundamentalism was synonymous with idolatry; a tendency within contemporary Christianity to worship concepts, soteriological schemes, dogmas—even Scripture—rather than Christ. Through "making the familiar strange" he challenges the idols that have brazenly taken up residence in Christianity and fearlessly demands exorcism or, if you prefer, gene therapy. His is a message desperately needed, not only for our age, but every age. I hope that you, as I was, will be richly rewarded by journeying with me into MacDonald's thought.

This volume is the fruit of doctoral research at King’s College London under the supervision of Professor Ben Quash and Dr. Michael Ledger-Lomas to whom I am indebted for their invaluable guidance and support. I am grateful for the financial and moral support of family and friends, particularly my wife, Jeltje. Extended research is always trying for family members and I thank her for her patience in accompanying me on this long journey. I am also indebted to my elderly parents. Their support was unwavering, but they, sadly, left this earth as this manuscript was being prepared. I am also thankful for the support of Yvonne and Matt Carson, Andrew and Rebecca Whettam, and Dr. Lisa Firth. This project could not have been completed without financial support from the King’s College London Theological Trust, the Mylne Trust, the Catherine Mackichan Bursary Trust, the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust, and the Alexis Trust, for which I am grateful.

As George MacDonald once remarked, “No man could sing as he has sung, had not others sung before him,” and, as a musician, I am conscious of the many “songs” that have influenced my writing. I hesitate to name anyone for fear of missing others who should rightfully be identified as part of the choir, but, looking back over my shoulder, I feel a particular indebtedness to the writings of Stephen Prickett, John Pridmore, U. C. Knoepfelmacher, Sally Shuttleworth, David Bentley Hart, and Rowan Williams (and, of course, others, many of whom are credited in the body of this work) for their scholarly ability to provide wide contextual insight—a view of the symphony that has helped me to put my own modest themes into perspective.

It is also helpful to have gifted children. Thanks are due to Benjamin Daigle and Amy de Jong for proof-reading (even picking up on wrongly-italicized commas), Jesse de Jong for correcting and advising on points of grammar, and Esther de Jong Paterson, herself a gifted theologian, for inspiring conversations and encouraging me to keep going.

John de Jong, Prague, 2019.

List of Abbreviations

The works of George MacDonald

<i>AF</i>	<i>Alec Forbes of Howglen</i>
<i>AQN</i>	<i>Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>Castle Warlock</i>
<i>DE</i>	<i>David Elginbrod</i>
<i>DG</i>	<i>Donal Grant</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>The Disciple and Other Poems</i>
<i>EA</i>	<i>England's Antiphon</i>
<i>Fairy Tales</i>	<i>The Complete Fairy Tales</i>
<i>HG</i>	<i>The Hope of the Gospel</i>
<i>HL</i>	<i>A Hidden Life and Other Poems</i>
<i>Lilith</i>	<i>Lilith</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Malcolm</i>
<i>ML</i>	<i>The Miracles of Our Lord</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Mary Marston</i>
<i>NW</i>	<i>At the Back of the North Wind</i>
<i>Orts</i>	<i>A Dish of Orts</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>The Princess and Curdie</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>The Princess and the Goblin</i>
<i>PH</i>	<i>Phantastes</i>

<i>Poems</i>	<i>The Poetical Works of George MacDonald</i>
<i>POS</i>	<i>The Portent and Other Stories</i>
<i>Rampolli</i>	<i>Rampolli: Growths from a Long-planted Root</i>
<i>RF</i>	<i>Robert Falconer</i>
<i>RS</i>	<i>A Rough Shaking</i>
<i>SF</i>	<i>Salted with Fire</i>
<i>SG</i>	<i>Sir Gibbie</i>
<i>TWC</i>	<i>Thomas Wingfold, Curate</i>
<i>US₁</i>	<i>Unspoken Sermons: First Series</i>
<i>US₂</i>	<i>Unspoken Sermons: Second Series</i>
<i>US₃</i>	<i>Unspoken Sermons: Third Series</i>
<i>WC</i>	<i>Wilfrid Cumbermede</i>
<i>WMM</i>	<i>What's Mine's Mine</i>
<i>God's Words</i>	<i>God's Words to His Children: Sermons Spoken and Unspoken</i>

Other abbreviations used

<i>GMAW</i>	<i>Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and His Wife.</i>
<i>GMWR</i>	<i>William Raeper, George MacDonald.</i>

Note

Emphasis in quotations is in the original unless stated otherwise.
New King James Version italics are omitted.

Introduction

G. K. CHESTERTON FELT that George MacDonald represented “a turning point in the history of Christendom.”¹ This claim appears to be little more than Chestertonian hyperbole; nice words written by him for a devoted son’s biography. History, certainly, does not seem to concur: MacDonald is generally absent these days from theological conversations and from the indices of textbooks exploring the nineteenth century—even those specializing in religion. Apart from some devoted disciples or specialists, he is all but forgotten. There is a strong case that *The Lord of the Rings* and Narnia might not exist without his inspiration, but apart from that, he seems to have made little impact on our world.

There are, perhaps, two fundamental reasons. First, that he is so Victorian, with a worldview and a writing style (sometimes in Scottish Doric) that, within decades of his death (perhaps even earlier), went spectacularly out of fashion. Certainly his optimism that “all will be well” was dealt a severe blow by the Great War and few modern readers have the patience to wade through what is, frankly, often tortuous, prolix, sentimental, and didactic prose. Second, he was, on principle, against any kind of systematizing of thought—“theologic chicanery,” as he called it, that left religion a desiccated husk—the discarded carcass of a spider’s catch. But he takes this analogy further: there is no spider at the center of religion, rather, a vampire.

Such views were no doubt fueled by exposure in youth to the fruits of the Westminster Confession in his native Scotland—a somewhat frigid and legalistic document giving birth, especially north of the border, to an equally frigid and legalistic version of Calvinism. In contrast, there is much humor in MacDonald’s writing, especially when he lapses into his Doric vernacular—the language of his rustic saints—to tease the

1. *GMAW* 13.

religious establishment. There is, nevertheless, a certain Scottish stubbornness—perhaps even dourness—in his demeanor, expressed mainly in a tendency to be somewhat opinionated and in the stubborn refusal to construct anything approaching a “system” (perhaps his *Unspoken Sermons* come closest). For this reason, it is very clear what he *doesn't* believe, but hard to work out what he does believe, or what he is proposing.

There is, however, a nagging doubt when reading MacDonald that Chesterton was onto something. C. S. Lewis certainly thought so, describing the aura surrounding his prose as “holiness,” and famously referring to him as his “master.” This volume explores what that might be.

George MacDonald was writing at a time of Evangelical anxiety. As the nineteenth century progressed, a maelstrom of ideas challenged accepted orthodoxy in so many areas. For Evangelicals, the received wisdom of forebears was increasingly perceived to be inadequate to account for, or defend, the faith. On the moral front, God was perceived as not being so much the solution to the problem of evil as responsible for it; on the scientific front, discoveries and theories from all quarters challenged the foundations of traditional faith. The Bible, for so long considered the interpreter of history, found itself under historical-critical scrutiny. As the critical *Westminster Review* put it in 1875 (with characteristic exaggeration), “the whole theological world is at issue on points involving the very existence of many dogmas hitherto held as being beyond dispute.”²

Social, ideological, and theological pressures resulted in a fundamental split in Evangelical lines: conservatives retreated behind the walls of received orthodoxy; others became more “liberal” in a quest to allow faith to bend with the times. But this bifurcation of Evangelicalism was, to the minds of many—including George MacDonald—unsatisfactory: neither “liberal” nor “conservative” truth-claims appeared to offer an adequate account of lived reality. The press was awash with polemical diatribes claiming to expose the hollowness of religion. Humanity, it was claimed (by those such as Herbert Spencer), had moved on. “God,” proclaimed Nietzsche, “is dead.” Many simply turned their back on Christianity.

For MacDonald, however, the problem was not that religion was hollow as such; the problem was the vampire in residence at its heart; a usurper, an imposter. Unlike Christ who shed his blood on behalf of the

2. “Religious Education of Children.”

children, the idol at the center of nineteenth-century religion was, like the harlot in Revelation, sucking their blood—drunk on the blood of the saints. The church was responsible for killing her children, a prognosis which did not, naturally, appeal to those faithfully serving at the altar. As one contemporary Presbyterian rightly observed, “His quarrel is with all the Evangelical churches at home and abroad.” Here, I go further and argue that his “quarrel” is with much of Western Christianity.

MacDonald’s response to this state of affairs is, like Jesus, to place a child “in our midst” for our consideration. As one critic lamented, childlikeness is something he “constantly harps about,” and it is true: at every page-turn we encounter a “child.” At first sight, this child appears to be the incarnation of the Romantic ideal, but appearances can be deceptive. It is, rather, a radical, sacramental icon undermining false doctrines of God and challenging the human response. It is not merely a reminder that Christ called us to be children; MacDonald argues that childlikeness, being the antithesis of all that is evil, is the fundamental attribute of the deity. *God* is the child “in our midst” and it is time the vampire was put in her place. This simple theological claim pervades MacDonald’s disparate opus and is, I suggest, the golden key that unlocks all his work, for however far MacDonald has strayed from the orthodox Evangelical fold, his work can only be understood as that of someone who not only remains a theologian, but an “evangelical” theologian at that; someone anxious, in other words, to reclaim and proclaim faith.

Again, though, appearances can be deceptive. At first sight of merely historical interest, on closer examination it is clear that the theological claims being made have wide-reaching implications. This volume explores those implications; in particular, the claim that there is something askew at the heart of Western Christianity which is so pervasive and corrupt that it can no longer lay claim to the title “Christian.” Christianity as we know it, MacDonald is saying, equates to—or at minimum has a tendency towards—vampirism. It represents a fundamental and far-reaching challenge to the foundations of faith, particularly one based of the Reformation tendency to place more value on words than the Word with the resulting tendency towards religious fundamentalism and the violence that ensues.

In many respects, this volume is a journey into George MacDonald’s mind. While this is a truism in respect to any “biography,” for a writer with Romantic, mystical, and idealist leanings such as MacDonald, it is a stronger claim: mind is the stuff of the universe. In his cosmos, God

is the great Mind thinking reality into being. He saw himself as having been flung into orbit at an “epistemic distance” from God (a term we will explore later), the radiating, thinking sun-God at the center of reality, but nevertheless intrinsically connected to that deity through the umbilical cord of *imagination* tethering mind to Mind. As for Coleridge before him, human imagination was “a repetition in the finite mind of the great I AM”; a force, a human–divine partnership, forging and fusing reality.

However, MacDonald’s philosophical idealism never remains merely theoretical. Always the champion of action above words, just as he insists that true faith is obedient faith, so he himself is obedient to his own vision—that of a divinely-inspired (“God-breathed”) imaginative mind partnering with God’s in the creative process; a mind informed by God’s book of nature, replete with numinous images pregnant with meaning. All his writings, therefore, are shot through with imaginative thought. This, you might observe, is true for any author, but this thinker is, above all else, imaginative rather than “logical,” and therefore—through his fantasy works in particular—we find ourselves invited (sometimes explicitly) to explore the mind of this innovative thinker. At his best, he shows rather than tells, drawing the reader herself to imaginatively engage with his art, an art which, he claims, *is* divinely inspired.

Our journey begins, therefore, by exploring the world into which this mind was born. Claims that MacDonald is somehow fundamentally unique are refuted as we consider his Scottish Calvinist upbringing, his historical heroes, his Victorian interlocutors, and the social and philosophical pressures that shaped him. Although in many respects a liminal figure on the edge of the Christian establishment, he was, nevertheless, deeply aware of contemporary conversations, and—as we will explore—a significant contributor to them. Although on the edge of Christian orthodoxy (particularly as understood by Evangelicals), his connection with those such as F. D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, A. J. Scott, John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, and others, place him near the center of at least one “school” of Victorian intellectuals, though these can hardly be described as establishment people. In short, he is a man of his times, but one that not only challenged, as Schleiermacher had phrased it, the “cultured despisers of religion,” but those enamored with religion who claimed allegiance.

MacDonald, though, was by no means unique in placing a child at the center of his thought. As we explore in chapter 2, the figure of the child was central to many contemporary conversations. On the one hand, the Victorians had inherited from the Romantics a view of the

child mind as a *tableau rasa* on which Nature wrote the text of life, a narrative untainted by the affectations of culture and the false mores of “adult” society. The child represented a state of innocence, of detachment from societal corruption, and of connection with divinity. Others, on the other hand, had a less benign view. The Puritans had bequeathed to the Victorians a view of the child as an accident waiting to happen. Shot through with original sin, rather than celebrating the state of childhood, it was seen as a phase in life to be left behind as quickly as possible: the child, as Calvin had insisted, did not, as a birthright, carry the *imago Dei*, rather, it was fundamentally corrupted by evil. Hell needed to be beaten out of the child. The ascendancy of evolutionary thought did little to free the child from ancestral burdens; rather, origin sin was simply replaced with notions of savage simian ancestry or, at minimum, the idea that the child was somehow burdened with the legacy of antiquity. In this period at the dawn of the new science of psychology, the child was also placed “in the midst” and became the focus of anthropological musings.

MacDonald, then, places before us an apparently Romantic child as somehow exemplary of both the nature of God and the disposition of the faithful. But, as noted, there is more in this “Romantic” child than meets the eye. In chapter 3, we consider how this child represents a challenge to such contemporary views. Rather than a state to be left behind as quickly as possible, MacDonald makes a radical suggestion: that it is adulthood that should be rejected. Underpinning this claim, following F. D. Maurice, is an emphasis on “original love,” that hell is not the deepest place in the universe from which some fundamental negative life-energy emerges to entrap the children of men; below that is an even deeper “abyss”—the love of God. The child does, in some sense, as Wordsworth had put it, come into the world trailing clouds of glory. There is something about the child that is inherently divine; it carries “original blessing.”

Representing the case for the prosecution, we consider Archdeacon (later Cardinal) Henry Manning’s severe view of “the sins that follow us” into eternity to indict us before the throne of God and how MacDonald responded theologically. (It was not only Evangelicals that were obsessed with sin.) Illustrating the case for the defense, we then meet one of MacDonald’s children, Diamond from *At the Back of the North Wind*. This narrative, like all MacDonald’s output, is fundamentally theological and reveals six central claims about the child and how, as an image-bearer, it reflects certain aspects of the divine nature. However, we are left with a sense that Diamond is not quite “all there”—that he represents a vision

of childhood that is not quite true to life, and perhaps, as the text itself suggests, that he has learning difficulties: he cannot truly relate to the real world. Diamond, however, is making a fundamental claim: that true holiness is perceived as insanity by the ungodly. Diamond *does* have learning difficulties: he is too innocent to learn the ways of “adult” human corruption. MacDonald is, rather disparagingly, suggesting that we, as readers, in our judgement of this Christ-child, are the insane ones.

The view that something is not “quite right” with Diamond raises a fundamental question which this book seeks to answer. Is something not “quite right” with MacDonald’s theology? Is the sense of inadequacy and unreality which we regularly struggle with as readers when we meet MacDonald’s fictive children simply the result of second-rate dramatization—perhaps overly-sentimental Victorian prose? (C. S. Lewis, while describing MacDonald as his “master,” nevertheless did not consider him to be in the first rank of authors, and “probably not in its second.”)³ Or is it because MacDonald’s inadequate pictures of children reflect an inadequate theology, perhaps a Romantic naivety? Or is it a deliberate authorial strategy—for example, to challenge notions of normality? What fundamental theological claims are being made?

Before, in chapter 5, constructing an overview of MacDonald’s theology as a base camp from which to explore some of his more enigmatic and opaque fantasy works, chapter 4 brings these questions into greater focus as we meet some of the children from his “realist” fiction, many of whom, like Diamond, raise questions. I cast doubt on the word “realist” because it soon becomes apparent that MacDonald’s realist characters (and settings) are far from real. On closer inspection, we realize they are imports from fairyland that sometimes misread the quotidian world of humans. His children appear to float incongruously above the grime of Victorian Britain, curiously immune to its toxicity. The grime, on closer inspection, seems more of a stage prop than the detritus of humanity; or is it that the children have magical powers? So we meet children such as Gibbie, an Aberdeen stray, finding a lost earring in a gutter and sucking it clean without contracting cholera. The temptation is to simply dismiss this as “bad fiction,” but, as critics, we must take into account that MacDonald’s fiction does not illustrate some underlying, deeper theology; his novels do not illustrate what he thinks, they *are* what he thinks—here, the view that evil has no purchase on the childlike. There are, of

3. Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 14.

course, period distractions and technical issues, but the quest is to dig for theological gems which, Chesterton remarked, are “hidden in a somewhat uneven setting.” That said, one must resist the temptation (perhaps Lewis’s error in his *Anthology*) of ignoring those fictive settings. Literary context is as important to the critic as content.

As noted, MacDonald particularly despised “theologic” systems. In his view, they quickly became idolatrous scaffolding that hid the true nature of God. He therefore stubbornly refused to explain his work: “If my dog can’t bark,” he remarked, “I’m not going to sit up and bark for him.” Constructing a systematic overview of MacDonald’s thought is, therefore, challenging. Not only is his theology dispersed in some fifty volumes of varying genres, his cognitive and epistemological prioritizing of imagination above “logic” necessarily results in often enigmatic prose. That said, he often does “sit up and bark” from within his narratives and it is possible, from both direct thoughts from sermons, letters, and such authorial interjections, as well as from imaginative, “illustrative” prose, to construct a clear picture of what he believes. This is presented in this mid-chapter where, in particular, we explore a little-read short story, *The Broken Swords*, which summarizes MacDonald’s *exitus–reditus* view of the trajectory of human life. Against the backdrop of a more nuanced understanding of the influence of those such as Jacob Boehme, a summary of his wider theology is offered under heads such as the doctrine of God, cosmology, anthropology, the problem of evil, and soteriology.

Until this point, for the most part, I purposely avoid MacDonald’s two main fantasy works *Phantastes* and *Lilith* that bookended his career. The former, published in 1858, represents his youthful manifesto; the latter, his most mysterious work written when he was around seventy, is arguably a summative retrospective of his life’s work. These works have been endlessly dissected from various perspectives (all, of course, richly rewarding and valid), but my motive in summarizing MacDonald’s theology prior to reading these more opaque works is based on the premise that *theology* is the key that unlocks their secrets, and in using this key, more detailed theological claims are revealed or clarified.

The second half of the journey into MacDonald’s mind begins (in chapter 6) by considering the Evangelical backdrop to his work in more detail and by looking more closely at his methodology. Regarding the former, we observe how “the problem of evil” was the main bone of contention between liberal and conservative Evangelicals (impacting, of course, those who claimed other faith-affiliations or none). We explore

in more detail the more extreme views of both camps. (In our criticism, it is important to remind ourselves that in the nineteenth century, Evangelicalism was having its time in the sun, and, generally, considered a positive force for renewal in British and American society.)

Regarding methodology, we consider MacDonald's placement of a fairy child above the unseemly religious skirmishes of the period; a child that offers a *via media* which involves two core proposals. The first, that fighting for the truth is a waste of time. Perhaps at this point MacDonald's Romantic pedigree comes most clearly into view as a counter-Enlightenment position challenging the hegemony of logic. Enlightenment epistemology, claims the fairy child, is fundamentally flawed; truth, although it may be logically evaluated, is not *in se* "logical." Rather, truth is perceived imaginatively through an aesthetic encounter with it and its source. Furthermore, truth is not simply a matter of perception but of construction as the human mind engages with God's truth which, for the Christian, is a person, not a theory. As Augustine had put it: "Christ is the art of the omnipotent God."⁴

With this in mind, the fairy child stands aloof from the futile religious battles, and using three strategies of defamiliarization forces those at its feet to reconsider their violent, destructive, and ultimately futile fundamentalist conflicts. First, it makes the familiar strange: by forcing a fresh look at the idols that have taken residence in the religious landscape we are forced to ask the question: What right have they to be there? Second, it makes strange the familiar. This has less to do with exposing falsehood as forcing a reconsideration of the truth: has familiarity bred contempt when it comes to the content of religion? The child—in a child-like manner—describes the world through its innocent eyes; we see our world truly, perhaps for the first time, or at least with fresh vision. And lastly, the fairy child, being from fairyland, either cannot, or refuses to, name what it sees. After Carlyle, and Coleridge before him, MacDonald was suspicious of words that had become so interred in the grave of convention that not only had their true meaning been lost, they had become gravestones hiding the true nature of reality. By refusing to name what it sees, the fairy child forces *us* to give reality a "name," and in the process, evaluate its true, that is, aesthetic, identity.

These three strategies of defamiliarization are evident in *Lilith*, a book which names the vampire at the heart of what we would now call

4. Dods, *Works of Augustine*, 7:177 (*De Trinitate* 6.10).

fundamentalist religion. As we consider her pedigree and nineteenth-century incarnation, it becomes clear why MacDonald has chosen this vampiric *femme fatale* as his antagonist. At numerous levels she embodies all that (in his view) was wrong with contemporary religion and society: she feeds on the blood of children, claims worship, but is, in reality, the queen of Hell; she personifies the male fear that Victorian females were not as submissive as supposed; she has sold her soul to the devil, the “great Shadow,” complicit in seeking out those whom *she* may devour; she is the princess of a materialistic and exploitative city that despises its poor; she is the ultimate anti-child, and therefore the antichrist. Shockingly, however, she is worshipped by those who claim faith. Since two core themes in *Lilith* are childhood and evil, a close reading of this text is necessary (chapter 7). It reveals that these are not two themes, but one: the perfection of childhood is the opposite pole of being from the depravity of vampirism. True humanity inheres in renouncing vampirism—the blood of a counterfeit Eucharist—and accepting the true Eucharist, the bread and wine of Christ.

Our reading of *Lilith* is very much a journey into MacDonald’s mind. Numerous allusions to mental states, as well as the genre of fictional autobiography, allow no other reading. We are drawn into a complex web of intrigue as MacDonald bares his soul. We discover that while the narrative does feature archetypal children, such as the Little Ones, the main hero-child is MacDonald himself in the guise of Mr. Vane: a far from ideal child, full of fears, doubt, pride, sexual fantasy, and foolishness—in short, a far more “real” child than many of his other fictional characters; if not a perfect child, certainly a child in the making—a child on the *reditus* leg of its journey being inexorably drawn back to the source of its being.

In chapter 8 we pull together the theological threads from *Lilith* in a quest to weave together as coherent as possible a picture of MacDonald’s “theology of childhood.” His methodology—the implementation of defamiliarization strategies—is a lesson in what might be called imaginative fiduciary hermeneutics, that is, “decoding” the world imaginatively as a child through the eyes of faith. The theological proposals that emerge clarify MacDonald’s view of reality as a Keatsean “system of soul-making,” but what is striking is his view of life *and* the afterlife as purgatorial processes preparing the soul for the final post-mortem embrace of God. Perhaps more contentious is his expression of the universalist “larger hope” which, by implication, will result in the salvation of Lilith, the vampiric antichrist.

Rather than simply a Romantic symbol of interiority or innocence, it is clear, then, that MacDonald's child is making rather shocking theological claims—at least to those raised in the shadow of Calvin. Not only is he suggesting that a vampire has taken up residence at the heart of Christianity, he is implying that this vampire, along with its human hosts, will be “saved.” Furthermore, in his theodical quest to exonerate God from charges of evil, he has, it could be argued, made God the author of evil. Since his starting point is “God is light, and in him there is no darkness,” the solution he offers therefore has to be, at some level, to redefine evil as good.

These theological questions and concerns are the focus of our final chapter where we critically examine the implications of MacDonald's “theology of the child.” It will be argued that his theodicy is flawed but that this does not detract from some profound theological insights which, in particular, shed light on the nature of Christian fundamentalism, an idolatry which, according to Pope Francis, is found in all religions. We discover that his views on hell and damnation, for example, chime with those such as Gregory of Nyssa and are not far removed from certain strands of Western thought.

It is easy, as some have done, to dismiss George MacDonald as a nineteenth-century oddity (some, as we shall note, even conclude that he is “not a Christian”); a “hopelessly Romantic” optimist wearing Wordsworthian rose-tinted glasses, ignoring—as one contemporary put it—“the awful controversy caused by sin.” But, I argue here, this would be a mistake. Rather, his is the story of a mind walking the familiar theological tightrope across the abyss where, on the one hand, we have a good God, and on the other, apparently dysteleological, destructive evil. How can the two coexist? This, the *mysterium iniquitatis*, has exercised theological minds since Job. I suggest that MacDonald's conclusions, far from being of merely historical interest, have much to contribute to today's theological conversations, and, in particular, are a stark warning against blindly sliding into the destructive hell of fundamentalism.

1

The Context of George MacDonald's Work

LIKE MANY VICTORIANS, GEORGE MacDonald's (1824–1905) journey was one of emancipation from “childhood” ways. His was a journey away from Calvinism in favor of a more benign vision of Christianity at the center of which is the image of “the child,” an axiomatic image symbolizing both the nature of God and the disposition of the faithful. One Presbyterian critic, George McCrie, lamented that “the childlike” was something that he “constantly harps about” resulting in “religious opinions, which are most unsound and dangerous.”¹ The central question we explore here is: What are the theological implications of MacDonald's understanding and use of this motif?

In answering this question, it becomes apparent that “the child” (MacDonald's shorthand for all of a childlike disposition, henceforth not in quotes), far from being a submissive, acquiescent juvenile content to submit to the whims of elders—notably worldly religious elders—is, rather, a force that challenges the latter's rule and wisdom. The child represents a theology that *is* “unsound and dangerous” to those such as McCrie, for in MacDonald's mind he and those like him represented a church that had turned its back on childhood, that is, had forsaken worship of the Christ child and instead allowed a vampire to take up residence at its heart—one that drank the blood of the saints rather than offering Eucharistic life. This is the essential message of one of MacDonald's last and most enigmatic fantasy novels, *Lilith*. Before reading this narrative, however, we lay thoughts of vampires to one side as we meet various

1. McCrie, *Religion of Our Literature*, 295.

incarnations of MacDonald's child and, through these encounters, build up a picture of his theology and the world in which it was forged.

Theology and Literature

Before we begin this task, however, some comments are necessary regarding the validity of reading MacDonald's work—especially his novels—as theology. What is the relationship between theology and literature?

George McCrie's decisive rejection of MacDonald's theology highlights a deeper issue—a profound suspicion, among conservative Evangelicals in particular, of narrative writing as a medium to express or explore theology. McCrie articulates the prevailing view: being imaginative, rather than concerned with the “true facts” of Evangelical religion, it results in “our poets and novelists . . . teaching an erroneous theology with all the earnestness of missionaries”; those with aesthetic gifts have sold their souls to the devil and become “patrons of heresy.” Such should stick to their role of providing entertainment, not “theologizing.” “Their peculiar office is to delight and entertain the world rather than to preach or to prophecy.”² The implication is that the imprecision of literature is unsuitable to express the “facts” of theology; that literature is merely the frothy surface hiding a substrate of true (or false)—that is, logically verifiable (or discountable)—bedrock beliefs.

This highlights a fundamental polarity that will surface regularly in this volume: the antagonism between those such as MacDonald who view imagination as God's *primary* gift to humans in the service of cognition and epistemology, and those such as McCrie who is of the opinion that:

The same considerations that made [pre-Reformation] literature an admirable herald of the Bible and of the Reformation, render it a dangerous pioneer of doctrine that is likely to overthrow them both.³

Put differently: imagination is a useful, if capricious, force that may provoke change but offers a poor theological foundation. In response to this charge, I briefly outline some considerations that will help us to approach MacDonald's literary opus as theologians with less cynicism.

2. McCrie, *Religion of Our Literature*, 287, 289.

3. McCrie, *Religion of Our Literature*, ix.

To engage in theology is, in a fundamental sense, to become a worshipper. God cannot be the object of human investigation for this would require an impossible perspective “outside” of being; rather, investigation into the nature of God can only be the result of personal interaction with God, should God so permit—a permission, it would appear, granted only to those who are humble; to those who recognize their dependency on, and subordination to, God—the “babes” of Matthew 11:25 to whom, uniquely, are revealed the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. In MacDonald’s language, true theology is understood, practiced, and expressed only by the child, one who embodies this submissive, worshipful attitude. Three further considerations are evident: first, that since theology’s “object” is not only infinite but personal, it can never be fully known; second, that such knowledge is essentially “storied” in that the truth regarding a person cannot be established by factual statements, however verifiable or logically correct; third, that truth is imprecise since subjectively perceived.

One might counter this by suggesting that theology is essentially a second-order, objective reflection on such personal stories, notably the gospel narratives’ articulation of Christ, but, in light of the “personality” or person-based nature of truth, literature may be viewed as not only a source of personal or imaginative fuel for subsequent reflection, but as itself a means of theological reflection and articulation. One thinks, for example, of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dostoevsky’s novels,⁴ or the works of Dante. Speaking of Dante’s *Commedia*, for example (a poem that has significantly shaped European theology), Vittorio Montemaggi proposes that truth is always the fruit of “human encounter” (truth, in other words, is always in some sense embodied) and that—in recognition of this—literature such as Dante’s draws the reader into a personal encounter with the author, others, and ultimately God. In Montemaggi’s words: “Dante’s text requires us to read it not only objectively but also by consciously situating our interpretation of it in the context of our subjective, first-person experience.”⁵ MacDonald is similarly driven by a conviction that theology involves more than the objective, academic analysis of presenting facts; rather, subjective engagement is required with the source of those facts—God. To this end, he writes imaginatively, demanding an interpretation based on personal, conscious engagement with the text—and

4. See especially Williams, *Dostoevsky*.

5. Montemaggi, *Reading Dante’s Commedia as Theology*, 36.

therefore with himself as writer. This is most evident in *Lilith*, in which we are invited to “read” MacDonald’s mind.

For Montemaggi, Dante’s poem is theology.⁶ This volume, likewise, approaches MacDonald’s work—notably his novels—as theology; as the exploration and articulation of the human encounter with God. Such encounters may be fictional, but, as Montemaggi notes regarding the prevalence of human characters in Dante’s fiction:

Human particularity and encounter destabilize easy distinctions between truth and fiction. A nonfictional story that fails to awaken us to the infinite value of human particularity can from this perspective be considered less true than a fictional one that succeeds.⁷

This tension between “real” theology and that expressed in literature is a fundamental concern of MacDonald. Inasmuch as the former is the fruit of “adult” endeavor—that is, of formal academic training in the discursive arts—it is suspect; only the more subjective and intuitive approach of the child, MacDonald asserts, is capable of engaging with, and expressing, the “personality” of truth. This is a claim we explore here. While certainly not a systematic or dogmatic theologian, it will be argued that MacDonald, whether in essays or novels, is making strong theological claims; not least, that he himself is such a child and therefore a medium of true theology. In this light, we will consider how his novels are not merely illustrative but *constitutive* of what he thinks; that even the most imaginative novels (fantasy works such as *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, for example) must be approached as theological works. We will also consider how MacDonald’s preference for imaginative story-telling represents a conscious methodological choice reflecting the view that theology has less to do with imparting factual information as awakening imaginative perception with a view to encouraging that personal encounter with the divine that is its essence. His pastoral goal in writing is the animation of childhood in us, for the Father can only embrace children. In what follows, it is assumed that since MacDonald is writing primarily as a theologian intent on leading his flock towards Christ,⁸ that the best way to read it is as theology, which, as Montemaggi suggests (and I have taken the liberty of substituting MacDonald for Dante) is:

6. Montemaggi, *Reading Dante’s Commedia as Theology*, 21.

7. Montemaggi, *Reading Dante’s Commedia as Theology*, 26.

8. See page 130.

to be open to the claims it makes on our active participation in the journey of which it speaks. We might or might not agree with the propositional import of the particular way in which [MacDonald] conceptually and imaginatively articulates his theology in [for example, *Phantastes*]. But if we are to read it *as* theology, and not simply engage in a detached analysis of its theological ideas, we need to allow ourselves, existentially, to interact with the text not simply as an object under examination, but as a living partner in a journey seeking to explore the deepest dimensions of our being, of the cosmos' being, and of the point of encounter between the two.⁹

The Reluctant Congregationalist

Having read natural philosophy (sciences) at the University of Aberdeen, George MacDonald trained for the Congregational ministry at Highbury Theological College, London. Often portrayed as having been ousted from his first pastorate (in Arundel, Sussex) by a diaconate of duplicitous shopkeepers and tradesmen unsympathetic to his liberal "German" theology, the truth may be more prosaic: the loss of living was, it seems, to some extent self-engineered and little lamented. His theology, in any case, was never likely to appeal to a provincial Congregational congregation.¹⁰

By mid-century he was working primarily as a writer. Friends and acquaintances included Charles Dodgson (who tested *Alice* on the MacDonald children), Charles Kingsley, John Ruskin, Lady Byron, and Alexander John Scott, later principal of Owen's College, Manchester.¹¹ He became a critic of the world he had left behind but unlike disenchanted

9. Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology*, 33.

10. Greville MacDonald emphasizes "constructive dismissal" (*GMAW* 177–87). However, contemporaneous letters suggest that his father's heart was elsewhere. From Highbury he writes, "I am not very happy myself [due to] wrong and painful thoughts," and soon after accepting the pastorate confesses that his "greatest desire is . . . to go out itinerating"; "I mean to take another mode of helping men" (Sadler, *Expression of Character*, 26, 50, 54).

11. On *Alice*, see *GMAW* 342. Kingsley's *Water Babies* was a response to *Phantastes*. See Manlove, "MacDonald and Kingsley," 143. MacDonald arranged clandestine meetings between Ruskin and Rose La Touche in his house, against the wishes of her parents, and according to Greville MacDonald, Ruskin, along with A. J. Scott, was "one of the closest friends of my father" (*GMAW* 330, 191–92). Lady Byron praised MacDonald's first poem *Within and Without*, subsequently financing family wintering in Algiers. See *GMAW* 265.

Evangelicals of the era such as George Eliot, Francis W. Newman (brother of John Henry), or Edmund Gosse whose trajectory was away from faith,¹² MacDonald remained “evangelical.” He published and lectured in a quest to promote Christianity in an era increasingly uncomfortable with traditional religion. His work might be summarized as a rejection of childishness (petulant, stubborn worship of a misconceived God) in favor of childhood (genuine submission to, and relationship with, the Father).

While C. S. Lewis was of the opinion that MacDonald always had an enduring respect for his childhood religion,¹³ Chesterton dryly remarks that he said things “that were not in the least like the Calvinists” and suggests his contribution to theology might be significant: “As Protestants speak of the morning stars of the Reformation, we may be allowed to note such names here and there as morning stars of the Reunion.” “I fancy,” says Chesterton, “that he stands for a rather important turning-point in the history of Christendom.”¹⁴ His relative obscurity, however, and absence from current theological discourse is perhaps testimony to the opposite. However, his “obscure” ideas have found their way into popular culture, especially through *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁵ C. S. Lewis also credits him for leading him to faith, describing him as his “master”¹⁶ (perhaps more so as a mentor in fantasy writing than theology). I shall argue that, in some measure, Chesterton was right: that MacDonald was “a morning star of the Reunion” by providing a *via media* between conservative and liberal Evangelicalism, and by helping those of faith to reconnect with pre-Reformation roots.

Kerry Dearborn suggests that MacDonald’s proviso for accepting ideas from eclectic sources was that they were “consistent with the

12. Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment*.

13. Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 12. Lewis notes MacDonald’s repudiation of Calvinist doctrines yet suggests that he sees “elements of real and perhaps irreplaceable worth in the thing from which he is revolting.”

14. *GMAW* 13.

15. There is a ring-wielding villain in *David Elginbrod*, the ring being inscribed in an undecipherable foreign tongue. In the short story, *The Castle*, there is a lost ring which “had for ages disappeared from the earth, but which had controlled the spirits, and the possession of which made a man simply what a man should be, the king of the world” (*POS* 175–76).

16. Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 20. See also Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 179–81, 225, 226.

Trinitarian faith.”¹⁷ However, universal salvation (including that of Judas and Satan) and a purgatorial hell, to give but two examples, are ideas which might indicate otherwise (if for “Trinitarian” we read “Evangelical orthodoxy”). His theology is a syncretistic amalgam of ideas, happily exploring, for example, evolution and Eastern mysticism. Such leanings lead one scholar to remark that he has “a view of human experience *quite different* from that of much of historic Christianity,” another, that his faith amounts to a “private religion,” and according to Chesterton, “He evolved out of his own mystical meditations a complete alternative theology leading to a completely contrary mood.” During his lifetime, those such as McCrie accused him of starting “some new scheme of Christianity.”¹⁸ These comments cannot, in my view, be justified. It seems, rather, that MacDonald’s work reflects (as one contemporary put it) “the noble protest of men like Maurice and Kingsley and [F. W.] Robertson, with whom the recovery of the central truth of Christianity, that God is love, came as almost a new gospel.”¹⁹ His views are—as we explore in this chapter—firmly embedded in contemporary thinking, and, as he himself observes: “No man could sing as he has sung, had not others sung before him.”²⁰ However, it is apparent that he has more in common with Emanuel Swedenborg (who imaginatively journeys into heaven and hell),²¹ Jacob Boehme (whose mystical theology is produced despite the censure of church authorities, and whose humble station in life as a shoemaker probably appealed to MacDonald’s Romantic leanings), or Gregory of Nyssa (with his focus on *epektasis*—the soul’s progressive journey towards God) than any of the progenitors of the Westminster Confession.²²

Much of MacDonald’s writing is a thought-experiment which tests the boundaries of the Evangelical orthodoxy of his day. It explores two

17. Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 177.

18. Hein, *Harmony Within*, 53 (emphasis mine); Reis, *George MacDonald’s Fiction*, 32; GMAW 12; McCrie, *Religion of Our Literature*, 287.

19. Moore, “Influence of Calvinism,” 334.

20. *EA* 3.

21. Note 48, page 22.

22. The similarity between Boehme’s cosmology and MacDonald’s is discussed in chapter 5. Resonances with Gregory are discussed in the final chapter, page 261. William Raeper singles out Swedenborg and Boehme as influences (*GMWR* 240) and one suspects MacDonald had Boehme in mind when he cast a cobbler as the hero of *Salted With Fire*.