

Book Reviews

Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up

Monica Weis

Forward by Bonnie Thurston

Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Oregon, 2016

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\$21.00

For anyone interested in Thomas Merton or the early Celtic branch of the Church, this is a book to treasure; one is enriched here by the other. Weis's book breaks new ground in Merton studies by tracing his enthusiasm for the Celtic branch of the Church during the final four years of his life. In September 1964 Merton wrote to Hans Urs Von Balthasar about his absorption in the documents of Celtic monasticism: 'I can think of nowhere in the West where monastic culture was so drenched in brilliant colour and form, with such a dazzled love of God's beauty.' (*School for Charity*)

In Chapter 1 Weis highlights three streams of influence that flowed into Merton's life: his renewed interest in his Welsh ancestry, his friendship with Donald Allchin, and his correspondence with the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Scholar Nora Chadwick.

The link to Merton's Welsh roots came through the Bird family on his grandmother's side. As the author quotes from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 'It is the Welsh in me that counts: that is what does strange things, and writes the books, and drives me into the woods. Thank God for the Welsh in me, all those Birds, those Celts.'

In part of the dedication Weis writes: 'in fond memory of Donald

Allchin who sowed Celtic seeds in my heart.' She shows Donald Allchin, described in his *Guardian* obituary of February 2011 as 'a devotee of all things Welsh - its saints poets and scholars', to have been a major influence on forming Merton's understanding of the Celtic church and its spirituality. While Donald Allchin was on research leave in 1963 he met with Merton at Gethsemani and they immediately built up a common bond through their common interest in Welsh and more broadly Celtic culture. They corresponded and Allchin came twice more to meet up with Merton, in April 1967 and in April 1968, though a planned visit of Merton to Wales never happened.

Chapter 2 gives a summary of the growth of Monasticism from St Anthony in the desert through to Celtic monasticism, with a special emphasis on Ireland. This Chapter gives a good summary of Nora Chadwick's *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, the text of a classic series of lectures on Celtic Spirituality given in 1960, and Merton's own notes on each lecture. What Merton discovered about the ancient Celtic monks and hermits affirmed his desire to seek solitude as a hermit.

Chapter 3 concentrates on The Voyage of Brendan and its importance in Merton's reading and monastic development, and his fascination with the monk's pilgrimage or exile for 'the love of God' or seeking 'the place of one's resurrection'. On July 18th 1964 Merton mentioned that he had received a copy of *The Voyage of St. Brendan*. *The Voyage* is about monks, written by monks, and at least in its original manuscript context, for monks. The chanting of the divine office, fasts, and obedience to the abbot, are all central to the narrative as is Brendan's seven years of voyaging on the sea and through the liturgical calendar of the church. On his journey to the Land of Promise, Brendan did not plot a straight course but rather a spiralling journey which returned to the same places for the major festivals and to the resting places connected with the festivals. These men were travelling through the liturgy on a voyage of discovery and every time they returned to where they had been before they discovered something new. To view the journey of the daily services and the festivals in this way is to see that we too can find there our newness of life, our 'place of resurrection'. By choice and effort we can step out of time and into eternity. This will demand that we are truly alert and ever watchful. To view each festival as a landing place and a stepping stone to the Promised Land is to have our liturgical calendar and festivals enriched along with our own lives.

Merton went from a journey which was a withdrawal from 'the world' to a journey where he rediscovered 'the world' in a greater depth. He

reflected in his journal on January 31, 1965 on the solitude of his journey as reflected in Celtic culture. He described it as 'when the ropes are cast off and the skiff is no longer tied to land, but heads out to sea without ties, without restraints!' Here he was describing his moving towards a deeper solitude as an adventure like Brendan's.

Chapter 4 introduces us to the Celtic Trinitarian way of seeing and imaging. The Celts celebrated the immanence of God whilst respecting his transcendence. For them there was no division between the sacred and the secular; they sought to see God's goodness and holiness in all creation. Many of their daily prayers were directed in a threefold manner to the Trinity

Chapter 5 continues the theme of the immanence of God by looking first at a few contemporary Welsh poets, and then at the early Irish hermits and their poetry, especially that which deals with the woods and solitude. Merton was influenced by the Scottish Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus who highlighted God's delight in creating the individuality of each creature and how its personal identity was a means of revealing God. The author shows how this theological tradition of intimacy between nature and the Divine came to enrich Merton's own contemplation, and his experience and love of the natural world.

Chapter 6 has the title 'So What?' and explores why Merton was interested in the Celts. It suggests that the stories of the Celtic monks formed a capstone to his own research and spiritual journey. It seems that the hermit poetry strengthened his own desire to be a hermit. As part of his spiritual journey, his Celtic studies helped toward attaining a new level of wholeness and holiness. In June 2 1964 Merton wrote in his journal: 'Reading about Celtic Monasticism, the hermits, lyrical poets, the travellers etc. A new world that has waited until this time to open up.'

The chapter ends by asking how our knowledge of his interest in Celtic monasticism and culture might enrich both our knowledge of Thomas Merton's spirituality and our own quest for God, the author highlighting four areas of interest that 'created a sound foundation and context for Merton's new-found enthusiasm for Celtic culture and monasticism' - the theology of the Eastern Church, Russian literary writers, the philosophy of Herakleitos and the principles of Zen.

With writing enthused with Celtic spirituality, listen to his invitation: 'The Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation ... follow Him in his mysterious cosmic dance...to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.' (*New Seeds of Contemplation*) And in the same vein, Merton knew

and lived words of Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'Let Him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us.' (*The Wreck of the Deutschland*)

David Adam was vicar of Holy Island from 1990-2003. He has been writing books on Celtic saints and prayer for well over 30 years. These include lives of Aidan, Cuthbert, Bede, Cedd, and the Voyage of Brendan. He is now retired and lives in Northumberland

Much Ado about Something: A Vision of Christian Maturity

Larry Culliford

SPCK, London, 2015

252pp ISBN 978-0-281-07362-7 (pbk) 252 pages

312.99

Thomas Merton, throughout his career as a contemplative practitioner, invited his readers to accompany him in discovering the mature Christian life through explorations of the meaning of human flourishing. *Much Ado about Something* is not specifically about Merton, but Larry Culliford reflects Merton's philosophy of human flourishing for the common good. Religions have been the traditional repositories of this philosophy by acknowledging the spiritual essence at the heart of material existence. Since the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 modern democratic societies have legally codified the dignity of the person as human rights, but religious wisdom, once the repository of human dignity, has either been relegated to the margins of public discourse or has been castigated as an ideology of political extremism.

Much Ado about Something counters scientism, a pseudo-faith in material rationality, by shining a scientific light on spiritual understanding. Culliford brings to his study a refreshingly interdisciplinary approach as based on his experience as a psychiatrist and as a practicing Christian of deep personal faith. Culliford's exploration of faith maturity is evidence-based as he extrapolates the significance of flourishing for an integrated self from case studies over his 25 years as a clinician.

Culliford's proposition on human flourishing challenges the dominance of scientism to argue that spiritual maturity necessitates the agency to face, rather than to evade, personal doubt and uncertainty, a position profoundly counter-cultural. Culliford supports his argument by

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drawing upon world religions in order to introduce his readers to traditions of contemplative practices that help to facilitate spiritual awakening. The literary device Culliford uses to frame and anchor his study is an overarching 'arc of life' that makes visible the process of an evolving spiritual maturity at different stages along a typical life cycle from infancy to old age. He covers six stages of spiritual development: egocentric, conditioning, conformist, individual, integration, and universal. Culliford alludes to interconnections between spiritual inhibitions at an early stage of this life arc and social ills. For example, fundamentalism is explained in terms of the 'egocentric stage' leader and the 'conformist stage' followers (p. 111). In contrast, Culliford equates spiritual maturity with the instinct to participate in the flourishing of others (p. 171).

This book is brimming with ideas about the nature of personhood, but too many are cursively skimmed rather than sifted and refined. That said, however, Culliford's case study approach gives his writing an authenticity and an intimacy making his book a pleasurable read that can be put down and taken up without losing the thread of his argument. The clarity of approach in this book and the implications of the author's ideas for personal and social well-being should attract a readership that includes those seeking insights into their own spiritual life; those with an interest in mental health, spirituality and the human brain; and those with pastoral roles. *Much Ado about Something* is timely and relevant for today's war-weary world wracked by atrocities too frequently misunderstood as being perpetrated as sacred causes.

James G. R. Cronin, University College Cork, Ireland. (See James Cronin's article on pages 61-68)

The Way of the Hermit: Interfaith Encounters in Silence and Prayer

Mario I Aguilar

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2017

ISBN 978-1-7859-2089-9 (pbk) 208 pages

£16.99

Mario Aguilar is Professor of Religion and Politics in the University of St Andrews and a prolific author. He was born in Chile but had to leave the country after being arrested by the Pinochet regime. He studied in Louvain and went as a Divine Word Missionary to Africa. His academic