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To understand, study Catholic and Protestant thinkers

Bill Tammeus | Jan. 26, 2011 A small c catholic

When I described here [1] recently how Jacques Ellul [2], the 20th Century French Reformed Church leader, thought about hope, several Catholic readers expressed gratitude for my having introduced them to a brilliant Protestant thinker.

It got me thinking about great minds in our different traditions that we don?t know much about because they are outside our theological walls.

Yes, this could include some scholars and interpreters from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions. But I want to focus a bit more directly on Christians whom Protestants and Catholics have missed.

Having exposed some of you to Ellul, I now want to tell you about a great Catholic mind I knew nothing about until quite recently. He?s Robert Lax [3] (1915-2000), who is the core subject of a trilogy [4] by S.T. Georgiou -? *The Way of the Dreamcatcher* [5], *Mystic Street* [6], and *The Isle of Monte Cristo* [7].

Georgiou, an artist and teacher in the San Francisco Bay area, has a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley.

Lax, sort of by inadvertence, became a mentor to a rather lost and dispirited Georgiou on the famous Greek island of Patmos, where Lax was a hermit. The island is where St. John the Divine received the vision he expressed in the final book of the New Testament, Revelation. To some, the vision is that of the Apocalypse.

I certainly had heard of -? and read works of -? the great 20th Century American monk Thomas Merton, but I had completely missed Lax, whom Merton himself considered far more brilliant and spiritual and disciplined than Merton ever was.

My ignorance about Lax no doubt reflects my haphazard theological education -? largely a self-directed enterprise ?- but I think it also reflects some of the sad and needless divisions we Christians from different traditions set up to preserve our truths and stay uninfected by what our leaders might call the foolish heresies of other traditions.

In *Dreamcatcher*, Georgiou published parts of interviews with Lax, and I found myself affirming something he said about writing but also realizing that Lax and I take different approaches.

> *Georgiou*: Do you write to make the world a better place?
>
> *Lax*: First of all, I write to better understand myself and my relationship with everything else. If my writing does indeed influence the world in a positive way, either now or in some future time, I?m all for it. And if for some reason it doesn?t, I?m OK with that too.

In many ways, this is why I have spent a career writing ?- because I usually have no idea what I think about

something until I write about it. But now the difference:

> *Georgiou*: So when you write, you don?t consciously try to enlighten the reader?
>
> *Lax*: Not really. I simply trust that if my writing is meant to help out the reader, he or she will pick up on it. But if I sense that my words may hurt somebody or upset them, I won?t write them.

Well, I do not intentionally set out to hurt anyone but my task as a columnist is to get people to think, and sometimes to accomplish that I have to upset them. And I?m perfectly willing ?- sometimes even anxious -? to do it, too. So Lax and I share some approaches but we also differ, and that?s what one might expect from people of different Christian traditions.

The Catholic world is full of saints and sinners of whom many Protestants have never heard, and that?s too bad. Indeed, we Protestants would do well to read biographies just of the people the Vatican has canonized.

But Catholics, too, could learn wise and useful things from our Protestant saints and sinners, starting with Martin Luther, of course, but moving into such fabulous modern writers and thinkers as Frederick Buechner [8] and Annie Dillard [9].

So read Ellul for a time and I?ll read Lax. And my guess is we?ll wind up with a deeper appreciation for each other?s theological family.

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