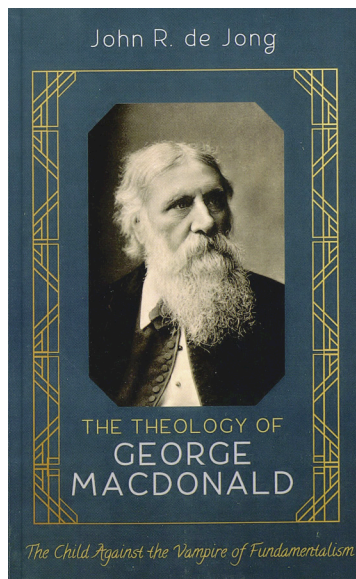


## Book Review Supplement

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**John R. de Jong**, *The Theology of George MacDonald: The Child Against the Vampire of Fundamentalism*. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019), \$35.00 (paperback).

George MacDonald's eclectic nature and the abundance of his works have left generous fields of unmined territory for MacDonald scholarship. John R. de Jong explores core tenets of MacDonald's theology in his book *The Theology of George MacDonald: The Child Against the Vampire of Fundamentalism*. This culmination of de Jong's doctoral work at King's College London offers a storehouse of research in intelligent yet accessible prose. Without defaulting to the sentimentalism common to MacDonald fandom, he offers a nuanced view of MacDonald's challenge to the strong currents of fundamentalism prevalent in Victorian evangelicalism. While de Jong is correct to suggest that MacDonald's polemic against religious fundamentalism serves as an apt warning for a variety of readers of any time period, his book will appeal most to MacDonald specialists and enthusiasts.



Most readers familiar with MacDonald will know that de Jong has undertaken a tricky task. MacDonald was no fan of theological systems of thought and therefore can be reluctant to tip his hand. De Jong admits this much, saying that in MacDonald's view, theological systems of thought "quickly became idolatrous scaffolding that hid the true nature of God" (7). Therefore, it might seem easier to find the theological assumptions that MacDonald opposes than those he espouses. But as de Jong makes plain, MacDonald is not so coy. His *Unspoken Sermons* is a collection of exegetical works that subvert popular fundamentalist interpretations of scripture, and de Jong makes hearty use of these theological gems, mingling them with keen insights from MacDonald's other works to generate a thesis that juxtaposes the childlikeness of the Divine nature with what de Jong calls "the vampirism of fundamentalism" (3). This vampirism, according to de Jong, is "the Reformation tendency to place more value on words than the Word with the resulting tendency towards religious fundamentalism and the violence that ensues" (3).

De Jong develops his thesis over nine chapters. Chapter one, a balanced overview of MacDonald in his Victorian context, holds promise for any reader new to MacDonald studies. Chapter two stands out as a detailed treatment of Victorian views of childhood that will interest all, including MacDonald experts. Chapters three and four consider MacDonald's counter (through his works of fiction) to the dim view of childhood common to Victorian society. Chapter five is a well-articulated overview of MacDonald's theology, with an emphasis on the problem of evil. Chapter six returns to historical context, showing how MacDonald's theology avoids evangelicalism's dual hazards of unchecked liberalism and anxious conservatism. Chapters seven and eight are the apex of the book's argument, suggesting *Lilith* as MacDonald's crowning exposition of de Jong's thesis: the child against the vampire of fundamentalism. The final chapter considers the implications of this thesis.

There is much to appreciate about de Jong's book. It is the fruit of thorough research, considering the full corpus of MacDonald's writings along with an impressive array of secondary sources. He engages with the standard fare of contemporary MacDonald experts such as Prickett, Manlove, Hein, McGillis, and Pennington, and extends his inquiry broadly to recruit an assortment of lesser-known Victorian voices to enrich the conversation. If for no other reason, students of MacDonald will appreciate de Jong's book for its extensive bibliography as it relates to Victorian views of childhood. De Jong can also be credited for conducting a solid theological discussion with his sources. It is clear that he is no stranger to the terrain of his thesis, with the expertise to navigate his challenging subject. And while he finds it hard at times to resist joining MacDonald in his censure of fundamentalism, he does have the restraint to propose a more prosaic view of MacDonald's departure from his Congregational pulpit at Arundel than the poorly examined victim narrative that has been popularized in recent years (15). In the same way, he is not afraid to question MacDonald on his treatment of theodicy (107, 173).

De Jong's exposition of MacDonald's theology is first-rate. Admittedly, similar work offering similar conclusions has already been done by others (Manlove, Hein, and Dearborn immediately come to mind), but I would argue that de Jong's development of MacDonald's view of the child as it relates to the true nature of God is particularly robust, offering new insights. In fact, this alone (with perhaps a treatment of its implications) would suffice as an ample thesis. But de Jong has undertaken the ambitious task of establishing *Lilith* as the magnum opus of MacDonald's polemic against religious fundamentalism. This is an interesting proposition, and de Jong labors in this second endeavor to expound his thesis from *Lilith's* framework. Readers can decide whether his approach is chiefly exegetical or eisegetical in nature, but in any case, I found de Jong's efforts to establish *Lilith's* vampirism as religious fundamentalism to require more development. To de Jong's credit, his treatment of *Lilith* is full of valuable insights, and as those familiar with

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MacDonald's writings will know, *Lilith* is an enigma meant to hold multiple interpretations. Altogether, the exposition of MacDonald's theology, the treatment of *Lilith*, and the efforts to conduct practical theology for a contemporary audience might be considered too much for one thesis. In defense of de Jong, MacDonald's polymathic legacy eludes the restraints of neat categories, so de Jong's trifold treatment of MacDonald's theology, literature, and practical theology reflects in many ways the nature of his complex subject.

No one will question de Jong's worth as a MacDonald scholar. He is a fine thinker and capable theologian who demonstrates exceptional expertise with MacDonald's works. He unveils MacDonald's theological views with soundness and clarity, and despite what may be a nebulous thesis, his book offers a trove of research that should prove valuable for scholars. Furthermore, de Jong's reading of *Lilith* should raise new questions and invite lively debate fitting for MacDonald's Sphinx-like masterpiece. For these reasons, *The Theology of George MacDonald* is a book that deserves its place in the library, reminding readers most of all that MacDonald's concern as a theologian was always "to elicit personal response, not produce watertight theoretical frameworks" (130).

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