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Reflecting on Alister McGrath's *Love for Science* and *Discovery of God*: Learnings for Non-Christian Theists

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Abstract: Oxford's Alister McGrath undoubtedly reflects a paradigm of meaningful intersection in the scholarship of science and religion, especially Christian theology. McGrath's life journey from loving science to discovering God in Christianity is particularly intriguing because his convictions were not supernatural but intellectual, rooted in multiple conscientious inquiries culminating in his conclusion that through Christianity, humanity and creation can be better understood. A recurring quote in McGrath's writings comes from C.S Lewis: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else". How do spiritual eclipses influence religious belief? What might non-Christian theistic religion like African traditional perspectives glean from a uniquely Christian outlook? This paper, leveraging McGrath's unique journey as a bridge between religion and science, unravels intelligible parallels between two different religious perspectives and learnings that non-Christian theists can glean from exclusively Christian scholarship.

Keywords: Alister McGrath; African religious thoughts; Christian theology; science; religion

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Academic Editors: Tracy J. Trothen and Calvin Mercer

Received: 17 April 2025
Revised: 29 May 2025
Accepted: 30 May 2025
Published: 4 June 2025

Citation: Adewuyi, Blessing T. 2025. Reflecting on Alister McGrath's *Love for Science* and *Discovery of God*: Learnings for Non-Christian Theists. *Religions* 16: 721. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16060721

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1. Introduction

The immense contributions of Oxford University's Emeritus Professor Alister E. McGrath toward a constructive engagement between science and religion, especially Christian theology, cannot be overstated. McGrath's intellectual and spiritual journey, marked by a transition from a passionate love for science to a profound discovery of God, stands out for its divergence from traditional metanarratives that often frame religious conviction in terms of religious and supernatural encounters. His path carves out a unique position for him as a bridge between the domains of science and religion, having deeply engaged with both.

The primary aim of this article is to address a significant gap in the academic study of science and religion, namely, the under-exploration of the personal and individual experiences of prominent scholars within the field. With only a few exceptions, the religious journeys of such figures, and how these journeys and experiences inform their scholarship, remain largely unexamined. To address this, this essay employs a descriptive methodology underpinned by a critical evaluation of Alister McGrath's life and intellectual development. This exploration not only highlights vital questions but also uncovers lessons with broader implications for how we understand the interface between science and religion, especially on an individual and personal level.

According to John Evans (2011), the relationship between science and religion at the personal level can be epistemological and, at the same time, moral, with the latter encompassing individual interests, values, and convictions. Empirical studies frequently

underscore sources of tension between these two domains, arising from intellectual dissonances as well as clashes over the authority to influence public morality (Evans 2011, p. 713). While moral concerns inch closer to the realm of personal experience, the individual narratives of scholars, especially those who shape public and academic discourses, are often overlooked.

Supporting this perspective, Ecklund and Park (2009) conducted a seminal study on the relationship between science and religion amongst academic scientists at the personal level. Their work offers preliminary insights into the role of religious practices and instances where individuals were likely to accept the conflict paradigm if they were raised in a home where religion was not important (Ecklund and Park 2009, p. 276). Their findings further demonstrate that a scientist's religious or non-religious identity does not necessarily predict their views on science–religion compatibility. A non-religious scientist might view the two domains as harmonious, while a devoutly religious scientist might perceive them to be in conflict, leading to inner tension and strategies such as compartmentalization to manage the dissonance (Ecklund and Park 2009, p. 280).

These findings point to a deeper need for a closer examination of the intellectual, personal, and social struggles of influential scholars in the field, particularly those who journey from a scientific worldview toward a religious one (or vice versa). Arguably, McGrath's journey serves as a rich case study. His transition from atheism to Christian faith, informed by a rigorous scientific background, provides an opportunity to explore the nuanced and often complex ways in which personal biography intersects with academic inquiry. Through his life and work, McGrath challenges the dichotomy between science and religion, offering instead a model of integration that is both intellectually robust and personally resonant. Understanding these personal narratives can illuminate the paradigms that shape such individuals' academic work and offer insights into how these personal experiences can influence public and scholarly perceptions of the science–religion relationship.

2. Introducing McGrath—A Brief Bio

Alister Edgar McGrath was born in January 1953 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. It is imperative to note that 1950s Northern Ireland witnessed tensions between the Catholics and the Protestants, which bubbled over into full-blown riots from time to time (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs 2013). He began his education at the Methodist College, Belfast, majoring in pure and applied mathematics, physics, and chemistry before he got a scholarship to study chemistry at Oxford University in October 1971, graduating with first-class honors in June 1975. He then began his doctorate in molecular biophysics under the supervision of Prof Sir George Radda in September 1975. Between 1971 and 1975, McGrath started on a journey from loving (and being exceptionally gifted in) science to a curiosity for and discovery of God. Amidst many conversations and multiple conscientious inquiries, February of 1974 marked a remarkable moment when he found a traveling companion in C.S Lewis. His engagement with some of Lewis' writings and delineations of Christianity sparked curious interest in him, provoking him to reconsider his earlier conclusions about Christianity and inspiring a yearning to study theology in depth. The opportunity to journey into theology presented itself in 1976, and McGrath grabbed it with both hands! By 1978, McGrath had bagged a first-class honors in theology and enrolled for training to be ordained as a minister of the Church of England by 1980 (McGrath 2019).

In terms of his career, McGrath crafted a path that synergized his academic interests with his ministerial calling. He was Oxford's Professor of Historical Theology from 1999 to 2008. He then moved to King's College London as Professor of Theology, Ministry, and Education, before returning to Oxford as Idreos Professor in 2014. From 2015 to 2018, He served as Gresham Professor of Divinity, which is the oldest and most distinguished

chair of public theological engagement in Britain and was established in 1597. He retired in September 2022 having accepted Oxford University's Andreas Idreos professorship of Science and Religion and the Directorship of the Ian Ramsey Center for Science and Religion in April 2014.[1] McGrath's scholarship has been celebrated both within and outside academia, having written "32 monographs, 9 academic textbooks, and at least 21 other theological books for wider readership, from laypeople to clergy", with reflections on the appeal of his scholarship both to academics and general society (Sollereder 2022, p. 110).

3. From McGrath's Love for Science...

Without equivocation, Alister E. McGrath embodies the unique intersection of Christian theology and the sciences—both as an individual and as a scholar. Arguably, McGrath began his intellectual journey more as a skeptic than a committed atheist. From the outset, he maintained a firm belief that the existence and knowledge of God could not be grounded in empirically proven facts—facts understood as "objective truths that could be proved to be right, resting on unshakeable experimental evidence" (McGrath 2020, p. 158). At that time, religion and religious belief did not appear rational to him. They were uncertain, unprovable by scientific standards, and thus unworthy of serious intellectual attention. McGrath gravitated toward the empirical rigor of science, which offered him a sense of intellectual clarity and certainty.

For a time, he found intellectual respite in the sciences, which engaged and celebrated empiricism. He believed that as long as a belief in God could not be factually proven, it should be discarded: "science proved its ideas, whereas religion merely asserted them. Science entailed atheism and destroyed the illusions on which religion was based" (McGrath 2019, p. 432). His conclusions at that time were also influenced by the socio-political situation of Northern Ireland because he was born and partly raised at a time when religion and religious affiliation were on the front burner of the social, political, and economic life of Northern Ireland, constituting a conflict that eventually abated through the Belfast Agreement of 1998 (commonly known as the Good Friday Agreement) that put an end to major hostilities (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs 2013). In essence, his belief system was largely informed by experiences of religious violence and instability, thus substantiating his convictions that religion and religious belief were more of a vice than a virtue.

In this context, McGrath's skepticism progressed to atheism. His worldview became one where the certainty offered by science eclipsed the perceived irrationality of religion. As John Evans noted in an article titled "Epistemological and Moral Conflict Between Religion and Science", there is a remarkable distinction between non-religiou person and an atheistn most cases, they do not represent the same thing (Evans 2011, p. 711). For McGrath, the intellectual seduction of certainty made atheism appealing; thus, he gradually moved from being non-religious to being an atheist. Like many who struggle with uncertainty, he sought the stability of empirical knowledge and found fulfillment in the perceived finality of scientific explanation. This drive toward certainty is a common human trait, an insatiable desire to know, understand, and master one's environment, and this is the bedrock of *scientia*.

Yet even within the scientific tradition, the promise of complete certainty remains elusive. Bertrand Russell, in his remarkable treatise "The Scientific Outlook", appraising human knowledge and power, especially when derived through science, underscores the limitations of human knowledge, stressing that despite how astonishing it is that humans know so much, it is still more astonishing that so little knowledge can give us so much power, especially in terms of changing and manipulating humanity (Russell [1919] 1931, p. 73ff). Russell's writing often accentuates how knowledge, innovation, and discovery are

often held in high esteem and perceived with great zest within the sciences, with little or no recourse to their inherently transient nature and ability to obscure human vision from higher-order wisdom and knowledge.

Similarly, Karl Popper and other philosophers of science have long argued against the notion that science is the ultimate or only path to truth, emphasizing the provisional nature of scientific theories (Popper 1959). The reality remains that any curious scientist who has spent many years in the scientific community will usually become aware of, in different waves and with different intensities, the fleeting nature of scientific knowledge. McGrath eventually began to wrestle with this transience. He remarked that "If scientific theories that once commanded widespread support had now been displaced by superior alternatives, who could predict what would happen to these new theories in the future?... Might they not be transient staging posts, rather than final resting places?" (McGrath 2019, p. 433). For McGrath, such reflections raised a deeper question: where lies the anchor that holds true from era to era and time to time? This question propelled him beyond the confines of scientific inquiry toward broader existential considerations.

McGrath attempted to expand the frontiers of his knowledge, exploring Marxism and other ideologies that seemed to provide succor; however, his quest came to a point of encountering their limitations too. Eventually, he reached what he described as "standing on the threshold of a new way of thinking and living" (McGrath 2020, p. 56). Being an intellectually curious individual, who would methodically engage with the facts and insights derived from ideologies and intellectual ideas, he finally embarked on a rigorous and open-minded investigation into the claims of Christianity; "I had stepped into a new strange realm and felt the compulsion to explore its territory. . ." (McGrath 2020, p. 59).

4. . . .to McGrath's Discovery of God

McGrath's intellectual inquiry led him to discover that Christian theology, far from being antithetical to intellectual rigor, offered a profound and coherent vision of reality—one that could accommodate both the insights of science and the mysteries of faith. His journey to Christianity was intellectual, guided by multiple conscientious inquiries into the depth of the Christian faith. McGrath's discovery of God and embrace of Christianity were more intellectual than experiential (although there are aspects of his enlightenment that captured his reflections on nature as pointing towards a Divine essence).

At this juncture, it is imperative to consider whether the intellectual provability and rationality of the Christian faith take away from the supernatural-cum-spiritual dimensions of religious conversion, of which many have written and claimed to be the basis of genuine religious conversion. Several examples readily come to mind, both in the Medieval era and contemporary times. Martin Luther's dedication and commitment to Christianity came after a religious experience where he was miraculously saved from lightning. Rudolf Otto canvasses the notion of the numinous and the three phases of "Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans" as the paradigm of a pathway to discovering the Divine (Otto 1923). John Hick, who is an apologist for supernatural experiences, argues extensively that religious belief can only be predicated on religious experience. The term 'religious experience' encompasses various nuances associated with spiritual, mystical, and supernatural encounters. In his two volumes on religious experience, Hick argues for the primacy of religious experience as a foundational basis for religion and as a common thread that unifies most religions of the world (Hick 2010, p. 29). John Hick explains religious experiences in two forms. The first is the lower form, i.e., the everyday sense in terms of the "religious, or numinous, or mystical experiences of ordinary people", and the second is the higher form, that is, intense experiences recorded as "peak experiences' and an "altered state of consciousness" (Hick 2010, p. 39).

William James is another notable proponent of the notion of religious experience serving as a signifier of religious experience. For James, religious experiences have four characteristics. The first characteristic is ineffability, which in and of itself immediately indicates that it defies expression. The second is noetic quality: although they are like states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be states of knowledge. The third is transiency: Mystical states cannot be sustained for a long time. When they fade, their quality is often imperfectly reproduced in memory. Lastly, there is passivity: when the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if their own will were in suspension and, sometimes, as if they were grasped and held by a superior power (James 1902, pp. 281–83). Religious experiences are often captured in religious feelings, which often preempt the presence of the Divine as an "ontological imagination" within which "unpicturable beings are realized, and realized with an intensity almost like that of a hallucination" (James [1902] 2004, p. 61). Empirical evidence and testimonies of conversion from atheism to Christianity are often replete with supernatural encounters-cum-experiences, which are spiritual, transcendental, and emotive in nature, with corresponding physical reactions and responses; however, McGrath's experience shows that encounters codified in religious experiences are not the only bridges between unbelief and belief.

McGrath's transcendental experience was intellectually derived and a product of intellectual curiosity, which is often the hallmark of many scientists. McGrath explains that his epiphany began when he read about publications that questioned the "reliability and limits of scientific knowledge" upon which he had rested his intellectual hopes and convictions, which had previously fueled his lack of interest in religion or religious discourses (McGrath 2019, p. 433). His conversion from atheism through science and on to religion through an intellectual experience is atypical of mainstream religious conversion experiences, but it has, without doubt, proved to be a formidable ground for the (re)construction of a new identity.

To further solidify the veracity of his conversion experience through intellectual activities, he repeatedly mentions his intellectual encounters with the works of C.S. Lewis. For McGrath, C.S Lewis was a "traveling companion" whose writings helped him "grasp the conceptual capaciousness of Christianity" (McGrath 2020, p. 147). A recurrent quote he uses, one of the intellectual and interpretative reference frames for Alister McGrath in comprehending the depth and richness of the Christian faith, is from C.S Lewis: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else" (Lewis 2002, p. 21).

If one pauses to reflect on the grand narrative and depth of wisdom underlying the Christian message of salvation—from the very beginning of creation to the coming of Christ—what emerges is an intricate tapestry woven with twists, turns, and prophecies and their eventual fulfillment. The coherence across millennia, culminating in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, presents what is arguably an unfathomable mystery. Yet, while these events may appear to be beyond comprehension, their significance and implications for humanity must, as McGrath often emphasizes, be revealed, not merely asserted, in ways that are intelligible, believable, and personally relatable to those for whom this redemptive work has been completed.

Much like the discovery of a priceless gem, McGrath approached the Christian faith with the excitement and curiosity of a scientist encountering something both beautiful and true. Drawing on his background in the natural sciences, he leveraged this intellectual framework to deepen and articulate his Christian convictions. He found in Christianity a structure of thought that resonated with the empirical and explanatory strength valued in scientific inquiry: "Like a good scientific theory, it (Christianity) offered an intellectual framework that made sense of his observation of the world" (McGrath 2020, p. 147). To many, the coherence and profundity of Christian theology may initially appear as a mystery

too extraordinary to be true. Yet, McGrath sees it not as a blind leap into irrationality but as the unveiling of a reality that, once perceived, brings light to everything else. In this way, Christian truth functions—borrowing from C.S. Lewis's famous analogy—like the sun, through which everything else becomes revealed.

5. An Eclipse of the Sun—A Bump on the Journey to the Divine?

If the capaciousness of the Christian faith is, as McGrath and others suggest, analogous to the illuminating power of the sun—shedding light on all aspects of reality—then one might reasonably ask the following question: what happens, metaphorically, in the case of an eclipse? Can the 'sun' of Christianity experience eclipses that obscures humanity's vision of reality? This metaphor of an eclipse becomes especially potent when considering the problem of evil and suffering, one of the most persistent challenges many people encounter in their journeys to the discovery of the Divine. In a 1999 publication titled "Suffering Belief: Evil and the Anglo-American Defense of Theism", Andrea Weisenberger conducted a systematic evaluation of the kinds of evil that most strongl question belief in God and concluded that there is "scant basis for continued belief in an all-perfect God", calling for "compelling reason" to abandon religious beliefs (Weisberger 1999). The consideration of an eclipse in this context is imperative as one of the factors that constitute a bump (or stop) on the journey of many. There are several references and accounts of how grief, suffering, the existence of evil, and many other daunting life experiences contribute to the difficulty many atheists and agnostics experience in seeing the existence of a Sovereign Being, especially the God of the Christian faith, as intellectually gratifying or realistic (Tooley 2021).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an eclipse as "an interception or obscuration of the light of the sun, moon, or other luminous body, by the intervention of some other body, either between it and the eye (observer), or between the luminous body and that which is illuminated by it" (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2022). According to the laws of physics, when solar eclipses occur, some regions (within the penumbra) are in partial darkness, while some other regions (within the umbra) are in total darkness, hidden from the light of the sun (Golub and Pasachoff 2014). The image of a solar eclipse serves as a potent metaphor for the uncertainties, distortions, and inhibitions that darken human perception of reality—whether natural or supernatural. Eclipses, whether celestial or existential, mark moments when clarity is obscured and light is temporarily hidden. In a scientific sense, an eclipse occurs due to the precise geometric alignment of the sun, moon, and earth, but from the perspective of the Christian faith, a person's faith and belief are most often threatened when things are out of alignment. How does the Christian faith make sense of such states? Are these moments of darkness a call for deeper faith? There is no unequivocal answer to these musings.

Even the best Christian theologians experience contemplations and momentary doubts when faced with deep pain and suffering. McGrath notes that although Lewis is widely known for his depth in the Christian-faith life, he also had his share of life sufferings; "his life was complex, difficult, and occasionally tragic. His mother died of cancer before he was ten years old" (McGrath 2014). The death of Joy Davidman, the wife of C.S Lewis, took a hard toll on his faith and can be likened to an eclipse. His book *A Grief Observed* (Lewis 1961) details how his mental and emotional contemplations during his moments of grief were reflective of an experientially dark moment, especially when evaluated vis-a-vis his earlier book *The Problem of Pain* (Lewis 1940), as is often carried out. The American Writer Chad Walsh, who was also friends with C.S. Lewis, notes that while Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* sought to "provide the theory behind the pain in the world, A Grief Observed was the reality of the theory" (Walsh 1979, p. 238).

The 2022 Boyle lecture on Science and Religion presented by Prof Christopher Southgate on "God and a World of Natural Evil: Theology and Science in Hard Conversation" touched on experiences of suffering and distress (including the example of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic) vis-a-vis the existence of God, "as a hard pill to swallow, given our desire to always have intelligible answers and explanations for every aspect of life" (Southgate 2022). Southgate referred to a podcast produced by Bio logos in 2020 featuring a conversation between Scientist Francis Collins—the former head of the US. National Institute of Health, who was once an atheist but is now a Christian author—and N.T Wright, the famous New Testament theologian, about COVID-19 (BioLogos Interview 2020). The debate was an attempt to make sense of the suffering heralded by COVID-19 despite people's belief in a perfectly good God. Wright held that there is a dark power that opposes and distorts God's perfectly good creation, while Collins held that bad and good are inextricable realities of creation—a similitude of Niels Gregersen's 'package deal,' where the world is "presented as a net of interconnected pain and existential joy" (Dańczak 2012, p. 160).

Despite its depth, Christianity, in word and deed, does not claim to have an all-encompassing answer to every question or a perfect explanation for every human experience, and it is highly doubtful that the sciences, despite their many ground-breaking innovations, also possess such capabilities. Generally, how humanity handles uncertainties and ambiguities, which form an integral part of the complex nature of being, has always been a significant part of our understanding of human nature. Many have experiences of finding hope and meaning in religion during turbulent times, while many also lose their faith in those same experiences. The eventual destination is largely dependent on the choices made or unmade, much like what is inferred in Bethany Sollereder's impressive book *Why is there suffering* (Sollereder 2021).

Faith (not skepticism), especially the Christian faith, presents a "big picture" that helps humanity grapple with and appreciate the complexities of life. McGrath provides respite and makes sense of the Christian faith as a lens through which a person can develop a relatable framework for comprehending and holding together the fragmented and fragile pieces that make up human reality. McGrath argues that despite the tremendous explanatory power of the sciences, there remain aspects of reality, particularly those concerning human existence, meaning, and suffering, that may never be fully known or explained. In response to this inherent uncertainty, McGrath maintains that the Christian faith offers something the sciences cannot: the spiritual resources of faith and hope, which enable humanity to "come to terms with uncertainty without being overwhelmed by it" (McGrath 2020, p. 139). At this stage in his intellectual and spiritual journey, McGrath came to a decisive conclusion: Christianity alone provides a coherence unmatched by any other worldview or religious system. It does not eliminate uncertainty, but it offers a framework that makes uncertainty livable. Christianity, he argues, offers "an enhanced capacity to live within that world and cope with its uncertainty and complexity, as well as our own frailty and failings" (McGrath 2020, p. 207).

6. Learnings for Non-Christian Theists

How can non-Christian theists who are interested in the interactions between religion, science, and the quest for ultimate answers benefit from a uniquely Christian approach? An example of a non-Christian theistic view used in this context is African religious thought, which is largely derived from African traditional cultures and Indigenous religious belief systems specific to Africa and its diasporic communities (Aderibigbe and Medine 2015). It is important to note that African traditional religious belief systems are often marginalized, especially in the scholarly contexts of science and religion. However, a

proper understanding of African traditional religious thought unveils its distinctive lens for understanding its worldview, especially as it heavily intersects with religion and science, although much of its belief systems and paradigms have been misconstrued and misrepresented in history. Interestingly, the rudiments of science from an African worldview and in the day-to-day religious practices of the African peoples are almost inseparable. Barry Hallen and Kwasi Wiredu, in their discussion of science and African culture, assert that "metaphysically and epistemologically, African culture is very hospitable to scientific inquiry" (Hallen and Wiredu 2013).

Robin Horton, a British anthropologist and philosopher known for his comparative work on African religious thought and Western science, argues that African belief systems have often been misunderstood or misrepresented due to two major limitations. First, many of those—particularly Western scholars—who have attempted to study African religions lacked a deep familiarity with the theoretical foundations of their own intellectual traditions. As Horton observes, "certain aspects of [their own] thinking are the counterparts of those very features of traditional thought which they have tended to find most puzzling" (Horton 1967, p. 50). Second, even when such scholars are conversant with their own theoretical traditions, they often fail to identify equivalent structures within African systems, having been "blinded by a difference of idiom" (Horton 1967, p. 50). This observation is valuable when placed alongside Alister McGrath's theological method. Unlike those who approach religious systems superficially, McGrath demonstrates a profound awareness of his own intellectual and cultural heritage. McGrath deploys multiple thorough inquiries into Christianity and Christian belief, which led him to the discovery of God. The paradigm of a comprehensive and codified inquiry can be very beneficial to African religious thought for any persons interested in its 'theology'.

The choice of African religious thought in this paper was largely predicated on global statistics and trends that show the expanding imprints of Christianity in Africa today on the one hand and some fundamental parallels between African religious thought and Christianity, in many subtle ways, on the other. The 2021 research on global Christianity by the Gordon-Cornwell Theological Seminary reveals that there are more Christians in Africa than in any other continent (Zurlo et al. 2021, p. 18).

In the recently released data from the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, it is stated that by 2060, more than four in ten of the world's Christians are projected to live in sub-Saharan Africa, while fewer than a quarter will live in Europe and North America combined (Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project 2022). The trends revealed by Pew Research show that as of 2010, about 63% of people in sub-Sahara Africa were Christians, with Christianity projected to remain the region's largest religious group, growing from 517 million in 2010 to more than 1.1 billion by 2050 (Pew Research Center 2015). Because African religious thought and practices often have a 'live and let live' approach, Christianity and other foreign religions thrive on the continent and are sometimes integrated into existing indigenous religious practices. As noted by Aderibigbe, the characteristics of "tolerance, accommodation, a desire for peaceful coexistence, the recognition of truth in other religions" and other peaceful dispositions are abundant in African traditional religious practices (Aderibigbe 2000, p. 331).

In terms of religious thought, there are notable parallels between African cosmology and Christianity, particularly in their shared belief in a Supreme Being. However, African religious traditions have often been critiqued for lacking the comprehensive theological and exegetical frameworks characteristic of the Christian worldview. In global theological discourse, African religious thought is frequently marginalized or dismissed as unintelligible, largely because it lacks a codified theology and appears, at first glance, to lack structured doctrines parallel to those of other major world religions. Yet, this perception is not always

accurate. Scholars of African philosophy such as Thaddeus Metz and Motsamai Molefe have drawn attention to essential features of African religious thought that align it closely with monotheistic traditions. These include a belief in a Supreme Being and a conception of the divine that bears resemblance to that found in other theistic religions. Metz and Molefe argue that African religious systems merit recognition and interpretation according to the same "standard interpretation" applied to Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions (Metz and Molefe 2021, p. 393). As Robin Horton observed, "one salient feature of Christian proselytization in many African cultures has surely been the identification of the Christian God with African ideas of the Supreme being" (Horton 1971, p. 100). This alignment facilitated the presentation of Christianity as the ultimate and true path to knowing and relating to God, a narrative that resonated deeply with many African communities and contributed to the effectiveness of Christian missionary efforts.

Another significant feature that aligns African religious thought with Christianity is the often minimal—and sometimes even nonexistent—distinction between the natural and the supernatural realms. J.S. Mbiti, a renowned scholar of African traditional religion (ATR) and an ordained Anglican priest, famously observed in his "*African Religion and Philosophy*" that for the average African, "no line of distinction [is] drawn between the spiritual and the natural" (Mbiti 1970, p. 5). While this perspective may challenge mainstream scientific paradigms, it opens the possibility for a distinctly African form of Natural Theology. Such a theology would be grounded in religious experiences and encounters with the supernatural through the natural elements, resonating with insights found in the works of philosophers and theologians like John Hick, William James, and Rudolf Otto. Moreover, aspects of Mircea Eliade's scholarship on the sacred and the profane further illuminate this connection, suggesting rich avenues for future research and exposition of the African religious understanding of Natural Theology.

The need for dialogue and partnership between leading voices and religious leaders from Christianity and African traditional religious beliefs cannot be overemphasized, as both perspectives can benefit greatly from such partnership and connections. With established scholarship on Natural Theology, Christianity can provide insights into the development of a Natural Theology based on African traditional belief systems while further exploring and expanding its religious beliefs related to the supernatural based on experiences and practices from African traditional perspectives.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that Africa is far from the monolithic entity it is often portrayed to be in scholarly and popular discourse. The continent encompasses a rich and complex tapestry of religious beliefs, practices, interpretations, and understandings that vary significantly across cultures, regions, and nations—much like the diverse denominational expressions found within global Christianity today. In recent years, debates among scholars of African religion have intensified around whether to pluralize the term African Traditional Religion by adding an 's'—rendering it 'African Traditional Religions'—to acknowledge and emphasize this inherent diversity. Sahin Osman (2024) offers a valuable synthesis of these ongoing discussions, presenting arguments from both sides of the debate. While some scholars advocate for the adoption of the plural form to better reflect the distinct traditions across African communities, others oppose the change, drawing parallels with Christianity, which retains a singular term despite its many denominational variations.

7. Conclusions

Based on the foregoing discussion, it may seem unconventional to trace a line from Alister McGrath—a Christian theologian and scientist whose personal journey moves from a deep love for science to a profound discovery of the divine—to African religious thought. Yet, this trajectory is not only insightful but also instructive. African Traditional Religions,

as a prominent example of non-Christian religious systems, can glean significant insights from McGrath's intellectual and spiritual journey. A teleological reflection on McGrath's path from the natural sciences to Christian theology reveals his conviction that Christianity offers a comprehensive, coherent vision of reality, what he calls a "big picture", that makes sense of human existence while also embracing its inherent uncertainties. At the same time, Christian theology, for McGrath, equips believers with intellectual and spiritual tools for understanding how "theology makes a difference to the way we imagine and inhabit our world, and cope with its challenges and concerns" (McGrath 2022, p. 267).

In a similar vein, African traditional religious thought would benefit from a more systematic aggregation of its inherently integrated perspectives into a capacious theological framework. As Metz and Molefe have argued, aspects of African "ontology, epistemology, and axiology" must be taken more seriously, particularly in scholarly and comparative theological contexts (Metz and Molefe 2021, p. 394). While African religions should be appreciated and respected on their own terms, they stand to gain from the development of a cohesive body of work that clearly outlines their beliefs, practices, values, and conceptual depth. Given that much of African religious knowledge has historically been transmitted through oral traditions and folk practices, scholars invested in its preservation and propagation are increasingly advocating for the documentation and codification of these systems in order to facilitate the formation of a distinct African theology that does not compromise its authenticity or cultural origin.

Despite the philosophical and theological parallels between Christianity and African religious thought, it is important to acknowledge that the depth, coherence, and doctrinal development within the Christian tradition, particularly its theological frames, remain more robustly articulated than in African traditional religious systems. The esoteric nature of African religious knowledge often contrasts with the wide accessibility of theological resources in Christianity, which are available for both lay inquiry and scholarly engagement. Nevertheless, non-Christian theists can benefit from engaging with the Christian perspective to identify resonances and areas of conceptual alignment. Such engagement promotes a more congenial intellectual exchange across traditions, encouraging mutual respect, deeper understanding, and shared enrichment.

Funding: This article received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Note

[1] Professor Alister McGrath profile page, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford. https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-alister-mcgrath (accessed on 13 January 2025).

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