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CHRISTOLOGY

“Fringe View: The world of Jesus mythicism” by James F. McGrath (New Testament Language and Literature, Butler University) — considers the “surprising number of people hold the view that the existence of Jesus is a myth.” And to this we respond: “Oh, come on.” Right? Nevertheless, “we know from debates over evolution and other subjects, views that no expert finds persuasive can still have an impact on public discourse, education and much else.”

McGrath finds that “a few major trends are discernible. ...

“One popular strand of mythicist thinking, associated with D. M. Murdock (and her pseudonym Acharya S), maintains that Jesus was invented on the basis of earlier deities, astrological entities and myths — in particular the ancient myths about dying and rising fertility gods. ...

“Another strain of mythicism views Jesus as a fictional creation based on Jewish scriptures. Noting the common Christian belief that Jesus was predicted in the Jewish scriptures, they reverse the relation and say that Jesus was invented on the basis of those earlier texts. ...

“Some mythicists, following the lead of Earl Doherty, think Jesus was initially understood as a purely celestial figure believed to have done battle with heavenly powers — and to have been crucified and buried somewhere other than on Earth. ...

“One of the poignant ironies about mythicism is its popularity among those who style themselves as freethinkers. ... Yet mythicists adopt many of the same weak modes of argumentation that they otherwise criticize. ...

“It is possible to think critically about a great many subjects and yet to shield one area from scrutiny. People tend to be selectively critical.

“That is why the role played by the guild of scientists, historians and other experts is important. Critiquing unpersuasive ideas and arguments is the stuff that scholarly publication is made of. Scholarship thrives on critique: researchers try to come up with something new, while their peers subject it to critical scrutiny. In this context, an over-

whelming consensus does not attain the level of certainty, but it is highly likely to be correct. ...

“A significant number of Jesus mythicists appear to be former conservative Christians who have become atheists. ...

“Did the historical Jesus exist? Historical study can only say ‘probably,’ but in this instance it says it with a high degree of confidence. Mythicists are never able to come up with a scenario in which it is probable that one or more Jews invented a figure that they claimed to be the anointed one, the descendant of David who would restore the kingdom of his ancestor; that, furthermore, they invented the claim that this figure had been crucified by enemy powers; and that they proceeded to try to persuade their fellow Jews to believe their message about this Messianic figure, so at odds with Jewish expectations.

“Is that version impossible? No — very few things are. But the fact that something isn’t impossible doesn’t make it likely.” *Christian Century*, Nov 7 ‘11, pp12, 13. <www.bit.ly/xAAEOI>

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

“Europe’s Illegal Faith” by Herti Dixon — reports that Johan Candelin, former executive director of the Religious Liberties Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance <www.bit.ly/yWJDyK>, “points to a definitive shift in Europe over the last five years in which Christians commonly have been painted as unreliable and even stupid by mainstream media. ...

“[W]hile some European countries — Austria, Hungary and Germany, as well as most of the formerly communist countries in eastern Europe — have so-called recognized religions that enjoy certain privileges, the evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches are mostly excluded or listed in lesser categories and often treated as ‘cults.’ In France and Greece it is forbidden to evangelize children, the elderly and the sick. Belgium currently is debating a similar bill.

“In Germany and Sweden the going is getting tougher: Parents are being sent to jail and having their children moved to fos-

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (continued)

ter homes for raising them according to biblical principles.”

For example, “Eduard Elscheidt ... from the small town of Salzhotten in northwest Germany ‘has been behind bars twice for keeping his elementary school children at home durning sex-education classes at school. ...

“The courts no longer base their decisions solely on acts committed but on how things are perceived. Swedish gays who *feel* defamed by biblical views on homosexuality can sue, according to the 2002 national bill outlawing hate speech against homosexuals. ...

“In 2010 ... a Catholic media group in Spain was fined heavily for broadcasting TV ads promoting the traditional family. These ads were perceived as ‘hateful’ against homosexuals.” *Charisma*, Dec ‘11, pp10, 12.²

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism, by Alvin Plantinga¹ — this is Plantinga’s “highly anticipated” take on the debate over the compatibility of science and religion. Oxford University Press <www.bit.ly/s3jzVe> promotes it as “a long-awaited major statement by a pre-eminent analytic philosopher ... on one of our biggest debates — the compatibility of science and religion. The last twenty years has seen a cottage industry of books on this divide, but with little consensus emerging. Plantinga, as a top philosopher but also a proponent of the rationality of religious belief, has a unique contribution to make. His theme in this short book is that the conflict between science and theistic religion is actually superficial, and that at a deeper level they are in concord.

“Plantinga examines where this conflict is supposed to exist — evolution, evolutionary psychology, analysis of scripture, scientific study of religion — as well as claims by Dan Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Philip Kitcher that evolution and theistic belief cannot co-exist. Plantinga makes a case that their arguments are not only inconclusive but that the supposed conflicts themselves are superficial, due to the methodological naturalism used by science. On the other hand, science can actually offer support to theistic doctrines, and Plantinga uses the notion of biological and cosmological ‘fine-tuning’ in support of this idea. Plantinga argues that we might think about arguments in science and religion in a new way — as different forms of discourse that try to persuade people to look at questions from

a perspective such that they can see that something is true. In this way, there is a deep and massive consonance between theism and the scientific enterprise.”

Writing for the *New York Times* (Dec 13 ‘11, ppC1,2), Jennifer Schuessler mentions that “Mr. Plantinga retired from full-time teaching last year.” Consequently, it seems that he has enjoyed the opportunity to express himself more freely. Asking Plantinga for his views on zoologist Richard Dawkins and the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, Schuessler records these replies: “Mr. Dawkins? ‘Dancing on the lunatic fringe,’ Mr. Plantinga declares. Mr. Dennett? A reverse fundamentalist who proceeds by ‘inane ridicule and burlesque’ rather than by careful philosophical argument.”

In a nutshell, Plantinga explains that “theists have been on the defensive, merely rebutting the charge that their beliefs are irrational. It’s time for believers in the old-fashioned creator God of the Bible to go on the offensive.”

Plantinga notes: “It seems to me that many naturalists, people who are super-atheists, try to co-opt science and say it supports naturalism,’ he said. ‘I think it’s a complete mistake and ought to be pointed out’ ...

“Theism, with its vision of an orderly universe superintended by a God who created rational-minded creatures in his own image, ‘is vastly more hospitable to science than naturalism,’ with its random process of natural selection, he writes. ‘Indeed, it is theism, not naturalism, that deserves to be called “the scientific worldview.”’ ...

“You really can’t sensibly claim theistic belief is irrational without showing it isn’t true,’ Mr. Plantinga said. And that, he argues, is simply beyond what science can do.

“Mr. Plantinga says he accepts the scientific theory of evolution, as all Christians should. Mr. Dennett and his fellow atheists, he argues, are the ones who are misreading Darwin. Their belief that evolution rules out the existence of God — including a God who purposely created human beings through a process of guided evolution — is not a scientific claim, he writes, but ‘a metaphysical or theological addition.’ ...

“Religion, like science, makes claims about the truth, Mr. Plantinga insists, and theists need to stick up for the reasonableness of those claims, especially if they are philosophers.”

Schuessler includes significant reactions from Dennett and a brief retort from Michael Ruse, philosopher of science at Florida State University. <www.tinyurl.com/78a6nk2>

SOURCES: Monographs

1 - *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, by Alvin Plantinga (Oxford Univ Prs, 2011, hardcover, 376 pages) <www.tinyurl.com/7amt3s9>

SOURCES: Periodicals

2 - *Charisma*, <www.charismamag.com>

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