

A Tribute to John A. McGuckin

Dr. McGuckin is one of those rare figures in the history of Christian theology that can distill the historical contours of the ancient world and its ancient faith while also gleaned the more potent aspects that continue to influence the lives of both countless Christians around the world and those who know him most intimately. He has the exceptional talent of both preserving and communicating an ancient faith, rather than an ancient mind. This ability to communicate the beauties and mysteries of the ancient faith of Orthodox Christianity for a new generation, without requiring the adoption of an ancient mind, is what makes him so accessible to both students and friends alike.

For those who frequent the halls of Union Theological Seminary, it is not uncommon to find students hurrying behind Dr. McGuckin trying to catch up with him, just to hear another word of witty wisdom. Indeed, I too, as a student of Dr. McGuckin, found myself on numerous occasions trying to have yet another word with him as he left the lecture hall. While I'm sure he would have preferred to go home for lunch, he always took the time to listen to his students and entertain their ideas and further inquiries. This inability to 'just leave' the lecture-hall after class was, of course, Dr. McGuckin's own fault, for it was his uncanny ability to deliver wisdom with great wit that drew students like myself to ask him further questions. Yet, underneath this witty wisdom exists an immense depth of theological vision and compassion for others. It was not uncommon to observe a student after a class or meeting asking him for advice on more personal matters, and it is here that one of the most compelling aspects of Dr. McGuckin is exhibited, that is, his service as a priest in the Romanian Orthodox Church. In my experience Dr. McGuckin did not wear two 'hats'—that of the priest and the professor—but integrated his pastoral concern with his academic prowess in a most captivating and credible manner. His words have served as a refuge to many, including myself, though I often wonder whether he has ever realized this. He is indeed one of those rare professors who is not only an advisor, but a mentor.

His background as an Irish Catholic, and current status as an Irish Stavrophore priest in the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, exhibits most clearly the universal scope of the Orthodox faith. John A. McGuckin initially studied Philosophical Theology at Heythrop College, a Pontifical Athenaeum, later earning a Divinity degree at the University of London in 1975. His Ph.D. dissertation at Durham University on the then obscure character of Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, a tutor and advisor to Emperor Constantine, set him on a staggeringly prolific pace, writing some of the best books in the field of Patristics. Beyond his many scholarly articles, some of his most prominent books include *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (1986); *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy* (1994); *At the Lighting of the Lamps: Hymns from the Ancient Church* (1995); *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (2000; Nominated for the 2002 Pollock Biography Prize); *Standing in God's Holy Fire: The Spiritual Tradition of Byzantium* (2001); *The Book of Mystical Chapters* (2002); *The Westminster Handbook To Patristic Theology* (2004); *Ancient Christian Doctrines Volume 2: Patristic Christology* (2006);

and *The Orthodox Church: Its History and Spiritual Culture* (2007). I also had the privilege of working as coeditor with Dr. McGuckin (Senior Editor) on the recently released *Blackwell-Wiley Encyclopedia of Eastern Christianity*—the largest ever English language reference work on eastern orthodoxy. His most recent work, *The Ascent of Christian Law*, was written in his role as Senior Research Fellow at Emory Law School. It charts the rise of Christian legal philosophy as a means of creating a new civilization in the Byzantine era. In addition to these literary works, Dr. McGuckin is also a Co-Producer of the feature film “Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer” (2011), and he has his own Radio Show in Florida entitled, “Turning to the Fathers.”

John McGuckin was awarded the Henry Luce III Fellowship in Theology for 2006 and serves as the Director and President of the Sophia Institute, an international research colloquium devoted to investigating the relation of Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions with contemporary culture. He was awarded the Order of Stephen the Great Gold Cross of Moldavia and Bukovina by the Romanian Church for both his academic and clerical service in 2007.

However, his greatest contribution to both the community at Union Theological Seminary and the broader Patristics and Orthodox Christian community is his unique personality and friendship. For those that know him, this is obvious—and, yet, those that read his voluminous works might catch but a glimpse of the gravity of his illuminating personality. I fondly remember my first day as a tutor for Dr. McGuckin in his survey course on Church History in the first millennium observing students’ unexcited demeanor before he walked into the lecture hall—as soon as he entered the room (as if directly from the Byzantine age), I was struck by his ability to transform a skeptical audience into one that was absolutely captivated by the material. Such a feat in a required Church History course is rarely observed; it requires both the intellectual depth and eloquence of a John Anthony McGuckin. With Dr. McGuckin the dusty church history books in the Burke Library are peeled open with great vigor, and this is due to his compelling demeanor and wit.

It is with these great accomplishments in teaching and scholarly work (most of which have gone unnamed) that Professor McGuckin was recently installed as the Chair of the newly endowed Ane Marie and Bent Emil Nielsen Professor in Late Antique and Byzantine Christian History at Union Theological Seminary. It is on the occasion of this momentous accomplishment that a number of colleagues and friends have come together to offer papers in Dr. McGuckin’s honor. We celebrate not only his past works but also those that are sure to come in the future.

Through Dr. McGuckin’s works the words and mysteries of the great Orthodox Theologians live again and can reach another generation. He has shown us that history has not always been very tidy, but the voices of the Christian past can (and do) still influence us all. In this he has done the Holy Orthodox Church one of the greatest favors. Whether this is his ‘mission,’ I am not sure—but, in any case, he has certainly succeeded and we are all privileged to read his great works and share his friendship. In the Orthodox tradition it is recommended that any traveler in the spiritual domain have a guide, and this is what John McGuckin has been for myself and countless others—he is priest before a professor. It is with the greatest privilege that I

can call John McGuckin not only a mentor and priest, but a friend. Thank you for the contributions you have made to the field of Church History.

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