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Review of Columba, by I. Finlay

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James Walsh, S.J. Preface by Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978. 369 pp.).

The work under review here, the first critical edition of the *Showings*, has been prepared by scholars long expert in medieval spirituality. It is the product of immense care and learning. The presence in one work of both the long and short versions of Julian's revelations is important, because the crucial differences between them (only the long text has the theology of God our mother and the famous allegory of the lord and the servant) raise questions both about Julian's meaning and about her understanding of her teaching role. The editors' commentary is convincing on a number of points, the most significant of which are their arguments for Julian's rhetorical skill and their new interpretation of revelation 14 as an examination of contemplative prayer. In certain ways, however, the edition is a disappointment. The index is incomplete. Sweeping generalizations about medieval thinkers are sometimes made without references. Moreover, although the editors are perfectly aware that the theological background to the God as mother theme is different from the history of the devotional use of the phrase, they feel that only the theological background is of interest. This sometimes leads them to odd emphases. When they say (p. 155) "there appears to be no attribution to the Son of motherhood before that of William of St. Thierry," they mean that the attribution to Christ of the *natura creatrix* of the Trinity is first elaborated by William. But as it stands, their sentence is incorrect; William does not use the term *mater* for Christ and various earlier thinkers do. Finally, the editors substitute facile characterizations, such as "inferior taste" (p. 58), "morbid, neurotic and hysterical" (p. 100), for an analysis of why certain devotions appealed at certain periods. Far too often they write as if they are the spiritual directors rather than the students of late medieval mystics.

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CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM

Columba. By IAN FINLAY. London: Victor Gollancz, 1979. 254 pp. £7.95.

Christian origins in Scotland remain obscure. Ninian is little more than a passage in Bede, Kentigern a figure of legend. Only Columba, founder of the Iona community from which the Dalriadan Scots and some of the Picts were evangelized, is a historical figure, this due largely to the *vita* of the saint by Adamnan. This paucity of written records has caused scholars to turn to archaeological evidence and to reevaluations of the forms and meanings of the literary sources. The results have been fruitful.

Ian Finlay is an art historian who has worked in early Celtic and Scottish art. He argues strenuously that analysis of archaeological remains, especially artistic ones, reveals the persistence of pagan motifs and probably pagan

notions among the early Christian peoples of Ireland and Scotland. He turns to the literary evidence and makes the same argument. In many ways, this book is about Columba the pagan.

Finlay proves his basic point, that a reevaluation of the evidence enables scholars to comprehend more about Columba and his world. He also makes a good second point, that later traditions which converge on the same point should be taken seriously—for example, that Columba, scion of a royal house, frequently dealt peremptorily with others. At other times, Finlay insists on common sense—for example, that Brude, the Pictish king supposedly converted by Columba, was at Inverness. Some scholars doubt the location, but Finlay points out that the royal seat would be “the natural point of focus of the territories controlled by the king, with good communications in all directions” (p. 130). In short, if not Inverness, then where?

This reviewer, however, thinks that Finlay has taken his method too far on some points. Many elements in Irish hagiography derive from Christian Egypt, not the pagan North, and Columba's mission to the Picts remains historically questionable, despite Finlay's reconstruction. There are occasional factual errors; the wife of the Viking Thorgeis gave pagan oracles from the high altar of Clonmacnoise, not Armagh. But this is, on the whole, a worthwhile study.

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Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium. By DONALD M. NICOL. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. x + 162 pp. \$19.95.

This is a short but significant synthetic interpretation of late Byzantine thought. In these 1977 Birkbeck Lectures Professor Nicol produces a polished, mature and distinguished scholarly interpretation of some principal aspects of Byzantine intellectual life in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. His interpretation is not any radical *tour de force*, but it is a careful, coherent and sensible analysis that deserves the attention of nonspecialist and specialist. It reads well and reflects a sound familiarity with the primary sources and the modern scholarly literature; there is an excellent bibliography. The footnotes are fairly extensive, erudite and very useful. The book contains four chapters: “The Background: the Theocratic Empire,” “Saints and Scholars: The ‘Inner’ and ‘Outer’ Wisdom,” “Byzantium between East and West: The Two ‘Nations’ ” and “The End of the World.” In my opinion, the best chapter is the last one. No other book pulls together so much scholarship so concisely and clearly. His scholarly judgments are balanced on controversial topics. This book complements his detailed political history, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium*, very well. He repeatedly