Review: *The God who Doesn't Exist* by Fergus McGinley

John Foulcher

Fergus McGinley's provocatively titled *The God who Doesn't Exist: God in an Evolutionary World* is an engaging, intelligent read. It's both a defence of a fairly conventional view of Christianity and an audacious attempt to reframe the Christian religion as a necessary component in human evolution. It is, as McGinley puts it, a work that's simultaneously 'anti-theology' and 'anti-science', though it draws heavily from both disciplines to creative a compelling central thesis. At 163 pages, it's not a long read, but it's a surprisingly rich and complex one, leavened by the quirky, deceptively colloquial style in which McGinley couches challenging concepts. McGinley often gives the impression that he'd be more at home discussing the meaning of life over a beer with friends at the local pub than he would be preaching from the pulpit.

McGinley initially creates a dichotomy between the God who doesn't exist and the God who does exist, the former being the God human beings have crafted to excuse and promote their inadequacies and the latter as the source of love and creativity which McGinley argues is a necessary component of the evolutionary process. The argument goes something like this: human beings are incapable of selfless love, but they've created a culture whereby selfless love is exactly what loving parents teach their children. So where did this sense of selflessness – the opposite of the Darwinian principle of 'survival of the fittest' – come from, as it's essential in the way history has progressed, and the main reason why we haven't torn each other apart. There's only one inescapable conclusion, McGinley asserts: that God as the source of all love must exist. He puts this assertion forward repeatedly as the book develops, sometimes with a little too much bravado. It's a concept that resonates very strongly with me, but I wonder what holes secular philosophers would find in it.

There are two other dichotomies (or, more likely, complementary opposites) established in the early stage of the book: the material as opposed to the 'virtual' (a dimension that includes the spirit and the imagination), and 'culture' as opposed to individual existence. In consideration of the material and the virtual, McGinley suggests it's quite absurd to argue that we're merely material. Demonstrably, we're otherwise:

> . . . in modern physics, the virtuality of the non-living universe is embodied, on one hand, in organized material structures like atoms and galaxies; and, on the other, in the form of continuous fields, pure immaterial wells of potential or virtual energy [as opposed to kinetic energy] – like the fictional *Force* in Star Wars. (p 48)

The significance of potential energy for us is that the ability to see possibilities, to imagine a future into being, is necessary for human evolution. This is evidenced everywhere. Similarly, 'culture', the human collective which is envisioned before it's created, is the embodiment of the individual's best qualities – which, by this stage, he's established are not *our* best qualities, but God's in us.

McGinley then moves away from what would be traditionally called sociology and science to consider the development of religion, specifically Christianity, on the evolution of human beings through culture. Beginning with the creation stories of Genesis and linking them to creation stories in other traditions, McGinley challenges us to re-think the Eden myth in a way that's challenging and innovative. In the story, God always intended Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of good and evil as this knowledge is the core of being human, of being moral beings. Without this knowledge, how would we be different from any other form of biological life? As he says:

> . . . the starting point of for learning selflessness is knowing the difference between selfishness and selflessness – knowing when we are being bad, or evil, and when we are being good. If we cannot tell the difference, there's no hope for us at all, no possibility of ever escaping from our natural narcissism.
>
> Moral conscience, in other words. In the biblical story it is what we get by eating the fruit of *that* tree. Something we do not get if we do not eat, if Eve and Adam did not eat back in the day. We would be stuck still in the Garden today, well and truly bored out of our brains, stuck in an eternal infantile childhood. (p 64)

Perhaps some fundamentalist Christians should should reconsider their childish notions of heaven in the light of this statement. A friend of mine once told me that his mother, a literalist if ever there was one, couldn't wait to get to heaven to sit down and have a cup of tea with her departed husband. 'Well,' my friend mused, 'that's the first ten minutes taken care of . . .'

Inevitably, McGinley arrives at the figure of Jesus as the incarnation of the virtual in the material, the presence of God in human form as a necessary step in our coming to be what God wants us to become. Jesus is the embodiment of the real God as opposed to the one we want, which we have made in our own image and which has infiltrated the development of the church. Jesus undermines our notions of what we think is a successful, fulfilled life, and by doing so holds a mirror to our own wants and desires. Inevitably, if we're honest with ourselves, we become aware of our own perversities and limitations. This, McGinley says, is the real nature of sin and repentance. The 'true' Kingdom, he argues, is predicated on the acceptance of our own sinful

nature, hence he has little time for 'liberal' Christianity which, he says, abolishes sin and therefore abolishes the Kingdom altogether. But the true concern of the Kingdom is not the next life, it's this one:

> As long as the focus is first on making sure we get to heaven when we die, the true Gospel will always elude the church's best efforts to find it and live it. (p 132)

McGinley uses the term 'the Jesus mutation' to describe the phenomenon of the events outlined in the Gospels – just as life grows and develops through cell mutation, so our moral consciousness was put on a different path through the existence of Christ. I'm reminded of Tom Holland's tome, *Dominion*, where he explores the effect of Christianity on the development of human history, even to its secular ends. McGinley puts great emphasis on the resurrection in his narrative; without it, we have nothing to aspire to, and the crucifixion becomes a noble but ultimately meaningless gesture.

He takes a welcome swipe at so-called 'atonement' theory which asserts that the sacrifice of the crucifixion was a once-in-history chance for Jesus to take our sins on his own shoulders as a sacrifice (a very Old Testament notion) to appease God, who has no choice but to punish us for our fallen nature:

> . . . apart from sounding decidedly weird, such explanations ring hollow, because they put the boot on the wrong foot: our problem is not with God, who has nothing but love and good intentions for us, but with our own selfish sinful selves . . . the death and apparent resurrection of Jesus must deal directly with whatever real power sin and evil have over our lives, not mollify a cranky deity. (p 106)

I have one small quibble with the book. In his attempt not to gender God, McGinley uses the third person plural pronoun - their/them – as is the current fashion. I'm not sure in works in this context: as well as the inevitable confusion created by using a plural to describe a singular, it also inadvertently implies polytheism, which is inappropriate here. McGinley recognises this, at one time reluctantly reverting to male pronouns to describe God and then decrying: 'Ouch! – I have suddenly used the male pronoun three times consecutively' (p 98). Better, I suspect, not to use pronouns at all for God but to simply repeat the proper noun.

This, however, is nit-picking. *The God who Doesn't Exist* is a vivid, engaging re-imagining of the Christian story in a thoughtful, entrancing way. It deserves to be read widely.

The God who Doesn't Exist: God in an Evolutionary World, Fergus McGinley, ATF Press 2025