

Stratford Caldecott (1953-2014)

By Philip Zaleski



Photo by Rose-Marie Caldecott

Stratford Caldecott, a leading Catholic intellectual long familiar to readers of *Sacred Web* through his many contributions to this journal, died of prostate cancer in Oxford, U.K. on July 17, 2014. He was 60 years old and at the height of his powers. We who knew him, in person or through print, mourn his passing; a vital and inspiring figure in Catholic metaphysics, theology, art, ecumenism, education, and economic reform has breathed his last.

Stratford's path to traditional Catholic faith was a struggle against difficult odds—or, as he would surely describe it, a gift of grace. He was born on November 26, 1953, to Oliver Caldecott (1925-1989) and Moyra Caldecott (b.1927), South African intellectuals who had emigrated to Great Britain in protest against apartheid three years before Stratford's birth. In time Oliver would become England's most prominent New Age publisher and Moyra a celebrated author of New Age novels, many set in ancient Egypt. There was a loving home, filled with books and fascinating visitors, and despite poor health Stratford benefited from

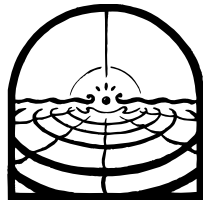
the stimulating environment. He was not baptized as a child, however, or initiated into any traditional religion. Instead, he turned to superhero comic books and science fiction novels and experienced strange, transcendent dreams that pointed towards a realm of truth and beauty hovering just beyond his grasp. These influences developed in him a strong mythic sense that blossomed, by his middle teenage years, into a conviction of God's abiding presence and power.

At Hertford College, Oxford University, his metaphysical and devotional bent deepened, as he recoiled against the skeptical philosophy courses offered by the faculty in that (and our) era and instead read deeply in Sufism and perennialism. At the same time he met and married a fellow student, Léonie Caldecott (née Richards). Henceforth he and Léonie would become lifelong partners, together raising a family and discovering Christ; rarely have husband and wife influenced one another's thinking so deeply.

They became, for a time, students of Dzogchen Buddhism. But soon Christianity, with its sacraments, saints, and theology of love won their hearts. Stratford entered the Catholic Church on November 26, 1980, his 27th birthday. Léonie followed suit a few years later. "In the teaching of the Church," Stratford would later write, "I recognized the God of my interior horizon... to reject the invitation of that God would have been to deny my true self." During these years, he became an editor and publisher for Routledge & Kegan Paul and worked for some years in America. There (if I may be allowed a personal note), my wife and I met him. We were immediately struck by his gentleness, humility, and integrity; one had the sense, which only grew stronger in the thirty years that we knew him, that Stratford acted always with an awareness of Christ's presence and a resolve to radiate Christ's love. This may be an extraordinary claim, but it is one that I believe to be true.

Stratford's Catholic interests ran broad and deep. All can be seen as aspects of one overarching project: to recover, expand, and express Catholic tradition in all its fullness and beauty. Areas in which he made lasting contributions include the role of beauty in education; the reform of the liturgy; the study and cultivation of holiness; the importance of imaginative fiction (especially the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien) as a vehicle of spiritual knowledge; relations between Catholic Christianity and other religions, especially Islam and Hinduism; and a lifelong effort to establish

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