

Introduction

Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan of Diokleia

Donald Allchin's friend Thomas Merton has written some striking words that apply exactly to Donald himself.

If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. . . . We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.¹

Donald did indeed come close to realizing within himself “the secret and unspoken unity” of which Merton was speaking. Christian reconciliation was the central theme that inspired his life. To a remarkable degree he united in himself Eastern and Western Christendom, Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and the Anglican and Protestant worlds. He wrote scholarly works on monasticism in the Church of England and on the great Danish theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig. He was co-editor of a book on the hymns of John and Charles Wesley. He loved the land and the poetry of Wales. He numbered among his friends several of the leading theologians of the Orthodox Church, such as the Greeks Demetrios Koutroubis and Christos Yannaras, the Russian Vladimir Lossky and the Romanian Dumitru Staniloae. He was truly a bridge-builder.

1. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 21. In this introduction I draw upon the obituary that I wrote on Donald Allchin in the journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St Sergius. Ware. “Obituary,” 37–46. Used with permission.

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Through this notable variety of interests—wide-ranging, yet without superficiality—Donald’s life was marked above all by the quality of *fullness*. This was rightly emphasized by Archbishop Rowan Williams in the homily that he gave at the High Mass of Requiem and Thanksgiving held in Donald’s memory in St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford, on January 12, 2011. “Emptiness,” said Archbishop Rowan, “was not a quality of any desk, any room or conversation with which Donald was involved. And it is that fullness we are celebrating today, the fullness of a man and a mind and a heart receptive in a very rare way to whatever gifts the Father gave.” The Archbishop went on to speak of Donald’s “capacity for welcome, a spiritual and intellectual hospitality the like of which is rarely seen.”² The contributions to this present volume, written from different points of view, illustrate exactly the receptive and outgoing generosity of Donald’s “spiritual and intellectual hospitality.”

Arthur Macdonald Allchin, to give him his full name—but to everyone he was known as Donald—was born in London on Easter Day, April 20, 1930, the son of a distinguished doctor. He was the youngest in a family of four, with two brothers and one sister. He was brought up as an Anglican. From 1943 to 1948 he was educated at Westminster School. In his first two years the school was still in Worcestershire, where it had been evacuated during the war, but in 1945 it returned to London, resettling as best it could in buildings that had been partially destroyed by bombing. In 1948 Donald entered Christ Church, Oxford, where he read Modern History, gaining his BA in 1951 with Second Class Honors. Although at this time most young men were required to do two years of “National Service” in the armed forces, Donald was exempted from this, presumably on grounds of health. Still remaining at Christ Church, he embarked on postgraduate research into the revival of the religious life in nineteenth-century Anglicanism. For this he was awarded the degree of BLitt in 1956. Today he would certainly have received a DPhil, but standards in those days were more demanding.

This led to his first published book, *The Silent Rebellion*,³ a pioneering study that is still well worth reading, based on the original sources, both published and unpublished, and notable for the skill with which it places the Anglican monastic movement in its broader cultural context. Donald expressed particular admiration for Fr. R. M. Benson, founder of the Society of St. John the Evangelist (the “Cowley Fathers”). In common with all

2. Williams, “The sermon preached by the Archbishop,” 46–47.

3. Allchin, *The Silent Rebellion*.

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his works, the book was written in a fluent and elegant style that was easily readable. Yet here, as also in his other works, I sometimes wish that he had developed his theme with greater rigor and precision, pressing his argument to a more decisive conclusion. He was asking the right questions, but there was something deficient in the answers. It has to be said that Donald was not a systematic thinker. His main strength did not lie in dogmatic theology, nor did he ever study philosophy in any depth. He was at his best when writing imaginatively about the life of prayer, and when exploring in a free-ranging manner the interaction between spirituality and poetry.

In 1954 Donald entered Cuddesdon Theological College, outside Oxford, where he trained for the Anglican ministry. He spent eight months in Greece, from July 1955 to March 1956, as a Philip Usher Scholar, and during this time he visited Athos, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. He was ordained deacon in 1956 and priest in 1957. From 1956 to 1960 he was one the curates at the fashionable Kensington parish of St. Mary Abbots. This was his only experience of parochial work, for he never served as priest-in-charge of any parish. While firmly rooted in the High Church tradition, he was not an extreme Anglo-Catholic.

In 1960 Donald moved back to Oxford, spending nine years as Librarian at Pusey House. During this time he developed close links with the Sisters of the Love of God at the Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford. In 1967 he succeeded the well-known spiritual director Fr. Gilbert Shaw as Warden of the Community, a position that he held for twenty-seven years until 1994. In the words of one of the nuns, Sister Rosemary, “He used sometimes to say that his relationship to SLG provided a thread of continuity through the changes of his life, and he gave something of the same to us.” Another women’s community of which he served as Warden from 1986–2008 was the Anglican Society of the Sacred Cross at Tymawr in Wales. Although himself far from being a recluse, he took a particular interest in the eremitic life, and acted as guide to several solitaries. He organized a memorable conference on the hermit life during September 29–October 4, 1975 at St. David’s in Wales; the proceedings were published two years later by Fairacres Publications under the title *Solitude and Communion*.⁴

Among the research students at Oxford whom Donald supervised was the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Rowan’s thesis on the theology of Vladimir Lossky, for which he was awarded a doctorate in 1975, has unfortunately remained unpublished. It is a work of great

4. Allchin, ed. *Solitude and Communion*.

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brilliance, in no way superseded, and it is much to be hoped that it will eventually see the light of day. There is a story told of Rowan's time as Donald's student—I cannot vouch for its accuracy—that after a few weeks Donald told Rowan that there was nothing further that he could teach him. Be that as it may, in his preface Rowan thanks his supervisor for “unfailing help and encouragement,” and speaks of the “many insights” that Donald provided through his personal acquaintance with Lossky.

From 1973 to 1987 Donald was a Residentiary Canon at Canterbury Cathedral. The relatively large house that was assigned to him (since then, pulled down) enabled him to provide a home for his elderly parents. “Residentiary” is perhaps not totally appropriate as a description of his life during those years, for he was frequently absent from Canterbury at conferences and speaking engagements. He was, for example, a visiting lecturer at Nashotah House, Wisconsin, and also at General Theological Seminary and at Trinity Institute in New York. In 1973, with the establishment of the International Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission, Donald was an obvious choice as one of the delegates, and he continued to play a highly positive part in the dialogue until 1984. The two Agreed Statements produced by the Commission during those early, creative years—the Moscow Statement of 1976 and the Dublin Statement of 1984—owe much to his expertise and discernment.

In the anonymous obituary in *The Times* on December 31, 2010, it is asserted concerning his years at Canterbury, that Donald did not enjoy his time at the cathedral. This is strenuously denied by some who knew him well at this time. Admittedly, cathedrals these days are complex organizations, and Donald was far from being a natural administrator. But he valued the monastic past of the cathedral and its choral tradition, although he was doubtless less at home with its civic role. Incidentally, there is another misleading statement in *The Times* obituary, when it said that Donald possessed “private” financial resources. He may have received a small inheritance from his parents, but he was never well off financially. His way of life, without being ascetic, was modest and simple.

In 1987 Donald returned once more to Oxford, to become the first Director of the St. Theosevia Center for Christian Spirituality. Here Donald was in his natural element, for the purpose of the Center is to build bridges between Eastern and Western ways of prayer, and this was a cause very close to his heart. The Center, at 2 Canterbury Road, is closely associated with the nearby ecumenical House of St. Gregory and St. Macrina, dedicated to

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work for Christian unity, and also with the Orthodox community worshipping in the adjacent church of the Holy Trinity and the Annunciation. At St. Theosevia's Donald organized an exciting program of day conferences, while from time to time the Center also sponsored seminars of a more academic character, bringing together senior members of the university.

In 1994 Donald returned to Wales, a land to which he had long felt strongly attracted. He was a keen admirer of the Welsh poet and artist David Jones, as also of other poets who have enriched the literary tradition of Wales in the last two hundred years, such as Ann Griffiths, Gwennallt, Saunders Lewis, and R. S. Thomas. Settling in Bangor, North Wales, he was made an honorary professor at the University of North Wales. By the end of his life he had become fluent in the Welsh language.

As his health deteriorated, Donald planned to return to Oxford. But a house in Bangor will not buy one in Oxford, and so he moved to Woodstock, some eight miles distant. Before he could settle into his new home, he had to be transferred to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, and here he died shortly before Christmas, on December 23, 2010. Donald, it has been rightly said, never acquired the art of cooking and housekeeping, and in his later years he was fortunate to be looked after by his friend Ciaran.

Donald neither desired nor received high office in the Anglican Church, for he was essentially a free spirit. At one time he was invited to become dean of a major English cathedral, but he declined the offer. It was a wise decision. He would have had oversight of a staff of more than sixty persons, and this he would not have enjoyed; and he would have been required to remain in one place, whereas he was always by inclination a wanderer. The possibility was mentioned more than once that he might become a diocesan bishop in the Anglican Church of Wales. That would have suited him better, as his gifts of preaching and of pastoral care could have been put to good use. In the end, however, nothing came of this.

While sociable, with an outstanding gift for friendship, he remained unmarried. In our numerous conversations, on no occasion did he imply that he had ever seriously envisaged marriage. In a notebook that he kept, entitled "A Book of Prayers," found after his death, he inserted a piece of paper dated December 20, 1957, with the words, "O Lord, if it be thy will, grant me the grace to serve thee in a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. Amen." This suggests that, around the time of his priestly ordination, he

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made a private vow of celibacy. This he kept throughout his life. He may also have thought, particularly during the 1950s, of entering a religious community, but he never did so. Throughout his life, however, he followed a disciplined pattern of daily prayer and regular almsgiving.

Donald was a prolific writer, the author or editor of some twenty-two books. The most substantial among them were the two works already mentioned, *The Silent Rebellion*, and his monograph on Grundtvig.⁵ Danish Lutherans have assured me that, in their opinion, this is the best work on Grundtvig in any language, not excepting Danish; and this is indeed high praise, in view of the jealous pride with which Grundtvig's fellow-countrymen extol his memory. Many of Donald's other works were collections of talks and of occasional essays rather than systematic expositions of a single topic. But all of them abound in original ideas and illuminating insights. A recurrent theme in his writings is the sacred in nature, one of his works being entitled characteristically *God's Presence Makes the World*.⁶

No account of Donald's life would be complete that did not emphasize his love of poetry. When asked what a speaker should bring to an audience, his immediate and simple advice was: "Give them poetry, poetry, poetry!" This leads me to recall how, when I was at Westminster School, during my first year as a "Junior" in 1947–48, Donald was the Monitor in charge of the communal room to which I was assigned. It was the custom at the end of the school year for each Senior to give a book to one of us Juniors, as a reward for the "fagging" that we had done (not that Donald ever made heavy demands on us, nor did he exercise his right as a Monitor to impose corporal punishment). At that time, although only aged thirteen, I took a precocious interest in philosophy. We were allowed, during the periods of evening "prep," to read a book of our choice when we had completed our work, but we had to secure permission from the Monitor in charge. On one occasion, so Donald used to remind me—I myself had forgotten about this—I went up to Donald and asked him, "Allchin, may I read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*?" Donald, however, when he approached me about the book that he proposed to give me, said firmly and even severely, "I shall not give you a book of philosophy: I shall give you some poetry." What he gave me was in fact *The Oxford Book of English Verse*—not at all a bad choice, as it introduced me to a wide range of poetry with which I was unfamiliar. As I write, I have the very same copy before me now, in which he has put

5. Allchin, *Grundtvig*.

6. Allchin, *God's Presence Makes the World*.

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a quotation from Chaucer as his inscription: “Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al!”

From the Welsh poets whom he loved Donald quoted in particular the opening words of a poem by Ann Griffiths, “Wonderful in the sight of angels” Truly, a sense of wonder was one of his most attractive characteristics. It was his openness to the dimension of wonder that led him to feel an especial affinity with the seventeenth-century mystical poet Thomas Traherne. He was a founder-member of the Traherne Association, established in Hereford some twenty years ago, and he was a faithful attender at its annual conferences.

The concentric eddies of Donald’s many interests and enthusiasms were ever expanding. Donald liked to use the phrase of Ann Griffiths, “We are keeping house amidst a cloud of witnesses,” and his own noetic domicile had no lack of denizens. He was at home in many worlds. In addition to his links with Eastern Orthodoxy and Danish Lutheranism, he had plenty of Roman Catholic friends. He was much influenced by André Louf, Abbot of Mont des Cats, and while at Canterbury—with the support of the Dean and Chapter—he arranged for regular visits by monks and nuns from Bec, as well as from Mont des Cats and Chevetogne, who stayed in the precincts and shared in the liturgical life of the cathedral. Another Roman Catholic friend was Thomas Merton, whom Donald met during visits to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1963, 1967, and 1968. Their initial conversation moved slowly until they discovered a shared appreciation for the Shakers: “That got us going,” Donald recalled, “and from that moment we never stopped There was a kind of quicksilver quality about the conversation.” When the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland was founded in 1993, Donald became the first President, and continued as such until his death. His ecumenical outreach also embraced the Methodists, and the book on the hymns of the Wesleys that he edited with Professor H. A. Hodges appeared under the evocative title *A Rapture of Praise*.⁷ In his book *We Belong to One Another* he explored links between Methodists, Anglicans, and Orthodox.⁸ He also had a warm devotion to the Mother of God, and was a supporter of The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Donald’s book on Mary was entitled *The Joy of All Creation*,⁹ and this choice of title is significant for at least two reasons. First, it underlines

7. Allcinn and Hodges, *Rapture of Praise*.

8. Allchin, *We Belong to One Another*.

9. Allchin, *The Joy of All Creation*.

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Mary's cosmic role, which is of great importance to Orthodoxy, and to which Donald was deeply sensitive. Secondly, it emphasizes the element of joyfulness that the presence of the Mother of God communicates to Christian liturgy and life. Joy was certainly a *leitmotif* throughout Donald's talks and writings. Some people felt that he spoke too often of joy, but for me his words rang true. He had, moreover, the precious gift of sharing this joy with others. I recall how, when at Oxford in 1960–61 as I was writing my book *The Orthodox Church*,¹⁰ I frequently came to a halt, baffled and discouraged. I used to walk down from the House of St. Gregory and St. Macrina to Pusey House, where Donald was librarian. If I was lucky I found him at home, although that was by no means invariably the case; for throughout his life Donald was usually not in the place where he was expected to be. Half-an-hour's talk was enough to break my writer's block. He did not usually offer specific advice. But his personal warmth, his infectious enthusiasm, his vision, and his sense of wonder, were enough to overcome my hesitations and to give me a sense of direction. I returned home knowing exactly what I wanted to say and how I was going to say it. That was typical of Donald's influence upon those around him. In his own inner life he experienced times of discouragement, yet to others he was a life-enhancer who communicated light and encouragement.

One of the titles that Orthodox Christians ascribe to the Holy Virgin is "Mother of Unexpected Joy." That is exactly what Donald brought into my life and into that of many others: unexpected joy. It is my hope that readers of this book who did not know Donald personally will discover through the pages that follow something of the enthusiasm and visionary joy that marked his life. May the Kingdom of Heaven be his!

¹⁰ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*.