Both as a man and a scholar, Michael Goulder richly deserves to be honoured, so it was a great disappointment to me that when I was invited to contribute a theological essay to this book, I was unable, for various reasons, to accept. Although this is primarily a personal appreciation of him, some things will be said about his academic work, of which the first is this: you do not need to accept all his conclusions to recognize the great value of what he has written. When his submission for an Oxford D.D. was being considered by the Faculty Board, one of the most eminent modern theologians remarked: “It’s better to be wrong with Michael than right with most other people,” meaning, I take it, that even when his conclusions do not seem completely acceptable, the wide and accurate learning, and the honesty and rigorous reasoning that have gone into their production are a model to us all and make possible insights on which further valuable work can be based. The comment was not of course meant to suggest that he is always, or generally, wrong; he is in fact an original thinker of great penetration, whose ideas, even those at present controverted, may well turn out to be substantially right. Michael and I have known each other for over forty years, but he already had an interesting life story behind him before we met. Born in 1927, he was sent as a scholar to Eton after a rather unhappy time at a preparatory school. Academically and in some other ways, Eton suited him, though it did little to further his religious development; but when he went on to Trinity College, Cambridge to read classics and economics, he became for a time a (slightly uneasy) convert to the very evangelical Christianity of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, before finding his home in the Student Christian Movement. It was in Cambridge that his career as a Christian was really launched, but when he went down, he decided to become a businessman, following in the footsteps of his father who had been killed during the War. He went out to Hong Kong to work for Jardine Matheson, but his religious con-
cerns soon reasserted themselves, and under the influence of Alaric Rose, the Dean, and of the remarkable Bishop, R.O. Hall, who has been a considerable influence in his life, he was ordained deacon and then priest, to a title at the Cathedral.

Although he was very happy in Hong Kong, he was conscious of having had no formal theological training, so in 1952 he decided to return to England to combine a curacy at the University Church in Oxford with work for the Final Honour School of Theology at Trinity College. His tutor there was another remarkable—and, as he recognized, saintly—man, Dr Austin Farrer, whose influence on Michael, as on many of his pupils and colleagues, was very considerable. Farrer’s theological style and interests can readily be traced not only in Michael’s first book, *Type and History in Acts* (London: SPCK, 1964) but in much of his subsequent work. At least in the short run, however, Farrer’s influence on him was not perhaps altogether healthy. His ways of thinking were virtually dominated by Farrer’s outlook, to an extent that made it difficult for him to find an authentic voice of his own. It was partly this which prevented his being awarded the highest honours in his finals in 1954. Such a situation was by no means peculiar to him. Farrer was a persuasive teacher and his pupils tended to feel they had to become disciples; moreover, as another of his distinguished pupils has put it: “Farrer’s thought tended to form a system, and if you bought into the system at all, you had to buy right into it. It was difficult for pupils to relate to Farrer simply as one interesting voice among others.”

Farrer was essentially a philosophical theologian, but in the post-war period he interested himself in biblical questions, about which, as about everything else, he held very definite views. In particular, he resisted any fragmentation of the text, whether of particular books or of the Bible as a whole. For him the biblical text, like his own theological system, was a seamless robe, and something of this can also be detected in Michael Goulder’s work. Farrer himself described Michael’s first book as a further development of his own thinking, “very much in the right direction”; and the seamless robe motif is also apparent in the later Goulder, for example in his book on the Song of Songs (*The Song of Fourteen Songs*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986). Farrer had included the Old Testament in the scope of his biblical work, though in a very impressionistic way, and here Michael has been altogether more professional; for example, even those who disagree with some of
the conclusions of *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) have recognized the chapter on Chronicles as a very significant contribution to Old Testament scholarship. In fact, though best known for his work on the New Testament, Michael is a highly respected member of the Society for Old Testament Study, and the author of two characteristically original books on the Psalter. It would be quite wrong to overdo the debt to Farrer: Michael is a professional, linguistically fully qualified, and widely recognized biblical scholar—indeed a major biblical scholar—in a way that Farrer never was.

After Oxford, Michael’s desire was to serve in a poor parish, and he spent eight more years in the parochial ministry before returning to Hong Kong in 1962 on a four-year contract as principal of what was called the Union Theological College there, thought it was in fact a small Anglican seminary, with less than ten students. At the end of his time there, which he much enjoyed, and in which he was forced to widen his theological base, nothing came of R.O. Hall’s desire that he should succeed him as bishop, and both of them returned to England, Michael to a post in the Extra-mural Department of Birmingham University—now the School of Continuing Studies. He has remained in the Department ever since, although promotion came only slowly—in the opinion of many competent judges, far more slowly than it should have done. It was only in 1991 that he was made a professor, though the title he then received, Professor of Biblical Studies, shows recognition of his competence in the study of both Testaments.1 Extra-mural work proved to suit him and he has displayed a great aptitude for it. Just to observe his conduct of a study-day for adults is to learn a great deal about educational method.

On the personal side the most significant moment in his time at Birmingham came in the autumn of 1981 when he resigned his orders and publicly declared himself an atheist. No one who was in contact with him at the time could fail to be impressed, not only by the integrity and courage that lay behind the move, but by the sympathetic concern for others which made him hesitate. A lot of people in Hong Kong and in English parishes owed their faith to him, or had had it fortified by the knowledge that it was

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1 Is it true even now, as it should be, that promotion for theologians in universities is completely unrelated to religious orthodoxy—or rather, perhaps, to theological orthodoxy as defined by the contemporary mandarins?
shared by so able and learned a man; and he recognized that his announcement would come as an extremely unsettling shock to many of them.

Still, honesty prevailed, and—somewhat to his surprise, perhaps—his decision was greeted with widespread sympathy, understanding and indeed admiration. This despite the fact that Michael, who has always had a full measure of the missionary spirit, lost none of it after his “conversion.” I remember myself being sharply, though quite fairly, challenged by him in the question session after a public lecture I had given at Warwick University; and a delightful story tells how, on his way to a conference in the north of England, he was to be seen in a station buffet having a cup of coffee with a fairly unacademic and slightly bemused Benedictine monk whom he was trying to “convert” by a species of Socratic dialogue and to whom he eventually cried triumphantly: “You’re as much of an atheist as I am!”

If on occasion he gives the impression of feeling “he that is not with me is against me,” that is understandable in one whose conclusions, both academic and religious, have tended to be against the current, at any rate in his circle, and who has been the object of a good deal of suspicion, both scholarly and religious. Sharp he can certainly be, but the keen concern for truth which lies behind the sharpness, and also the essential humanity and friendliness of the man are not hard to discern. His ready sense of humour is disarming too; the mention of his name immediately conjures up the memory of his many good stories and his characteristic ready laugh. If sheer fecundity of ideas sometimes leads him to speak—or even write—before he is sure, that at least helps to create a healthy theological ferment.

Many stories testify to his absent-mindedness, and his other-worldliness (if he will forgive the expression); but when it comes to matters intellectual and academic, he pushes reason to the limit and always seems to know exactly where he stands. He is a man who tends to see things as either black or white, without being quite so good at the intermediate shades; there must surely be some who envy the very assurance he feels about his atheism.²

² His reasons for his conversion to it are set out with great lucidity and cogency in his contributions to Goulder and J. Hick, Why Believe in God? (London: SCM, 1983), and are best studied in his own words. In essence his case is that no cogent empirical evidence can be produced for the existence or activity of the transcendent: in particular he can find no ground for believing in anything that
To describe Michael as an *anima naturaliter christiana* might appear patronizing, and he would no doubt object to the implications. Yet it would at least be a way of emphasizing that behind the sharpnesses and angularities—in private, as well as in public life—there is a man not only of integrity but also of deep goodness, kindness and compassion. These qualities are fuelled no doubt by his own physical difficulties: as an adolescent he suffered a deforming attack of polio, which inevitably led to a certain amount of self-consciousness and has affected him subsequently in various ways; and in recent years he has had to wage a continuing battle against serious eye trouble. For those fortunate enough to be his friends, knowing Michael is a very enriching experience.  

Could plausibly be called divine providence. A strong belief in providence—indeed in special providences—was a key feature of Farrer’s system, at any rate as Michael understood it, and perhaps the question of Farrer’s influence should be raised again in this connexion. Had the understanding of Christianity Michael took on board at Oxford been less clear-cut, rigid and dogmatic—less “red-blooded,” to use his own term—would he have reacted as sharply as he did in 1981? To raise that question implies no disparagement of the strength and coherence of the case he makes for atheism, and perhaps in any case such questionings of history are futile.

3 I should like to thank Michael’s daughter Catharine and Professor John Barton for their help in the writing of this appreciation.