

## A RESPONSE TO COLUMBA STEWART

First of all, I would like to thank Fr. Columba for a fascinating paper. The unique role that monks and their offspring, the later religious orders, have played in Christian history makes it an apt starting point with which to begin an investigation of theology in dialogue. Again and again, religious orders have been the first to encounter philosophies, cultures and even countries new to Christianity. One thinks of the Franciscans in the Americas and the Jesuits in China and India, of course. But it was the Celtic monks who, centuries before, were central to the Christianization of the Germanic tribes in the early Middle Ages. They were aided by the Benedictines under the direction of that most monastic of popes, Gregory the Great. The missionary movements of the past, however, are not the place to start the dialogue, important as that history might be.

Fr. Columba rightly opens what one hopes is a series of dialogues with one of the central issues for Western Christianity. No other dialogue has so influenced the Christianity that arose in the Roman Empire as strongly and thoroughly as Greek thought. For the many Christians who look to Rome or Constantinople as home, and for those missionized by them, the Christian message has been embodied in the language of Greek philosophy and become nearly indistinguishable from it. Fr. Columba has carefully pointed out, though, that the monks themselves were suspicious of the philosophy that they appropriated. They realized that Greek thought was not necessary to the gospel message and they undertook, as Fr. Columba so aptly put it, in “strategies of acknowledgment and engagement.”

Athanasius in his *Life of Antony*, Evagrius and Cassian wrestled with the proper way to monitor and regulate Greco-Roman philosophy to fit (as nearly as that could be done) the goals of the Gospel message. Behind Evagrius and Cassian lurked the genius of Origen, both intriguing and troubling to those Christians down through the centuries who have tried to meld a message consistent both with Christianity and with the inheritance of Greek philosophy. The issues with which Origen, Athanasius, Evagrius and Cassian struggled have their counterpart in the present as Christian theologians once again attempt to translate the traditional languages in which Christianity has been passed down into the thought worlds of modern cultures. Here the experiences of the monastic theologians, with their wary, prayerful and practice-oriented appropriation of culture can serve as a guide and a gentle warning to our own efforts.

The early Christian monks met other problems, however; problems that Fr. Columba acknowledges, but which could not possibly be addressed in a single presentation. As Fr. Columba has indicated, because of its central role in Christian history, monasticism offers a unique space from which to pursue several points of

dialogue. The most important issue, of course, has already been opened up by Fr. Columba in his investigation of the ambiguous role of Greek philosophy in monastic thought. In the spirit of his presentation, however, I would like to suggest a few other avenues to which this fascinating talk could only allude in passing.

First, the danger that the monks recognized of identifying Christianity with Greek thought highlights the fact that Christianity need not be expressed in Greek thought at all. This reminds those of us in the West that Christianity from its very beginnings also spread outside the Roman Empire and engaged other thought worlds. The earliest, largest and most important of these was the Syrian culture of the Persian Empire. Persian Christians breathed in a culture influenced not only by Greek thought, but also by the state religion of Zoroastrianism. Persian Christians, perhaps as numerous as those of the West right up until the fourteenth century, developed their own form of monasticism and of monastic theology.<sup>1</sup> This theology is exemplified, or at least best known in the West, by Ephrem the Syrian, whose positive portrayal of the feminine nature of God at work in redemption fascinates and confounds many in the West. Unlike Western Christians, Persian Christians never gained the status of a state religion, but were always a subject religion, first to Zoroasterianism and then to Islam. Christians who are, or are perceived to be, at least culturally, in some sense a minority will develop a quite different theology and practice than those who consider themselves, at least culturally, the majority. Those of us who were privileged to participate in the discussion of Latino/a Catholic and Black Catholic Self-Disclosure at the joint colloquium of The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States and the Black Catholic Theological Symposium held immediately before this conference were made fully aware of the differences such status can entail.

The long experience with Islam of Persian Christians, of whom Persian monks were often the religious and intellectual leaders, can give real insight into how Christians might respectfully coexist with their Islamic neighbors.<sup>2</sup> For example, it is often forgotten that it was the Persian Christians who set up schools where the Greek classics were first translated into Syriac and then, under Islamic rule, into Arabic, thus saving Greek science and philosophy from being lost.<sup>3</sup> When the Latin theologians of the Middle Ages learned the Greek classics by means of Arabic translations and commentaries, they were merely inheriting at a distance the legacy of their Persian Christian brothers and sisters.

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<sup>1</sup>For an estimate of numbers in the Persian church and its importance for theology today, see *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning: Rendering Accounts* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Press, 1998) 108-10. For a recent introduction to the history of the Persian church see Dale Irwin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Press, 2001) 57-65, 111-13, 125-26, 195-208, 271-88.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the earliest written dialogues between Syrian Christians and Islam, see Sidney Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Irwin and Sunquist, *Earliest Christianity*, 276-78.

Of course, the Persians were not the only Christians to develop a theology and practice outside the Roman Empire. Ethiopian Christianity, Nubian Christianity, and Armenian Christianity,<sup>4</sup> all developed in dialogue with other thought worlds only marginally influenced by the Greco-Roman thought that was the very air of the Christianity of the Roman Empire. The St. Thomas Christians of India, most strikingly, evolved a Christian practice and theology far more influenced by Hinduism than by the Syrian church with whom they were in contact.<sup>5</sup> Time allows no more than a mention of these traditions, but surely important lessons that could be learned from the experience of these, our sister communities. As Christianity struggles to position itself in a multicultural and multireligious world, it could learn much from those Christians who existed as minorities within cultures other than those formed by the Greco-Roman thought world of the Roman Empire.

A second venue for dialogue hinted at by Fr. Columba is equally relevant to the modern theological scene. Fr. Columba mentioned that it was Melania the Elder, the “most learned woman of monastic Palestine,” who advised Evagrius to head out into the Egyptian desert. Hints of a fascinating dialogue indeed! The ascetic life was not closed to women, even if “in Christian portrayal, the philosopher was always male.” Women could also undergo the *askesis*, attain control over their appetites, and, once having done so, achieve a state of spiritual equality with their male peers. Jo Ann McNamara, Marie Anne Mayeski and Prudence Allen, to name only three of the scholars who have investigated this area, suggest that in the early medieval west, monasticism, particularly in its missionary ministry, offered unprecedented opportunities for men and women to operate on nearly equal terms, both intellectually and spiritually. This was quite an accomplishment in a society that could be particularly harsh for women.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of a partnership between ascetic men and women was dashed by the great changes wrought by the eleventh- and twelfth-

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<sup>4</sup>For a recent introduction to the history of these churches, see Irvin and Sunquist, *Earliest Christianity*, 113-14, 206-208, 215-19, 250-51, 281-82, 289-97, 470-75, 492-96.

<sup>5</sup>For a brief, but informative introduction to the history and practice of the St. Thomas Christians, see K. Pathil, “India, Christianity in,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003) 7:392-401, and Irvin and Sunquist, *Earliest Christianity*, 93-95, 113-14, 307-11, 495-96.

<sup>6</sup>See Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press) 120-47; idem, “The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150,” in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare Lees, *Medieval Cultures* 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 3-39; idem, “An Unresolved Syllogism: The Search for a Christian Gender System” in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1999) 1-24; Marie Anne Mayeski, “Excluded by the Logic of Control: Women in Medieval Society and Scholastic Theology,” in *Equal at the Creation: Sexism, Society, and Christian Thought*, ed. Joseph Martos and Pierre Hégy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 70-95; idem, *Women at the Table: Three Medieval Theologians* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004); and Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997–2002) 1:252-328, 408-10.

century reform movements, when women ceased to be ordained as deaconesses and abbesses.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, history offers an intriguing model here. Again it is a dialogue made possible by monasticism, this time a dialogue between the sexes, that bears further scrutiny and recovery.

But the assumedly sexless, if not genderless, partnerships of early medieval monks and nuns open up another area of dialogue. Where does that leave married Christians? With the enforcement of celibacy in the twelfth century, a long tradition of married clergy came to close in the West. At least in part, mandatory celibacy was the result of a centuries-long debate about the relative merits of the ascetic life and the family life. The eleventh-century reformers, who were largely monks, were firmly convinced that the ascetic life was superior to the family life and therefore clergy would be holier if they adopted the monastic practice of sexual abstinence.<sup>8</sup> Married Christians were redefined inescapably as lay people and as such were definitely second-class Christians since they were incapable of either sacral or administrative leadership. A third area for several dialogues arises. How should the ancient practice of *askesis* be understood and practiced today? What should be the relationship between *askesis* and continence? Does the self-possession described by Fr. Columba as central to the *askesis* of the early centuries still require complete sexual self-denial? If not, how would this affect the monastic life? Is *askesis*, then, open to married couples?

More centrally, how can the important and ancient Christian lifestyles of the married and the celibate respectfully dialogue, learning from each other as equals the beauties inherent in these different forms of Christian life. Such an approach should not start with the assumption (still often prevalent in some Roman Catholic circles) that celibacy is the preferred Christian life and marriage is only a default option for the weak. One can imagine that such a dialogue would go far to address tensions between clergy and laity in the present Roman Catholic Church since celibate bishops and priests could be understood historically as standing precariously between the two vocations of monasticism and the secular life.

Well, it must seem that I have strayed far from Fr. Columba's topic, that is, how monastic theology dealt with Greek philosophy. I would claim, however, that, if it so seems, it is only because Fr. Columba's model of monasticism as a space for opening up multiple dialogues is simply too intriguing, his allusions to other issues that could be raised using this approach is simply too enticing not to follow up on

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<sup>7</sup>The definition of ordination changed in the 11th and 12th centuries to exclude women and married males. On this subject, see Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 481-507; idem, "The 'Invention' of Clergy and Laity in the Twelfth Century," in *A Sacramental Life: A Festschrift Honoring Bernard Cooke*, ed. Michael Horace Barnes and William P. Roberts (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003) 117-35; and idem, "Heloise, Abelard, and the Ordination of Abbesses," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57 (2006): 16-32.

<sup>8</sup>On the enforcement of celibacy in the 11th and 12th centuries and the resistance to it, see Anne Barstow, *Married Priests and the Reforming Papacy: The Eleventh-Century Debates*, Texts and Studies in Religion 12 (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1982).

them. Fr. Columba reminds us how central monasticism has been, and one prays, will always continue to be in Christian life and history. Monasticism started as a form of liberation. Let us thank Fr. Columba for pointing out how powerful that liberation can still be in opening up important conversations for theology today.

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