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Review of Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland AD 450-1150, by C. Harrington

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and the first Jesuits almost five hundred years ago. At the heart of this book is the contention that Jesuit vitality flows from its spirituality and that this spirituality is based on numerous creative tensions, the central one being highlighted in the title: *Contemplatives in Action: The Jesuit Way*. In other words, Jesuit spirituality is centered on both love of God, nourished by a life of prayer and spiritual sensitivity, and love of neighbor, manifested through the active apostolic outreach of the Society.

Although this spirituality is historically rooted, it is also open to—and in fact depends upon—God’s active presence in the world. It presupposes that God works through the Church and through superiors. Therefore, discernment, properly understood and undertaken, is both a communal and an individual engagement. The creative tensions of Jesuit spirituality are inherent in a full living out of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They are also present in the call to both companionship (“friends in the Lord”) and mission (which may separate friends for “the greater glory of God”). Moreover, the tension is apparent in the call to fidelity to both “the Center and the Periphery in the Church,” for example, to the Papacy and to the local church.

One might question the authors’ contention that the early Jesuits “ministered to women in the same way as they ministered to men” (4, 70), for example, regarding the availability of the Spiritual Exercises to women, but this concise (80 pages) examination of Jesuit spirituality, past and present, offers many invaluable insights.

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***Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450–1150.* By Christina Harrington. New York: Oxford University Press, 200. x + 329 pp. \$65.00 cloth.**

Traditionally scholars viewed Irish Christianity as idiosyncratic and often characterized by an openness to nature and a revulsion to ecclesiastical authority, views still maintained but more by New Age types than by scholars, who in the last half century have pulled the Irish into the Western Latin mainstream. Harrison accepts this basic approach; her Irish Christians consider themselves good members of the Western Church. But she makes a good case for their willingness to push the envelope, especially on the role of women.

Realizing that the traditional view has managed to hang on, she starts by debunking that view, yet she does so in a sympathetic way, acknowledging that it enjoys longevity largely because most books on Celtic Christianity for popular audiences are not written by scholars. She also puts to rest the notion that pagan attitudes toward women as powerful figures and avatars of earth religion influenced Christian attitudes. Yet if the sources of Irish Christian attitudes toward women were Christian, they were not the usual ones. Irish women had a freedom of movement as well as an acceptance by men unheard of on the continent. Why? Because “the builders of the new Irish Church adopted foreign ideas about women and holiness more selectively than has hitherto been imagined” (48). Harrison effectively demonstrates that the apocryphal Acts, known both early and well in Ireland, determined the view of women. Thus, Thecla and other women who evangelized, moved among the people, and worked with the male apostles provided the *toposi* for

women's hagiography rather than the submissive, sheltered virgins of the continent.

This attitude maintained itself for centuries. Harrison focuses on Brigit, the best known of the women Irish saints and the one about whom the most was written. The *vitae* portray Brigit as an abbot of a double monastery, as an abbess who held her own and won the respect of male monks and as the superior of men who worked at the monastery or on its lands. Brigit's influence gave her church, Kildare, a status second to only one other church, Armagh, and Brigit's successors, both monastic and episcopal, managed to keep Armagh's primatial hopes at bay so effectively that an unknown Armagh writer composed a life in which Saint Patrick, traditional founder of the see, acknowledges that Brigit is supreme in the Kildare area. The Irish frequently settled controversial matters by literarily transferring them back to the time of the founders. This way the successors of Patrick could acknowledge Kildare's independence by following the saint's example. Indeed, so extensive was Brigit's posthumous influence that later hagiographers actually claimed that she had been consecrated a bishop. Significantly, the male hierarchy did not condemn these *vitae*, although they also avoided giving them credence.

This more open attitude toward women manifested itself in another very salubrious way. The great Irish male saints were all virgins, as one would expect, and every so often they encountered temptresses to their virtue. As Harrison points out, during the drive for celibacy in the eleventh century, continental hagiography frequently treats these women as hopeless harlots who deserve the beatings they get and who sometimes risk eternal perdition. But in the Irish lives, the male saints, after safely preserving their virtue, forgive the women, talk with them, urge them to a better life, and, in some cases, convince them to enter nunneries. Unlike Peter Damian, Irish reformers of this period managed to introduce celibacy without denouncing the lawfully married wives of priests as "whores, prostitutes . . . and chambers of filthy spirits" (270).

A substantial body of legal literature survives from early Christian Ireland, and Harrison writes considerably about the legal status of women. Much of it deals with property and family rights, such as whether a family could install one of its own as abbess and how the family could maintain the succession. Since headship of a monastery or nunnery brought great prestige to a family, issues of rank and stature also appeared in the law tracts. As continental influences grew, they threatened the status of the abbesses. In general, the abbesses held their own, relying upon a centuries-old tradition of active women who bore ecclesiastical responsibilities.

Harrison has done a very thorough job. She has researched extensively in the primary source material, and her bibliography shows her to be current with the secondary literature. She clearly demonstrates that the Irish Church followed the general trend of Latin Christianity—for example, there was no real thought of ordaining women—but it also gave women a leeway unknown in Romanist circles. Irish ecclesiastics seem to have avoided the petty, stupid misogyny that harassed so many Medieval women on a daily basis.

The book has only two real shortcomings, one stylistic, one historical. In her attempt to be thorough, Harrison has included material that does not advance her case, for example, the *vita* of Saint Gobnat or the abbey of Clonburren, which she could have relegated to an appendix and thus not

detract from the main themes. She also could have spent more space than she does—and could have done so much earlier in the book—on the notion of Woman in Irish Christianity. The reader is uncertain what was the ideal held by both women and men in the Irish Church, and thus by what standard were women imaged. There are inevitably some small points about which one might quibble—why was Ian Bradley’s superb *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (1999) not included in the discussion of “modern Celts”—but these do not detract from Harrison’s overall achievement.

This book has great value for students of Irish and Celtic Christianity; Anglo-Saxonists will also find it helpful as will all those interested in Medieval women’s history. Alas, the price will deter many scholars; may we hope for a paperback edition?

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***The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village.* By Eamon Duffy.** New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001. xvi + 232 pp. \$22.50 cloth.

While working on his magnum opus, *The Stripping of the Altars* (Yale, 1992), Eamon Duffy encountered the parish records of Morebath, a remote and poor parish in Devon, and Christopher Trychay. This book is the story of Morebath during Trychay’s fifty-four years as vicar—a period spanning the reigns of four monarchs during which Morebath went from a conventionally Catholic village to one that conformed to the Elizabethan religious settlement. It is more than a lengthy and well-illustrated footnote to his previous work, however. This is the best study of a Tudor parish that we are ever likely to have. While Duffy willingly acknowledges that Morebath is not a typical parish and Trychay is not a typical Tudor priest, in the hands of a subtle and sensitive historian like Duffy, we gain precious insights into a lost world and into the transition from Catholic to Protestant England. Duffy recognizes that his sources, exceptionally full as they are thanks to Trychay’s garrulousness, cannot give us the complete story. Part of what makes this book so satisfying is Duffy’s refusal to give in to temptation and claim too much. In a public lecture given months after the book was published, Duffy reflected that using Trychay’s parish accounts to describe Morebath was like “trying to describe a house by looking through the keyhole.” But what a keyhole!

After a chapter in which he describes the setting and the village as it would have looked in the sixteenth century, aided by some beautifully reproduced color photographs of Morebath today, Duffy fully describes the parish records on which the book is based. (Pages from the records are reproduced throughout the book, which greatly aids our appreciation of the source.) He fully explains the devotions found in pre-Reformation Morebath and the organizations responsible for supporting their costs. The second half of the book tells the parish’s story chronologically, from the beginning of the attack on images under Henry VIII to Trychay’s death during the reign of Elizabeth.

Pre-Reformation Morebath had a complex structure of guilds and funds to provide money for pious purposes. Particularly fascinating is the use of flocks of sheep. Sheep were distributed to almost every household in the village, and they were responsible for grazing and shearing. Distribution, income, and expenditure were all carefully recorded and accounts presented annually