

How to be prolific: the cut-and-paste theology of Alister McGrath

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Best known to the general public for his anti-atheist trilogy, *The Twilight of Atheism* (2004); *Dawkins' God: genes, memes, and the meaning of life* (2005); and *The Dawkins Delusion: atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine* (2007), the prominent Christian academic Alister “book a month” McGrath is an theology-generating *machine*, cranking out new texts at an extraordinary pace. McGrath’s own website lists about 40 books written or edited by him; the British Library catalogue contains in the region of 70 titles. Tackling the ever-rising Christian-apologetic flood waters is a daunting task for even the most intrepid critic, and that’s without taking into account his numerous talks, lectures and debates, television and radio appearances, and newspaper, magazine and academic journal articles. On top of all that, he has recently taken up the Chair of Theology, education and ministry at King’s College, London, having previously been Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. Does the man never sleep?

But I've discovered something that helps to explain how McGrath maintains his intimidating rate of publication, and makes him seem just a little less impressive.

For Alister McGrath is a recycler of his own words. He habitually regurgitates sentences, repeats paragraphs, and reproduces pages of largely unaltered text. In other words, he is guilty of the often neglected academic sin of self-plagiarism.

Set against the obvious crime of theft from the work of others, self-plagiarism is often seen as a minor problem. But while I agree that there are worse failings than reusing your own words, doing so without disclosing that you are doing so is nevertheless a clearly unethical scholarly practice. Allowing derivative work to be presented as original material (or, worse, actively disguising old writing as new text) is a form of deception. It may not be intentionally deceptive: it may occur innocently, as when a writer repackages something originally written for an academic audience for a wider market. Nonetheless, the effect is to create a misleading impression of the author's creativity, exaggerating how much original work they have actually done. In any event, to avoid the appearance of pretending to be more prolific than is really the case, portions of text which have seen prior publication should be duly acknowledged and attributed. McGrath fails to do this. Whether he is aware of the issue or not, McGrath's burgeoning bibliography makes him look like a man of ceaseless creativity, an image somewhat undermined by the knowledge that he repeats himself a lot.

I was alerted to McGrath's practice of shovelling material from old books into newer ones while subjecting some of his publications to detailed and – it has turned out – interminable scrutiny. Reading *Twilight of Atheism* alongside *Dawkins God*, I soon became aware of

certain similarities, in particular between the sections of each book which dealt with the supposed warfare of science and religion. Reading pp.84-87 of *Twilight* alongside pp.140-143 of *Dawkins' God*, I found that although there were some minor differences between the two texts (for example, in *Dawkins' God*, David Livingstone is described as an "Irish geographer and intellectual historian"; but in *Twilight* he is an "Irish scientist and historian"), and *Twilight* was more verbose, the text was basically the same.

Wider research revealed that the passage in question is one of McGrath's favourites: he's recycled it more than once. In fact, the earliest incarnation I have tracked down can be found in McGrath's 1998 book, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science & Religion* (I cannot claim to know whether this was its first appearance in McGrath's oeuvre). It was also used in *The Re-enchantment of Nature: science, religion and the human sense of wonder* (2002).

Here are the opening few lines of the section in question, taken from each of those books:

As Freeman Dyson points out in his superb recent essay "The Scientist as Rebel"... a common element of most visions of science is that of "rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture." Science is thus a subversive activity, almost by definition – a point famously stated by the biologist J.B.S Haldane in February 1923. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for nineteenth century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture... (*Foundations of Dialogue*, 1998, p.21)

As Freeman Dyson points out in his essay 'The Scientist as Rebel', science has often been seen as a liberator – a Prometheus-like figure, bringing freedom from outmoded ways of thought and institutions. Science is a 'rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture'. It is a subversive activity, a point famously stated in a lecture delivered to the Society of Heretics at Cambridge by the biologist J.B.S. Haldane in February 1923. History offers us many confirmations of this insight. For the Arab mathematician and

astronomer Omar Khayyám, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for English physicists of the eighteenth century is offered a platform for criticising the pervasive influence of the Church of England; for nineteenth-century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture... (*The Re-enchantment of Nature*, 2002, p.69)

There has always been a sense in which the natural sciences are opposed to authoritarianism of any kind. As Freeman Dyson points out in his important essay "The Scientist as Rebel," a common element of most visions of science is that of "rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture." Science is thus a subversive activity, almost by definition – a point famously stated in a lecture delivered to the Society of Heretics at Cambridge by the biologist J.B.S. Haldane in February 1923. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyám, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for nineteenth century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture... (*Twilight of Atheism*, 2004, p.84)

The history of science makes it clear here that the natural sciences have often found themselves pitted against authoritarianism of any kind. As Freeman Dyson points out in his important essay "The Scientist as Rebel," science often finds itself in "rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture." Science is thus a subversive activity, almost by definition. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for nineteenth-century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture. (*Dawkins God*, 2005, p.140)

But this is by no means an isolated example. Investigating further, I uncovered many other instances of McGrath's labour-saving technique. *Twilight of Atheism* emerges from this as a patchwork-quilt of a book. Based on a speech, it was apparently padded out to book length by incorporating chunks of text from other sources.

I discovered that a passage summarising Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* on p.74 of *Twilight of Atheism* had been previously aired (with only slight differences) in McGrath's *Christian Theology: an introduction* (2001, p.541) and *A Brief History of Heaven* (2003, p.149). *Twilight of Atheism* also shares material about Freud with the much earlier *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (1993, compare pp.68-69, 70 of *Twilight* with pp.97, 99 of

Intellectuals). The account of Marx's approach to religion in *Twilight of Atheism* (especially pp.63-65) closely resembles similar discussions in *Christian Theology: an introduction* (2001), *Introduction to Christianity* (1997 – and the second edition, published as *Christianity: an introduction* in 2006), *Historical Theology: an introduction to the history of Christian thought* (1998), and *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (1993). McGrath's discussion of 'death of God theology' in *Twilight* (pp.158-161) seems to owe a great deal to his *The Future of Christianity* (2002), with echoes in the later *Dawkins God*.

This is just the tip of the iceberg; I found many other examples which it would be tedious to rehearse here. Anyone with the patience to systematically compare McGrath's books with each other will undoubtedly discover many other examples of recycling.

How much does any of this matter, if self-plagiarism is often seen as one of the less serious infringements of academic integrity? Well, it's another dent in McGrath's scholarly reputation. As one of the most prominent and eminent of the critics of modern atheism, with a string of qualifications to his name, McGrath simply should not be making basic mistakes like this. As I pointed out in my article "McGrath vs Russell on Calvin vs Copernicus: a case of the pot calling the kettle black?" (*Freethinker*, June 2007) McGrath often attacks atheists like Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins for their perceived scholarly failings (indeed, it's a key part of his apologetic strategy), and that's every reason for us to search out and expose McGrath's own weaknesses.