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Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through science, faith and doubt – a memoir, by Alister McGrath

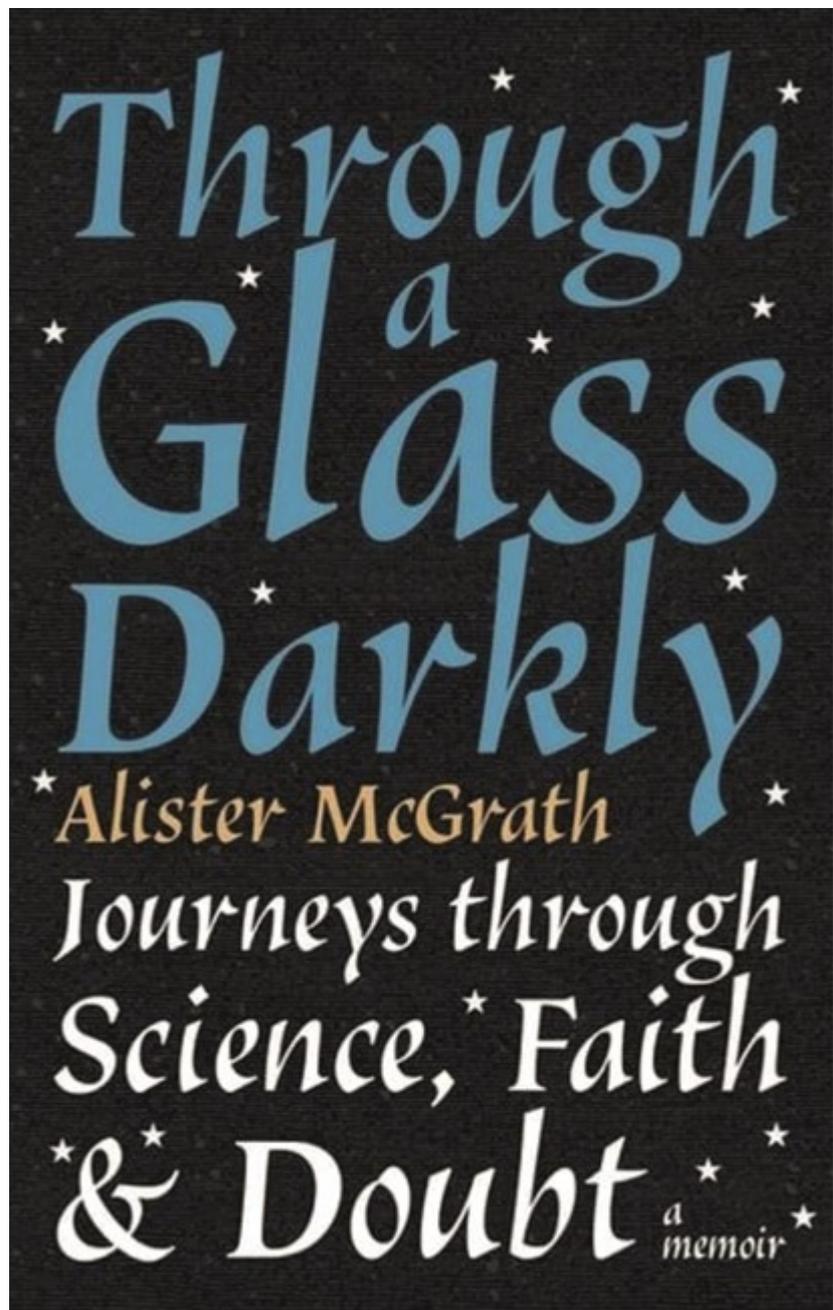
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John Saxbee enjoys an intellectual memoir with a debt to C. S. Lewis

FROM teenage atheist to bestselling advocate for Christianity: Alister McGrath provides a very accessible and compelling account of “journeys through science, faith and doubt” ([Features, 28 August](#)).

This is essentially an intellectual autobiography describing how “my ideas and my history interact and overlap.” Those who want to know where he holidays, what hobbies he might pursue, or which football team he supports will be disappointed.

The book is in three parts. The first majors on the embedding of atheism in his mind as a teenager growing up in sectarian Belfast. As a boarder at the Methodist College, he quickly became aware that his



“only real talent lay in the life of the mind”. The natural world fascinated him, and he was inevitably drawn towards scientific subjects — and towards belief that science secured certainty whereas religion entailed flights of fancy and wishful thinking.

Top grades secured him a place at Oxford to read chemistry. Here, he became aware of the extent to which scientific explanations were provisional and often in need of correction. Reading Karl Popper convinced him that uncertainty was more authentic when engaging with reality — and that maybe religious faith was not beyond the pale after all. From Einstein he learned that “science needed to be supplemented if it was to deal with the deepest human questions of meaning and value.”

He needed to revisit his views about Christianity. Conversations with scientists who were also Christians alerted him to the doctrine of the incarnation, which became, for him, a “game-changer”.

Part Two finds him “shipwrecked on an island of faith”. Oxford’s Professor of Theoretical Chemistry and a committed Christian, Charles Coulson, reassures him that his new faith does not require him to abandon his love of science.

At this point, he discovered the writings of C. S. Lewis, who had himself journeyed from atheism to Christianity. Lewis became his intellectual travelling companion and, crucially, gave him the framework within which his new-found faith and his love of science could interact. This found expression in his simultaneously pursuing groundbreaking doctoral research in chemistry, and reading for a degree in theology.

After much heart-searching, and conflicting advice, McGrath was ordained to a curacy in Nottingham. He has exercised a pastoral and liturgical ministry ever since.

But “the life of the mind” was always going to determine his future. Joining the staff of the theological college Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, in 1983, and becoming its Principal in 1995, together with holding a personal chair in theology at the University, combined to secure his credibility as a leading theologian, complementing his scientific credentials.

His *Christian Theology: An introduction* (1993) became an instant bestseller, filling a gap that he had himself identified during the early stages of his own theological explorations.

Frustrated by the recommendations of the Hind report on ministerial formation, he left Wycliffe Hall to become a Senior Research Fellow in Oxford. Natural theology, focusing on the interface between theology and the natural sciences, dominated his lecturing and publications, fuelled by the provocations of the New Atheists, and especially

Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. McGrath's *The Dawkins Delusion?* became another bestseller.

Feeling that his talents were not best suited to senior leadership positions in the Church of England, notwithstanding being urged to allow his name to go forward, he was appointed to a chair at King's College, London, and then back in Oxford as Professor of Science and Religion. This post combined the "twin peaks" of his brilliant academic career.

Part Three reprises much of what has gone before, but now through a more reflective lens. Here he explores in greater detail how his ideas and his history have interacted: how his Irish upbringing influenced his negative attitude to religion; how early interest in Marxism excited his interest in finding a Big Picture to make sense of the world around him; how scientific studies inspired a life-long passion for study of the natural world; how encountering in Oxford scientists professing religious faith, and discovering C. S. Lewis, helped him to live with uncertainty in relation to both science and religion — and glimpsing truth through a glass darkly; and how teaching and preaching brought delight in communicating his hard-won faith to packed lecture halls and tiny Cotswold churches.

Here his chapters on the irrationality of faith, Mary Midgley's maps of reality, and ways out of Plato's cave are little gems in themselves.

McGrath ends by prioritising wisdom rather than knowledge. It is the means whereby we can live meaningfully and authentically in the midst of uncertainty and doubt.

This faith odyssey will illuminate such ways of wisdom for teenage atheists, and committed people of faith, in equal measure.

The Rt Revd Dr John Saxbee is a former Bishop of Lincoln.

Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through science, faith and doubt — a memoir
Alister McGrath

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