

Foreword

When I first learned that my doctoral supervisor at Oxford was to be Donald Allchin, I was pleased but slightly surprised; I had associated him up to that point with his work on the Anglican monastic revival, and I was planning to study contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology. The surprise didn't last, of course. Not only did I discover the unique breadth of Donald's acquaintance with the Orthodox world, I learned never to be surprised at the depth and range of Donald's interests. At the end of our first hour of (nominal) supervision, during which we had discussed Orthodoxy, Merton, Wales, David Jones, John Wesley, and much else besides (even, briefly, my proposed research), he said with that characteristic beaming smile, "Well! This is all turning out even better than we could have hoped." What I think he meant was that he was always delighted by the chance of conversation that roamed anarchically around the wide world of Western and Eastern Christian civilization and glad to find someone who was equally happy to let it do so—even if they could not begin to match his energy, appetite, and capacity to make connections.

As many have said, that capacity was one of his greatest gifts: allowing you to link up some insight from a modern Episcopalian literary critic with an aphorism from sixth-century Syria, a Welsh elegy, and the notebooks of some out-of-the-way Tractarian; and linking up people with the same imaginative gusto ("You know x, of course? No? Really? Oh, you *must* meet . . ."). Thinking about all sorts of things and persons that have been intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally precious to me over the years, I am quite taken aback to recall how many of them I owe to Donald: from an introduction to some of Merton's lesser-known work through to the manuscripts of Vladimir Lossky that formed the main matter for my doctoral research, from the philosophy of Christos Yannaras to the poetry of Denise Levertov, and the later Geoffrey Hill (whose *Tenebrae* I first picked up in Donald's

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house in Canterbury). It is Donald's eye and ear that I realize picked out for me so much that gave lasting nourishment and joy.

In 1973 I went with him on a visit to Paris to meet an assortment of mostly Orthodox friends, and was delighted and amused to see that the reaction to him of these Franco-Russians was so like the way in which he was received and welcomed in the UK—the affectionate exasperation at his utter impracticality, the awe at the breadth of his interests, the intense warmth of appreciation and gratitude for his spiritual luminosity. His unselfconscious enthusiasm and sheer enjoyment of his friends and his faith never seemed to vary from one cultural context to another, and the response was always the same. And, it must be said, his willingness (untypical of the English) to converse in fluently rickety and English-accented French (or indeed Welsh) never failed to consolidate the affection he won.

One of those Orthodox friends remarked on that visit as he greeted him, “Pas encore évêque?” “Not a bishop yet?” And that reminds us of another feature of Donald's ministry: he managed to be close to many powerful and influential figures in the church, near the heart of the Anglican Establishment in Oxford and Canterbury, yet supremely uninterested in church politics, let alone a “career” in the church. He once quoted to me a remark made to him by (I think) David Edwards when both were young clergy: “You'll be fine when you're Dear Old Father Allchin—but what are you going to do until then?” In the event, he found innumerable things to do, and none of them required any particular hierarchical meal ticket. It was part of the “monastic” quality of his contribution to the church. He came close a couple of times to committing himself to the monastic calling in the traditional sense; but (surely rightly) recognized his charism as being more to do with living on the edge of the institution in a rather different way—even more insecure in many respects, but simply a visible presence on the edge of the church's “business” world, reminding people of other and more fruitful explorations to be had, if only they would turn to the larger horizon. Unfussily compliant (mostly) with the rules around intercommunion and the like, he nevertheless behaved in so many respects as if the divisions between churches had already been healed. He was never an ecumenical negotiator; always an ecumenical witness. To be with him in that context was to recognize that in some profound sense he was right and the divisions *had* been healed—not by our ingenuity and good will but by the abiding, inexhaustible presence of grace. Like a few others of his generation, he embodied a style of Anglican identity that succeeded in being

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utterly and humbly hospitable just because it was fundamentally confident and unworried. It does no harm to be reminded that this was once possible; and perhaps still is, by the grace of God.

The essays in this book present a wonderfully rounded picture of Donald in so many settings, so many conversations. For those who knew him, they will rekindle not only memories, but shared enthusiasms; for those who didn't, they should open up a world of new and startling possibilities for joining up the dots in theology and creativity and spiritual understanding. It is a welcome tribute to a loving and much beloved friend, and I hope it will make new friends for him and his vision of the church and the kingdom.

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