

## EXCERPT

IVP Academic

### **George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles** *Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment*

Available November 20, 2018 | \$16, 150 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5373-1

*In this installment of the Hansen Lectureship series, historian and theologian Timothy Larsen considers the legacy of George MacDonald, the Victorian Scottish author and minister who is best known for his pioneering fantasy literature, which influenced authors such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, and Madeleine L'Engle.*

## The Legend of the Holy Doubter

George MacDonald would champion a better way for Christians to respond to doubt. This began with the insight that questioning things is not wrong:

"Ma'am," said Curdie, "may I ask questions?"

"Why not, Curdie?"

"Because I have been told, ma'am, that nobody must ask the king questions."

"The king never made that law," she answered, with some displeasure. "You may ask me as many as you please."

Questioning can be the first step toward a settled assurance: "The first sign of the coming capacity and the coming joy, is the anxiety and the question." This leads on to the more general point that it is not inherently bad to have doubts. One reason why this is true is because doubt is not necessarily a choice:

"Nursie," said the princess, "why won't you believe me?"

"Because I can't believe you," said the nurse, getting angry again.

"Ah! then, you can't help it," said Irene, "and I will not be vexed with you any more. I will give you a kiss and go to sleep."

Even questions that have an accusatory edge to them might be positive and productive in the end: MacDonald observes that complaints directed against God demonstrate a passionate engagement that can lead on to a healthy faith and are thus a far better portent of the future than spiritual indifference.

MacDonald is particularly concerned to counteract the pernicious influence of Christians who react to confessions of doubt with condemnation, punishment, and accusations. In *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, Charley is a youth who lacks religious certitude, but he knows better than to try to discuss his concerns with his clergyman father: "He would speak to me as if I were the very scum of the universe for daring to have a doubt." Repeatedly, when MacDonald's characters express their uncertainties to the vocal champions of religion, instead of being met with pastoral support and encouragement, they are reviled and rejected as heretics and atheists. Great-Great Grandmother Irene, by contrast, knows better than to turn on doubters with displeasure: "I'm not vexed with you, my child—nor with Lottie either . . . when you had all but made up your mind that I was a dream, and no real great-great-grandmother.—You must not suppose I am blaming you for that. I dare-say you could not help it." Likewise the saintly Rachel in *Thomas Wingfold*, though herself strong in faith, knows better than "to condemn doubt as wicked."

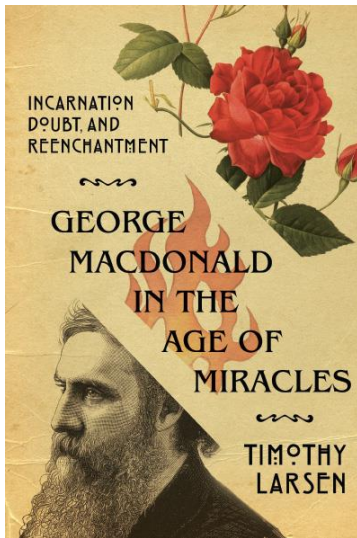


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In fact, far from being a sign of wickedness, MacDonald insisted that doubting was often an indication of a good and noble character. One of the most famous and emblematic articulations of Victorian doubt was—and still is for scholars today—Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, especially this stanza:

Perplex in faith, but pure in deeds,  
At last he beat his music out.  
There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

"Honest doubt" became a catch phrase, and it implied more than just doubt candidly avowed but rather that the doubt was actually a manifestation of the person's fundamental honesty and therefore marked them as worthy of our respect. We are told of our no-longer-carefree curate that he was finding the right path "now that Thomas had begun to doubt like an honest being." It was a departure from the narrator's usual habit to refer to Wingfold by his first name, and this was presumably done to underline the decision to name him after the apostle known as Doubting Thomas, the patron saint of all those who are not yet convinced. *In Memoriam* is a book-length poem, yet MacDonald was so pleased with it that in the very year it was published he patiently copied the whole thing out by hand as a birthday present for his wife, Louisa. Moreover, while many scholars treat it as a prime example of loss-of-faith literature, MacDonald would refer, in the Christian language of the community of faith, to "our beloved brother Tennyson in his book *In Memoriam*." MacDonald even came to know Tennyson personally. The MacDonalds' London home offered a good view of the Thames and, delightfully, one year the Poet Laureate even gatecrashed their garden party so he too could watch the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race.

MacDonald's eyes of faith were always seeing religion in people whom others saw only as skeptics. He named Tennyson as the premier figure in that "noble band of reverent doubters" who were not to be conflated with scoffers. Others in this worthy fraternity included Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough, whose poem "The Questioning Spirit" MacDonald singled out for praise. In the eyes of most people, an obvious example of a religious scoffer was Mark Twain. MacDonald, however, struck up a hearty friendship with the satirist from Missouri. They visited each other in America and England and, in a moment of likeminded enthusiasm, imagined that they might collaborate on a novel. Twain's children avidly read and re-read *At the Back of the North Wind* until their copy disintegrated. Belying his reputation as an irreverent unbeliever, MacDonald apparently found Mark Twain to be a "deeply religious" man. Even P. B. Shelley, who scandalized the respectable by becoming one of the first figures in British elite society openly to avow atheism, MacDonald discerned to be someone whose professed unbelief was a protest against unchristian things that were said and done in the name of religion. He even went so far as to claim that Shelley's writings bore signs of a subterranean commitment to "the very essence of Christianity."

In his fiction, MacDonald returned again and again to this motif of the legend of the holy doubter. The most unflinching of these portraits is the character of Charley in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*. Defying assumptions about Victorian sentimentality in didactic Christian novels (although readers are meant to admire and sympathize with him), far from having a happy

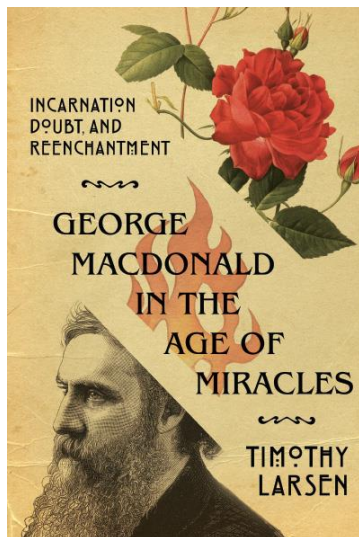


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ending in which he finds a deeper, truer faith—spoiler alert—Charley's chronically unsettled condition culminates in his suicide. Nevertheless, even this is just an extreme example of evangelical sincerity gone awry. From his evangelical clergyman father Charley "had inherited a conscience of abnormal sensibility." Charley's case reveals that sometimes he who cares much, doubts much: "It was the very love of what was good that generated in him doubt and anxiety." To care with such passionate earnestness about the truthfulness of Christianity is, for those who have eyes to see, itself a sign of faith, even if this faith is only the size of mustard seed: "There was always a certain indescribable dignity about what he said which I now see could have come only from a *believing* heart." Similarly, there is the "sad holy doubt" of Ericson in *Robert Falconer*. "For Ericson's, like his own, were true and good and reverent doubts, not merely consistent with but in a great measure springing from devoutness and aspiration. Surely such doubts are far more precious in the sight of God than many beliefs?"

At the other end of the spectrum from Charley—who, to reiterate, never does find assurance in this world—is Ian in *What's Mine's Mine*. The reader gains the impression that he is a doubter, but as the novel goes along it becomes clear that Ian is primarily objecting to empty religious forms and false theological formulas and that he not only already has a real faith but is an exemplary Christian. Nevertheless, Ian still serves to remind us that when we encounter religious doubt, it might actually be a sign of something life-giving and true rather than destructive and false:

Ian was one of those blessed few who doubt in virtue of a larger faith. While its roots were seeking a deeper soil, it could not show so fast a growth above ground. He doubted most about the things he loved best, while he devoted the energies of a mind whose keenness almost masked its power, to discover possible ways of believing them. To the wise his doubts would have been his best credentials; they were worth tenfold the faith of most. It was truth, and higher truth, he was always seeking.

The quintessential MacDonald leading characters, however, are recurrently ones who really do have fundamental religious doubts but whose quest for truth leads them on to a deeper, more profound faith. As we encounter such stories in real life *in media res*, MacDonald wanted us to be able to discern the potential upside of doubt. In his *Unspoken Sermons*, he gave pastoral reassurance to his readers that their periods of doubt, which so alarm them, might be some of the best of times in their seeking after truth and spiritual life. Moreover,

a man may be haunted with doubts, and only grow thereby in faith. Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to rouse the honest. They are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be understood. . . . Doubt must precede every deeper assurance.

Likewise, in *The Miracles of Our Lord*, MacDonald expounded upon the plea recorded in Mark 9:24, "help thou mine unbelief," arguing that this text should become a kind of life verse for an Age of Doubt:

It is the very triumph of faith. The unbelief itself cast like any other care upon him who careth for us, is the highest exercise of belief. It is the greatest effort lying in the power of the man. No man can help doubt. The true man

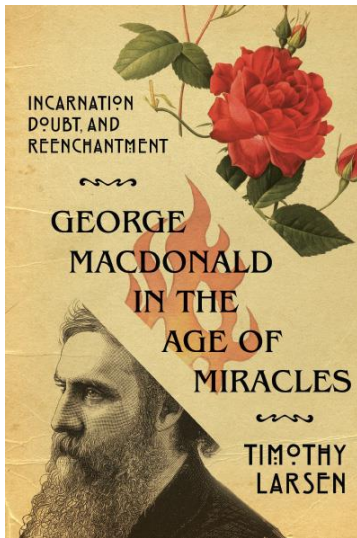


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alone, that is, the faithful man, can appeal to the Truth to enable him to believe what is true, and refuse what is false. How this applies especially to our own time and the need of the living generations, is easy to see.

MacDonald even expressed a providential view of the Age of Doubt, arguing that it “no doubt is needful, and must appear sometime in the world’s history. . . . No doubt it has come when it must, and will vanish when it must.” In *Lilith*, Mr. Vane confesses penitently that he still has questions and uncertainties. Father Adam graciously reassures him “thou canst, not but doubt, and art blameless in doubting”; “Thou doubttest because thou lovest the truth.” In a letter to his father, MacDonald reflected that “real earnestness is scarcely to be attained in a high degree without doubts & inward questionings.”

Not only does MacDonald often discern doubt to be covert evidence of faith, but he completes the paradox by suspecting that a posture of overweening certitude could be a secret sign of doubt. Perhaps Charley’s dogmatic, scolding clergyman father is not so much a paragon of faith as someone with so little faith that he does not think his religion can withstand scrutiny: “Do you know, Wilfrid—I *don’t* believe my father is quite sure himself, and that is what makes him in such a rage with anybody who doesn’t think as he does. He’s afraid it mayn’t be true after all.” For this reader at least, when the self-righteous Mrs. Elton in *David Elginbrod* asserts breezily in one breath that the Bible has been confirmed by both contemporary archaeological discoveries and recent paranormal occurrences, one suspects that she is protesting too much. This paradox is encapsulated in the triumphant, final stanza of MacDonald’s long poem, “The Disciple”:

Even of thy truth, both in and out,  
That so I question free:  
The man that feareth, Lord, to doubt,  
In that fear doubteth thee.

—Taken from chapter two, “George MacDonald and the Crisis of Doubt”



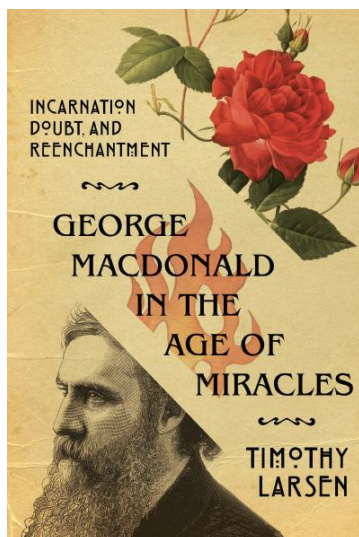
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## "Wit, Knowledge, and an Acute Critical Intelligence"

"It is hard to imagine a better pairing of author and subject than George MacDonald, one of the essential Victorians and one of the deepest of Christian writers, and Timothy Larsen, one of our very finest historians. This book is truly a joy to read."

—**Alan Jacobs**, distinguished professor of humanities in the honors program, Baylor University

"In this gem of a book, Timothy Larsen uses the delightful and moving writings of George MacDonald to open surprising new vistas on the religious world of Victorian Britain. I recommend it highly."

—**Thomas S. Kidd**, distinguished professor of history, Baylor University

"Victorian writer George MacDonald was a powerful influence on later authors such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, and Madeleine L'Engle. In this fine collection of lectures, scholar Timothy Larsen provides an essential context to MacDonald's life and thought, and indeed to the religious history of the nineteenth century. With his acute literary and theological insights, Larsen's book is a readable and perceptive guide to one of the great Christian thinkers."

—**Philip Jenkins**, Baylor University

"Drawing widely on George MacDonald's novels, stories, poems, and sermons, Larsen boldly presents him to us in all of his heterodoxical orthodoxy. Here is a fiery Scotsman with a capacious faith and vision who could find Christ in the most unlikely of places."

—**Louis Markos**, professor in English and scholar in residence, Houston Baptist University, author of *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*

"These lectures are steeped in a scholarly acquaintance with George MacDonald's writings. Their accessible style aims at bringing MacDonald's theological insights on such ever-pressing matters as religious doubt and the purpose of human suffering to a wider Christian audience."

—**Elisabeth Jay**, professor emerita, Oxford Brookes University

"In a Victorian religious culture saturated with religious preoccupations and moral anxieties, George MacDonald stands out as a relatively neglected author whose work nonetheless pays careful attention to the intersection of religion and literature. Tim Larsen brilliantly opens up MacDonald's imaginative writing as well as his sermons and essays to demonstrate how closely he followed contemporary interest in Christian doctrine and the challenges it faced in his day."

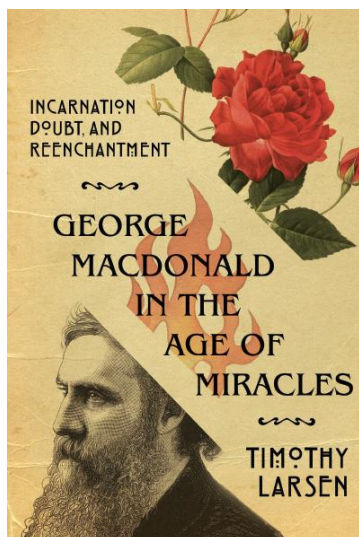


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No one who knows Larsen's work will be surprised at this: with wit, knowledge, and an acute critical intelligence, Larsen picks out again and again the ways in which MacDonald's fiction illustrated or experimented with controverted points of Christian doctrine, yet still functioned as good, readable fiction. A series of other interlocutors comment insightfully on Larsen's chapters and open up further seams of interpretation. For anyone interested in Victorian religious history and literary culture, this is a gem of a book."

—**Jeremy Morris**, master of Trinity hall, University of Cambridge

"Larsen has an original, interesting, stimulating, and even at times, controversial take on George MacDonald and his work."

—**Stephen Prickett**, regius professor emeritus of English, University of Glasgow, president of the George MacDonald Society

"Rarely, if ever, does a theologian grasp the essentials of luminaries such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, and Madeleine L'Engle. But here, in this exquisitely argued, beautifully crafted, and elegantly written thesis, Timothy Larsen offers a beguiling mediation on incarnation, doubt, and re-enchantment. With his careful and nuanced focus on George MacDonald, Timothy Larsen has produced a poised, sumptuous, and sublime theological essay—worthy, indeed, of Lewis, Chesterton, Tolkien, L'Engle, and MacDonald. This is Christian apologetics at its best and from one of the finest public intellectuals writing in our time."

—**Martyn Percy**, Christ Church, Oxford



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