

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Clashing Symbols. An Introduction to Faith-and-Culture by Michael Paul Gallagher

Review by: Eamonn Conway

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ousness within a wider tradition of philosophical or theological thought.

The only person who seems to admit the possibility that 'the fight between art and religion is an ancient and a necessary one' is John Devitt quoting the poet James Fenton.

The major difficulty we have with these two stimulating books is to do with time-lag. They are, on the one hand, too out of date when they reach us (the first were lectures given in the spring of 1996) and should, maybe take on a more immediate and journalistic presence, as a monthly magazine, for instance. On the other hand, they are too flimsy and ephemeral to do justice to the kinds of illustration which the two pieces on visual art would require. Such is the quandary of the editors and book publishers. However, to be reading in April 1997 about a play 'currently playing in the Project' which is so vividly and brilliantly described that you want to go out and buy a ticket, only to find that 'currently' means 1995, and to be told that 'the current hype in *Glenroe* is about a rape trial; in *Fair City*, the issue of the sale of a pizzeria ...' is too local and too anachronistic for the 'book' genre.

The most exciting category in these collections was that of 'epiphanic' art, used by Joseph Dunne to describe the kind of structures which Christianity might put in place to create 'chinks through which what is other than ourselves' might break through 'with a power to show us – in part indeed to make us – other than we thought'. In the note at the end of this article he quotes Alisdair Mac Intyre as suggesting that this necessity could betoken another kind of St Benedict! Such is exactly what the monks of Glenstal Abbey are trying to create in and for Ireland. These essays are valuable pointers in the same direction and signs that the Spirit is moving us in these directions.

MARK PATRICK HEDERMAN
CYPRIAN LOVE

Glenstal Abbey, Limerick

Clashing Symbols. *An introduction to faith-and-culture.* Michael Paul Gallagher, SJ. London: Darton Longman and Todd. Pp. 170. Price UK£9.95.

This book, its subject matter, and the manner in which it is handled, is clearly the work of someone of considerable scholarship, with a keen sense of mission. It is a book written not to provide information 'for the sake of it' but rather to effect transformation. Anyone interested in being part of such a transformation will find the book inspiring.

Immediately one is struck by the clear structure and sense of direction of the book. The author begins by clarifying the concept of culture and synthesizing the views of a selected number of commentators on this subject. Material is sifted carefully and presented with as much lucidity as the complex subject matter allows.

Gallagher then turns his attention to the Second Vatican Council and in particular to the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*. What he describes as two foundation stones of Catholic thinking on culture emerged from this Council: culture is intimately linked with the dignity

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of the person and with the call of freedom to become more fully human. In retrospect *Gaudium et Spes* has proven to be both 'prophetic' and, in ways which he argues convincingly, 'innocently optimistic' with regard to the modern world (p. 43). And the document itself is uneven in places. Nonetheless its fundamental concern – a more positive listening to the situations of today as 'signs of the times' (p. 37) – was valid then and has remained so. This is a document of the Council about which, relatively speaking, we have not heard very much, which raises the question whether this 'unexpected child of the Council' (p. 36) was also an unwanted one.

The next two chapters, 'Catholic Developments since 1965' and 'The World Council of Churches: a Different Approach' complete a comprehensive marking out of the pitch from the ecclesial side. The inclusion of an ecumenical perspective is valuable, and particularly helpful is the retrieval of key points from Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi*. And as we move to a consideration of more recent Church deliberations on faith and culture it will not be lost on the reader that Gallagher spent five years working at the Pontifical Council for Culture established by John Paul II in 1982. Gallagher makes several references to addresses given by the Pope on this subject. These do not become tedious for two reasons: Gallagher's own informative commentary on the texts, and the fact that, in comparison with other aspects of present papal teaching, the Pope's views on culture have received little attention and response. In fact, one wonders why bishops who took the papal hint and established centres for family renewal have not also set up institutes for the study of faith and culture. Just recently again (March 23) John Paul instructed that 'each particular Church must have a cultural plan'.

In the remaining chapters Michael Paul Gallagher comes into his own as he assesses the contemporary context of faith and culture and begins to point a way forward. Those who have struggled with terms such as modernity, postmodernity and postmodernism will find simple yet scholarly distinctions and clarifications. And now that we have arrived at discussion of the nineties we find that this book is about us and not just about ideas. We find ourselves on stage and are challenged to look critically at the roles we are, perhaps unwittingly, playing. The reader can see clearly the advantages and disadvantages of modernity and postmodernity in terms of quality of life and full human growth, also the appeal of many of the more destructive aspects of postmodernism. Readers will be struck by the extraordinarily balanced presentation of the world in which they live and find themselves gently disturbed into an exploration of their own unquestioned assumptions and patterns of behaviour.

What we are called to is an 'aggressive discernment of culture'. To explain what Gallagher means here by 'aggressive': the Church, he argues, is not meant simply to play the game on whatever pitch it finds itself. Its matches must not always be 'away'. The Christian community is called to be creative of culture and in so doing participates in the work of its Creator-God. He therefore chides those whose fundamental stance towards contemporary culture is that of the 'tense adversary' (p. 117).

Their 'armour-plated Christian attitudes' are often the result of fear and of a failure to read the signs of the time with the eyes of faith. But, interestingly, for a papal rebuke of these 'prophets of gloom', Gallagher has to go back to the opening address of Pope John XXIII to the Second Vatican Council.

Those who have the opposite tendency, who settle for an innocent acceptance of contemporary culture, are also selling the Good News short. They fail to appreciate 'the inescapable differentness of the gospel way' (p. 119) which 'transcends common sense' and must always be in some kind of tension with the assumptions of a non-religious culture. In this context Gallagher makes some pertinent observations concerning the topical and thorny issues of pluralism and relativism (pp. 119-120).

What Gallagher means by *discernment* of culture becomes crystal clear in his commentary on Acts 17. And as we arrive with St Paul at the Areopagus we also arrive at the central message of this book. What the Christian community most needs at this point in its pilgrim journey are aggressive, intelligent discerners of culture. And so I suggest that no more pastoral plans should be put in place, no further pastoral letters penned, until the contents of this book have been carefully considered. The right-ordering of the relationship between faith and culture in contemporary society will not be achieved by superficial strategies or knee-jerk responses but only by serious study, prayerful reflection and hard work.

With regard to the text as a whole I was left wondering if there was sufficient acknowledgment of the cultural arrogance of the Church in the recent past. People can still put names and faces on 'tense adversaries'; ecclesiastical tyrants who, at national, or perhaps more destructively, at local level, wielded power over the most minute aspects of their lives. There is still much healing work to be done if the Church is to regain its credibility as a creator, or better, co-creator of culture.

In a delightful if brief personal epilogue Gallagher acknowledges that the book is at times (unavoidably, in my opinion) complex, and he wishes to end with something simpler and more personal. He talks of bringing Italian friends to his home town of Collooney, County Sligo, and of being with children at the National Gallery where they preferred to sit in front of the computers while he and some other adults went off to examine 'the real thing'. There is, I suspect, another book on faith-and-culture to be written by Michael Paul along these more personal lines.

Michael Paul Gallagher has an academic background with which few scholars can compare. Not only can he hold his own in the field of English Literature, he can also draw theologians such as Newman, Lonergan, Rahner and Balthasar, as well as the less well known but no less significant Sebastian Moore, into fruitful dialogue with one another, and all in a language which is accessible to the average reader. But above all it is the tone, a blending of confidence which comes from faith with passion and a sense of mission, which makes this book so essential to the rebuilding of the Christian community.

'Towards what are our hearts moving?' Gallagher asks (p. 122). If this

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book is read in the spirit in which it was written the reader will have a welcome and dependable companion for the journey.

EAMONN CONWAY

All Hallows College, Dublin

Called to be a Nuisance. *Reflections from the Fringe.* Betty Maher. Dublin: The Columba Press. Pp. 96. Price £5.99.

In this clear-eyed and succinct volume, Betty Maher takes on many of the most pressing questions that the Roman Catholic Church faces as it enters the new millennium. She speaks from her own pained experience as a lay woman called to ministry in a patriarchal Church, who has seen how women are regarded as a nuisance when they are called to the same service as their male counterparts.

Her hurt is evident as she recounts the story of a young woman who made 'an act of faith' in allowing her son to be baptized into a Church 'which denigrates his mother, his grandmother and his sisters'. The reader senses her frustration when, called to serve as a minister of the Eucharist, she watches a celebrant break the large host into four pieces and consume them all himself. She details the denigration of women implicit in the establishment not just of a male clergy but a celibate one, and raises social issues that have clearly been defined by a male hierarchy. How, for example, Maher asks, can one state that 'every sexual act must be open to the transmission of life' if one considers a pregnancy that arises from the abuse of a young girl?

But there is more than just anger here. She looks to the New Testament for examples of women welcomed by Jesus in their service, and provides recommendations for progress today. An answer, she says, is collaborative ministry between the ordained and non-ordained, calling this not only a question of the future of the Church, but also of justice. Maher offers encouraging first steps: involving women more visibly and deeply in liturgies, for example, or addressing the issue of inclusive language in discussions of God. She calls for more practical discussion of the use of lay ministry, including the issue of how the work of these women and men will be funded.

Maher writes of a meeting gathered by BASIC – Brothers and Sisters in Christ – a movement for the promotion of ordination to the priesthood of women in the Roman Catholic Church, where an ordained man said to her, 'We are at peace today here because it is so obvious; it quite simply has to come.'

Can it be this clear? Then again, how can it not?

As I read this book, I recalled how, as a child in New York City in the 1960s, I badly wanted to join my brother as an altar server. What struck me was the realization that I rarely voiced this wish. Girls simply could not serve at Mass. Thinking back, I was amazed at my own passivity. I was, to use a phrase from Maher's introduction, 'educated to acquiescence'.

Now, of course, girls serve at Mass around the world; some of the younger ones may not remember a time when girls were not on the altar.