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The "dangerous idea" lying at the heart of Protestantism is that the interpretation of the Bible is each individual's right and responsibility. The spread of this principle has resulted in five hundred years of remarkable innovation and adaptability, but it has also created cultural incoherence and social instability. Without any overarching authority to rein in "wayward" thought, opposing sides on controversial issues can only appeal to the Bible—yet the Bible is open to many diverse interpretations. *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* is the first book that attempts to define this core element of Protestantism and the religious and cultural dynamic that this dangerous idea unleashed, culminating in the remarkable new developments of the twentieth century.

At a time when Protestants will soon cease to be the predominant faith tradition in the United States, McGrath's landmark reassessment of the movement and its future is well-timed. Replete with helpful modern-day examples that explain the past, McGrath brings to life the Protestant movements and personalities that shaped history and the central Christian idea that continues to dramatically influence world events today.

Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution: A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First Details

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Dan says

This book deserves 3.5 stars - a 4 is probably too high, but 3 is certainly too low. I would definitely recommend it to anyone seeking to better understand Protestantism. McGrath does an excellent job balancing history, sociology, and theology throughout the book. I came away with a better understanding of denominational differences (both doctrinal and historical) and similarities.

David says

Alister McGrath is one of my favorite theologians and this book is a fantastic feast for any who dive into reading it. The first part is a history of the Protestant Reformation up to about 1900 which reads more or less like a straightforward history book. In the second part he analyzes a number of issues in Protestantism from worship and church government to more surprising topics such as sports and the arts. Finally, in the third section he picks up the historical story from part one, focusing in on Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism began in the early 1900s and by the early 2000s was the most vibrant and largest branch of Protestantism.

I think this would be a great book to read prior to tackling *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor. That book blew my mind and was incredibly challenging. McGrath's book is not easy, but it is much easier than Taylor's. The two books cover similar periods and complement each other well. McGrath's is more straight up history with some theology. His final emphasis, in part three, is the rise of Pentecostalism. Taylor's emphasis is to examine how unbelief, nearly unheard of in 1500, became a viable option. Though with different emphases, I think reading McGrath's first could be helpful.

The "dangerous idea" McGrath speaks of is the idea that the Bible can be interpreted by the common person. So anyone can read and interpret the Bible, not just the church leaders. Along with this was the Protestant idea of "priesthood of all believers" which, again, emphasizes that all Christians are equal and those in authority are not automatically deferred to. This idea led to the splintering of denominations in Protestantism, ultimately leading to the Pentecostal churches.

Overall, a fantastic read. If you are a fan of history or theology, check it out.

Andrea Levin says

I read this book as a former religion major with gaps in her studies, an English and humanities teacher at a public school, and as a member of an interfaith family. My aunt, who self-identifies as a Bible-believing Christian, and I, a Reconstructionist Jew, read it together in a two-person book club, and we both enjoyed it immensely despite our very different personal relationships to the topic. McGrath's writing is engaging. He presents and interprets historical events and theological issues with clarity. After finishing this book, I feel as though I have a solid understanding of the historical development of Protestantism in its various forms and

the current trends in its global expansion. I've already used what I have learned from Christianity's Dangerous Idea to enrich the background information that I present on the texts and concepts I teach in my public school classes. I would recommend this book to people who are interested in religion, history, philosophy, politics, and anthropology.

Nathan says

No one can fault McGrath's research - deep, broad and painstaking - or his erudite yet effective prose. However, he gives short shrift to the wider implications of Reformed Christianity, developing a too-narrow focus. Much of his research is wasted as he jumps to a hasty conclusion.

Jon Cooper says

This was a very engaging read. McGrath's thesis is well-woven throughout the entire text: Protestantism is a movement that can be defined by its (varying) commitment to the Bible and its ability, willingness, and insistence to change itself as well as change how it relates to society - and to do so in light of biblical reading.

I have very little to say about this book that is negative, if for no other reason than its strengths far outweigh its weaknesses, in my opinion. Indeed, if anything, it deserves a second edition where it reconsiders the development of the Church of England (and the entire Anglican Communion, especially the relatively newly formed Anglican Church in North America), particularly in regards to its Fresh Expressions movement; and where it gives at least some attention to the emergent/emergence/emerging church movement in the United States and Western Europe. Such a second edition ought also to reconsider the political nature of American evangelicalism, in light of not only the religious right, but of the religious left.

All that being said, the book as it is currently written is well worth the read. The first section on history is a much more accessible and concise history of the Protestant Reformation for those put-off by MacCulloch's more erudite and logorrheic (albeit superior) "The Reformation". The second section, on Protestant doctrine, practice, and ecclesiology, was a frankly heroic attempt at summarizing and consolidating the moving target that is Protestantism. While the first section was, for me, the most enjoyable to read, it was the third section that was the most interesting. In this section, McGrath considers 20th century changes in Protestantism and their implications for the 21st century.

This section does an incredible job of bringing home to the reader - particularly the American or even the Western reader - that Christianity is not an American phenomenon. (MacCulloch does much the same in his insanely large magnum opus, "Christianity: The First 3000 Years".) Here, McGrath concentrates on Pentecostalism, where he reconsiders its historical development, its ethos, and its explosive growth - not so much or only in North America, but in South and Central America, Africa, and Asia. It's easy in the United States, at least, where both Pentecostals and their charismatic counterparts in mainstream denominations (including both Protestantism and Catholicism) is a minority, that it and they are the majority in Africa, for example, and fast approaching the majority in Asia and South/Central America.

The other thing this section does is make a good argument about the similarities between Protestants - especially congregational Protestants - and Muslims. Only the eyes of a disinterested historian such as

McGrath could probably see such connections, and not everyone will buy his arguments, but they are worth considering. The main thrust of his position is that Islam and Protestantism have many similarities - in terms of approaches to epistemology and ecclesiology - and even behave similarly. And now that both are becoming more and more politically involved - for good and ill - we have much to learn about what to expect from one and the other. To be honest, I've butchered his thesis on this topic. Suffice it to say that this small section in his well written book is compelling and worth everyone's attention.

All in all, an amazing read. There are moments when I wish HarperCollins did a better job with editing, but c'est la guerre. Along with Prothero's "Religious Literacy", inter alia, a must read if we're to make any headway in understanding that religion and religions remain relevant to the social and political spheres of the global society.

Auntie says

I decided that I am not going to treat this book as all others. It is a fantastic history of movements in the church in relation to the interpretation of the Bible. It's going on my reference shelf for future consulting.

Dale says

Strong, but not for those who are not well-versed in history

Let me just note that Alister McGrath has taken on a large topic (Protestantism) in *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* and done about as well as one can in organizing the information and presenting it in a cogent and readable fashion.

McGrath assumes that you already know a lot about history in general and about the last 500 years or so in particular. That is to be expected. If he had to explain every last detail this book it would have to have been 3,000 pages rather than the already hefty 478 pages of text plus 50+ pages of endnotes...

Read more at: <http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/2011/...>

Archadams says

Very good read. This is a history of the church from the reformation until now. Alister McGrath explores how delivering the gospel to common people freed Christianity to be what it was meant to be.

Brian Ferry says

Some wonder if the fragmentation of Christianity from the time of the reformation stems from one theme. In this surprisingly fair-minded evaluation of the reformation events, Alister McGrath does just that when he identifies it to be the ideology of personal interpretation of Scripture. McGrath is an Anglican priest and the chair of theology at the University of London.

Steven says

A good synopsis of Protestantism's 500-year history. The only deficiency is the author focuses too much on Anglo-Protestant movements after the 17th century. Greatest strength of the book is the analysis of Protestantism greatest idea and greatest threat: how does one claim the authority of correct Biblical interpretation when final authority is vested in the text to be interpreted.

W. Don says

I enjoyed this book. I found it well written, reasoned, unbiased (at least, with no obvious agendas that I could discern) and very informative. Not written as a scholarly work, it is a pleasant and thought provoking read for the layperson interested in church history. It is a well referenced survey of the topic, suitable as a foundation from which to launch more serious research if one is so inclined.

His basic premise is that Protestantism, in contrast to Catholicism, does not have a single, defined authority for hermeneutics and Biblical interpretation, as is provided by the Pope. It is an interesting perspective, and he does an excellent job of exploring the development of my faith over the last 4 centuries as a result of this significant difference with the church from which it sprang.

He provides a thorough history of the early years of the Reformation, and expands the narrative beyond Martin Luther's contribution to include also those of Zwingli and Calvin, the Anabaptists, and Anglicanism.

Copyrighted in 2007, it is current and relevant to the recent headlines of our world.

Highly recommended.

Rosy says

Early on I came up with an analogy for this book that held all the way through, particularly through the first and third parts (of three): It is like using Google Earth, when you zoom back up and out away from your pinpoint until you see just the breadth of context that interests you. This book did that for me. It backed up and out to provide a big picture that was interesting and informative for me -- not too much detail (sometimes not enough), and not quite wide enough to lose its grip on the subject -- although McGrath does come perilously close to doing that in his effort to be comprehensive.

The first part is a lightweight but complete history of the Reformation and resulting Protestant movements, the second a snapshot series of various categories and aspects of Protestantism that inform the current big picture, and the third an investigation of a few of those categories and aspects that McGrath feels will wield the most influence on the relatively near future. The second part was the one in which the broad brush most disappointed my interest and investment in reading the book. Too often I felt that McGrath failed to sufficiently explain a movement or a development -- his descriptions are good but he does not always account for these changes satisfactorily. As an appropriately broad example, he cites extremely little scripture for a history of a phenomenon that by his own definition is centered around people reading the

Bible.

This is a nonacademic history written by an academic, an exercise I suspect is often successful and certainly succeeds here. At under 500 pages, this book is manageable, worthwhile in its contribution to my understanding of the Church in culture, and often an enjoyable, satisfying read. Significantly, it is quite evenhanded, revealing very little bias, which enhances the educational value greatly. The author indulges in too many self-conscious signposts for my taste: This is what we just did, this is where we are going next, this is what we did again -- reminded me of one of the more irritating aspects of technical writing, which would otherwise be an incongruous comparison.

My opinion? Not splendid, but definitely worth the read.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

I bought this book a couple of years ago and have already read McGrath's *The Passionate Intellect* and his biography of C.S. Lewis. McGrath is a historian, biochemist and Christian theologian from Belfast, Northern Ireland. A one time atheist and professor at Oxford University, he is now a Christian and holds the Chair in theology, ministry, and education at the University of London.

I like reading his books because he is committed to challenging Christians to use their minds and intellects to explore and affirm their faith. While I don't agree with him in all areas, such as his stance on evolution and certain Biblical truths he seems vague on, his work is well-researched and reflects his own commitment to making reasonable and intelligent arguments concerning the Christian faith.

Christianity's Dangerous Idea is a historical account of the origins of Protestantism, its spread throughout Europe, America and eventually the world, its development and adaptation to change and its current cultural face as it exists today.

He starts with the Reformation with Luther and Calvin and meticulously traces their beliefs, comparing and contrasting it with the prevalent Catholic theology and its turbulent spread across Europe, including heretical break offs. He also explains the separate but contemporary development of the Anglican church under Henry VIII in England and its own struggles between the state church and Puritanism, Puritanism being the branch of Reformed theology that traveled from Geneva under Calvin to Scotland via John Knox.

For the entire review cut and paste the following link to my blog post:

<http://sharonhenning.blogspot.com/201...>

Thomas E Carr says

A well-crafted extensively-researched review of Protestant history presented in narrative form. McGrath follows the movement both chronologically and geographically providing a coherent big-picture view. The "dangerous idea" is that of Biblical interpretation becoming a task appropriate for any lay-person. He argues, and I think rightly so, that the resulting denominational diaspora throughout Europe, then the New World, and now Asia and the "Global South" is a direct result of this idea.

McGrath largely refrains from passing judgment or offering personal opinion on any individual movement or message of protestantism, which is sometimes welcome (when it comes to less essential and more debate-oriented topics like the nature of the creation story) but at other times frustrating (Baptism's roll in salvation, cessation of certain spiritual gifts). I understand why he does this though, as it allows the facts of the history to reach a large audience without being distracted by debates around "hot topics."

I would highly recommend this to Christians who want to gain a better understanding of church history from the reformation forward. Very readable. Moves quickly. Doesn't feel like a textbook.

Brent McCulley says

McGrath's treatment on the history of Protestantism is convoluted. At one point he seems to follow the logical progression of the history of Protestantism from the Reformation henceforth as a dynamic outflow of complex features in a balanced way; at another point he seem to look back in hindsight with anachronistic sociological systems, and project such constructs - such as social Darwinism, Marxism, and Weberian philosophical ideologies - onto the evolution of Protestantism. This is a seriously misguided way to view history. It is ultimately anachronistic, and it only serves as an improper way to interpret history using a flawed scope. Hence, my review of McGrath is mixed.

The first two-hundred pages, of the five-hundred page book, are brilliant. McGrath weighs both sides of the historical scheme, as interpreted throughout history, and takes a balanced fair perspective, offering fresh insight into the history of the Protestant Reformation and it's consequences. The last few hundred pages are extremely moot, albeit in fairness to McGrath, he did set out to write a 'new history' of the reformation, and with such a project, it's always going to be under high scrutiny. Even still, McGrath begins to become redundant and repetitious, stating the same exact points over and over again within the same forty pages or so. His numerous references to Max Weber's sociological and philosophical scope or ideas is not in the least bit troubling in comparison to his seemingly libertarian obligation to infringe Darwinian ideals into the history of splintering Pentecostal factions. I understand that McGrath is a biologist -but seriously...The innumerable references become overwhelmingly superfluous and irritating for the reader given the fact that they are naively misguided.

In short, McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* is well written in one sense, and frantically and spuriously written in other. The book itself is divided into three sections. My suggestion would be to pick this book up and read the entire first section (the first 200 pages or so), and throw out the rest.

Brent McCulley (11/3/13)
