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

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1. *GMAW* 13.

religious establishment. There is, nevertheless, a certain Scottish stub-
bornness—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* be-
lieve, 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 exag-
geration), "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 funda-
mental 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 ascendency 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 Mac-Donald'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 childlike 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

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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 that 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.