

McGrath vs Russell on Calvin vs Copernicus: a case of the pot calling the kettle black?

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NOTE:

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Dr. Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, is a prolific author and editor. In recent years he has been making a name for himself as an increasingly shrill critic of atheism, and of Richard Dawkins in particular. McGrath's central argument is that atheism (which he defines narrowly and prejudicially) is in decline in the West, a phenomenon that he attributes to its alleged unfashionable modernist-rationalist preoccupations, its association with totalitarianism, and its failure on the imaginative front. McGrath, who has a PhD in biochemistry, also criticises those (he puts Dawkins in this camp) who think that science and religion are incompatible, or that science demands atheism. His book *The Twilight of atheism* was first published by Doubleday in 2004 ¹, closely followed by *Dawkins' God: genes, memes, and the meaning of life* (Blackwell, 2005). In response to Dawkins' *The God delusion* (Bantam, 2006), McGrath published a short (96 page) pamphlet entitled *The Dawkins delusion?* (SPCK, 2007).

Infuriated by McGrath's distortions of atheism and its history, and by the generally dreadful quality of the scholarship on display in *Twilight of atheism*, I have slowly been compiling a detailed critique of that book. In this article, I present an analysis of one short section of *Twilight* to give an early airing to a discovery that I believe to be an original contribution to the literature on Calvin and Copernicus.

One of McGrath's targets in *Twilight* is the idea that science and religion are (or have been) at war, or that they are inevitably in conflict. To illustrate his argument that there is "no universal paradigm for the relation of science and religion, either theoretically or

historically” (*Twilight*, p.84), McGrath concentrates on refuting two legends: the Wilberforce-Huxley “debate”, and the myth of Calvin’s condemnation of Copernicus. He claims that both stories “have been known to be completely false since about 1970, and are now viewed by historians as the urban myths of journalists too lazy to check their sources” (*Twilight*, p.81). McGrath is on safe ground here. A legend has grown up around the encounter between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley at Oxford in 1860, giving retrospective importance to a minor skirmish and exaggerating Huxley’s role. It is also true that Calvin never criticised Copernicus by name. It is this latter story, and McGrath’s treatment of it (found on pp.80-81 of *Twilight*), that concerns me here. I will first set out what McGrath has to say, and then draw out his many mistakes.

McGrath begins by referring to Bertrand Russell’s *History of western philosophy* (first published 1945):

Russell illustrated the “bigoted” nature of Christian theology with a racy account of the early fortunes of the Copernican theory of the solar system, and singled out John Calvin’s critique of the theory for special criticism. Did not the Bible say that the sun went round the earth? Well, that, according to Calvin, was the end of the matter. “Calvin,” wrote Russell, “demolished Copernicus with the text: ‘The world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved’ (Psa. xciii.1), and exclaimed: ‘Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?’” John Calvin emerges from this episode as an arrogant fool, typical of the kind of person who gets in the way of scientific progress. With the coming of atheism, such obscurantist ravings against advances in our knowledge could be silenced. (*Twilight*, p.80)

However, McGrath continues:

Russell did not source his citation from Calvin, forcing others to work out where he got it from. The noted historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn attempted to track it down when studying early responses to Copernicus’s theory. Yet neither Kuhn nor anyone else could find anything like the quotation attributed to Calvin in any of his published writings. It did, however, feature prominently in the pages of Andrew Dickson White’s *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). (*Twilight*, p.81)

In his earlier book *Religion and science* (first published 1935), Russell had expressed his indebtedness to White², so it seemed that White was probably Russell's source in *History of western philosophy* as well. Unfortunately for the literary detectives, White didn't cite his sources properly either. Historian Edward Rosen (1960; see also Ratner's challenge to Rosen's conclusion that Calvin had never heard of Copernicus, and Rosen's reply (both 1961)) is credited with discovering that the quotation could be tracked back from Russell, via White, to "a work published in 1886 by F.W. Farrer (sic)" (*Twilight*, p.81)³:

Once more, no source was provided for the citation. The trail fizzled out at that point. Farrer was a cleric at Westminster Abbey in London who perhaps lacked the will and resources to check his facts. The remark attributed to Calvin thus had to be dismissed as pure invention. (*Twilight*, p.81)

A writer who criticises others for failing to check their facts and their sources needs to take particular care over their own material. McGrath comments, sarcastically, that the "intellectual authority of the great atheist writer Bertrand Russell was such that few bothered to check out his assertions." (*Twilight*, p.81). McGrath's intellectual authority is somewhat less intimidating, and I can report that there is no shortage of mistakes in the two pages of *Twilight* under examination. Despite criticising Russell for failing to cite his sources, nothing by any of the key figures (Russell, Kuhn, White or Farrar) in this story can be found in McGrath's bibliography, except for the article by Rosen.

McGrath's reference to "F.W. Farrer" is a misspelling of the name of one of the important players in the spreading of the Calvin/Copernicus story (yet Farrar's name is correctly spelled in Edward Rosen's article, which McGrath cites). The cleric in question is Frederic William Farrar (1831-1903). He became dean of Canterbury Cathedral in 1895, but had previously been canon and archdeacon of Westminster Abbey. The apparent source of White's Calvin 'quote' was Farrar's *History of interpretation* (1886, p.xvii).

McGrath claims that Russell "illustrated the 'bigoted' nature of Christian theology with a racy account of the early fortunes of the Copernican theory of the solar system, and singled out John Calvin's critique of the theory for special criticism" (*Twilight* p.80). In fact, the 33 words quoted by McGrath are the sum total of what Russell has to say about

Calvin on Copernicus. McGrath omits “similarly” from Russell’s original, which reads: “Calvin similarly, demolished Copernicus...” (Russell 1961, p.515), indicating that, far from singling Calvin out, the passage is just one of a series of examples. Nor does Russell say that “Christian theology” is “bigoted”, as McGrath implies. What he actually says is this:

Protestant clergy were at least as bigoted as Catholic ecclesiastics; nevertheless there soon came to be much more liberty of speculation in Protestant than in Catholic countries, because in Protestant countries the clergy had less power. (Russell 1961, p.515)

Furthermore, although Copernicus’ work involved “the dethronement of the earth from its geometrical pre-eminence”, which, “made it difficult to give to man the cosmic importance assigned to him in the Christian theology... such consequences of his theory would not have been accepted by Copernicus, whose orthodoxy was sincere, and who protested against the view that his theory contradicted the Bible” (Russell 1961, p.513). Russell’s point was that “Copernicus was right to call his theory a hypothesis; his opponents were wrong in thinking new hypotheses undesirable” (Russell 1961, p.514) , and not, as McGrath has it, that Calvin was “an arrogant religious fool, typical of the kind of person who gets in the way of scientific progress.” Nor does Russell say anything remotely resembling McGrath’s overheated rhetoric: “With the coming of atheism, such obscurantist ravings against advances in our knowledge could be silenced.” (*Twilight*, p.80). Russell’s position was therefore more nuanced and less dogmatic than McGrath would have his readers believe.

McGrath mentions the Calvin/Copernicus myth in some of his other books (see for example McGrath 2001, pp.258-259). He seems to have particular difficulty with Farrar’s name. In *A Life of John Calvin* (1990, p.xiv), and *Reformation thought: an introduction* (1999, p. 273) he spells Farrar’s surname correctly, but misspells his first name as “Frederick”. Interestingly, however, one of McGrath’s books shares *Twilight*’s misspelling of Farrar’s surname: *The foundations of dialogue in science and religion* (1998). McGrath’s account of the story in *Twilight* very closely resembles that in *Foundations of dialogue* (compare *Twilight*, p.80-81 with McGrath 1998, pp.16-18).

In *Twilight*, McGrath credits Thomas S. Kuhn with having made some effort to track down the alleged comment of Calvin. In *Foundations of dialogue*, McGrath was more explicit:

This particular urban myth was not challenged until Thomas S. Kuhn attempted to track it down as part of his exploration of the background to the Copernican Revolution. Kuhn did not find the quotation in Calvin but in Andrew Dickson White's History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom..." (McGrath 1998, p.17).

McGrath doesn't supply a source for this claim in either *Twilight* or *Foundations of dialogue*, and it seems to be false. First, no other writer on the subject refers to any such investigation or "challenge" by Kuhn. Secondly, Kuhn doesn't mention conducting any such research or making any such challenge in any of the publications by him that I have consulted (Kuhn 1957; Kuhn 1977; Kuhn 1996; Kuhn 2000). Thirdly, far from exposing the error, Kuhn in fact *perpetuates* it by reprinting the alleged quotation from Calvin in his book on Copernicus (Kuhn 1957, p.192). His cited source? Andrew D. White's *A history of the warfare of science with theology in Christendom!* There is no indication that Kuhn was even aware that the quotation was of dubious provenance. Although I am at one with McGrath in his criticism of "scholarly laziness" and "the urban myths of... amateur historians" (McGrath 1998, p.18), I fear he has blotted his copybook by introducing this *new* urban myth into the literature in place of the old Calvin/Copernicus one. McGrath presumably does not have Farrar's excuse of lacking "the will and resources to check his facts." (*Twilight*, p.81)

How can we explain McGrath's solecisms? If the relevant passages in *Twilight* have, as I suspect, been copied largely unaltered from *Foundations of dialogue*, it makes sense to examine that work for clues. The bibliography of *Foundations of dialogue* contains three entries for Kuhn (including two different editions of *The structure of scientific revolutions*), but, oddly, not his *The Copernican revolution* (1957). On the other hand it does, like *Twilight*, include Edward Rosen's article, in which Kuhn is identified as one of those who uncritically borrowed the Calvin quote from A.D. White (Rosen 1960, p.163). *Foundations of dialogue* also cites Helge S. Kragh's *An introduction to the historiography of science* (1987). In that work Kragh correctly says:

Following White, Calvin's alleged anti-Copernicanism has been a permanent part of history of science and history of ideas for generations; the quotation from Calvin used by White has been used as evidence many times, by Bertrand Russell, Will Durant, J.G. Crowther and Thomas Kuhn, among others. (Kragh 1987, p.135)

But these are dead-ends, demonstrating only McGrath's inattention to his sources. McGrath's gloriously ironic failure to properly cite any of his assertions on this issue leaves us with fewer clues to work with than Edward Rosen had in 1960. Unable to solve the puzzle, I can only conclude by noting that perhaps McGrath's Kuhn story must be "dismissed as pure invention", to borrow McGrath's remark about Farrar's error (*Twilight*, p.81).

McGrath characterises the "warfare model" of the relationship between religion and science as symptomatic of atheism (although the main sources, Farrar and White, were not atheists). But although it is fair to say that it has not been unusual for atheists to adopt such a view, many have not. Atheism is consistent with a range of opinions on the relationship between science and religion. Among recent rationalist authors, Ludovic Kennedy (1999, p.154) and Dick Taverne (2006, p.17) have included the misquotation of Calvin in their books. But a survey of atheist and rationalist literature in my own collection reveals that most writers have not promoted the misquotation. On the other hand, some religious people (creationists for example) hold that there is indeed a conflict between religion (or their particular interpretation of the Bible) and science (or particular scientific findings), and so much the worse for science. But, historically, stories like that of Calvin and Copernicus have also formed part of arguments designed to promote liberal theological views. See, for example, W.R. Inge (Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral) in Needham (1926, p. 359). Farrar's *History of interpretation* falls into this category too (after citing Calvin, and other examples, Farrar comments, "such ignorant condemnations show us that the revision of the principles and methods of exegesis is rendered absolutely necessary by the ever-widening knowledge of modern days." (Farrar 1886, p.xviii). Others to have employed the misquotation include Bryan Appleyard (1993, p.32) and the Russian Orthodox evolutionist Theodosius Dobzhansky (1969, p.95. Dobzhansky is one of McGrath's favourite examples for the compatibility of science and religion!).

One nagging question remains: did *anyone* ever say those infamous words, “who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?” In 1960, Rosen identified Farrar as the earliest known source, and there the matter has rested for the last forty-seven years, with the former Canon of Westminster Abbey standing accused of making up quotations. However, my own research has uncovered an earlier citation – as far as I can discover this is the first progress on the issue in over half a century. And while I cannot rescue Farrar from the charge of being careless with facts, I can establish for the first time that the quotation was not invented by him, just wrongly attributed to Calvin.

The source I have unearthed is *The Protestant Theological and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia*, edited by J.H.A. Bomberger (1860):

This orthodox theology had, since Gerhard, taught an equal inspiration of the O. and N. Testaments, so that the H. Spirit is author in an equal measure of every part of the Scriptures, of the book of Esthor, as of the gosp. of St. John. If others had explained differences of style and language by an accommodation of the H. Spirit to human calami, C. utterly discards this refuge: the differences of subjects alone is sufficient to explain the form: or, the divine oracle shows itself in all its contents, astronomical and geographical. “Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the H. Spirit?” (see Witt. Theolog. p.254. – Gasz, Gesch. der prot. Dogm., 1854, 1. Th. p.165). No trace, therefore, of historical or personal exposition. (Bomberger 1860, vol. 1, p.525).

The “C.” referred to here is not Calvin but the Lutheran theologian Abraham Calovius (1612-1696), described by Farrar as “a man of stupendous diligence and wide learning, but the very type of a bitter dogmatist.” (Farrar 1886, p.364). Bomberger’s encyclopedia is an incomplete (only two volumes were produced) English adaptation of the *Real Encyklopädie für protestantische theologie und kirche* (22 vols. 1853-1868), edited by Johann Jakob Herzog (1805-1882). The article on Calovius (the article is entitled “Calov”, which is a common variant abbreviation of his name) was written by Dr. Friedrich Tholuck (1799-1877), and the indications are that it is a straightforward translation of the original article Tholuck wrote for Herzog. I must leave it to others with

better knowledge of German and access to the original sources to follow the references further.

Bomberger/Herzog is not the only source I have discovered which attributes the quotation to Calovius. The Scottish theologian Marcus Dods (1834-1909) also credits a version of the quote to Calovius in his *The Bible: its origin and nature* (1905): “‘Who’, said Calovius, ‘would dare to set the authority of Copernicus above the authority of God?’” (Dods 1905, p.66). Dods’ source is not cited, but in any case Dods was writing too late to be a source for Farrar or White.

If either Bomberger or Herzog’s original work was Farrar’s ultimate source, then a plausible explanation for his mistake presents itself: he simply confused ‘Calov’ with Calvin (in Bomberger, the article on Calvin appears in close proximity to the article on Calovius). The dates of publication also fit well, both Bomberger and Herzog appearing a good many years before Farrar's book. So, is there any evidence that Farrar consulted either Bomberger or Herzog? Yes: he cites Bomberger’s translation of Herzog in his *The life of Christ* (1874), which predates *History of interpretation* by over a decade. And he cites Herzog, apparently the original this time, in *History of interpretation* itself (Farrar 1886, p.480).

In *Foundations of dialogue*, McGrath says:

I am unpersuaded that White drew his citation directly from Farrer's work. Rosen's research suggests to me that both Farrer and White are more likely to have drawn on a third source, common to both, yet at present unknown to us. (McGrath 1998, p.17).

No supporting reasons are provided ⁴, but now that a third source has finally been identified we can begin to evaluate McGrath's hypothesis. White cites Herzog at various points in *A history of the warfare of science with theology*, and also mentions Calovius in relation to his opposition to the Copernican system. Although White and Farrar both used Bomberger/Herzog, it seems unlikely that they both would independently conflate the entries on Calovius and Calvin. The evidence therefore still suggests that White drew directly on Farrar for the misquotation.

Alister McGrath enjoys an enviable reputation as a scholarly and accurate writer. Several of his books bear the imprimatur-esque praise of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams: “Alister McGrath invariably combines enormous scholarship with an accessible and engaging style”. His anti-atheist work is very much concerned with correcting the errors (real or alleged) of writers like Richard Dawkins. Yet few people have subjected McGrath to the same amount of scrutiny. In this article I have put just two pages of *Twilight of atheism* under the magnifying glass, and revealed more flawed scholarship than I have space to discuss in detail.

Notes.

1. The references to *Twilight* in this paper are to the paperback edition published by Rider, see McGrath (2005).
2. For Andrew D. White’s version of the legend, see White (1896, p.127). Contrary to the impression McGrath creates (“It did, however, feature prominently...”), White devotes just two sentences to the story. Also note that McGrath mixes up his publication dates. On p.81 he dates *History of the warfare of science with theology* to 1896, which is correct. But on p.85 he dates the same title to 1876. On p.86 he correctly notes that in 1876 White published an early version of the material under the title *The warfare of science. History of the warfare of science with theology* essentially expands on the 1876 publication, and it seems McGrath got the two books confused.
3. Although Rosen gets the credit, Reijer Hooykaas identified the implausibility of the alleged quotation in terms of Calvin’s theology in the 1950s, but he isn’t mentioned in *Twilight*. Citing White’s attribution, Hooykaas commented, “many historians pass judgment on Calvin without having a serious knowledge of his works” (Hooykaas 1956, p.136 note 100). In the same work Hooykaas also mentions Farrar’s favourable opinion of Calvin in his *History of interpretation* (Hooykaas 1956, p.138) but nowhere does he mention Farrar’s use of the controversial quotation. A century before Hooykaas, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* observed that Calvin was pre-Copernican rather than anti-Copernican: “He knew not of the opinions of Aristarchus of old; nor was even aware that Copernicus had so recently enunciated the truth upon the heavenly system.” (Anon 1854, p.31)
4. There must be some doubt whether McGrath has even read Farrar’s *History of interpretation*, since it is absent from the bibliographies of both *Twilight* and *Foundations of dialogue*.

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