

The Myths Of Celtic Spirituality

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The New Age And The Celtic Spirit

For some time now there has been a popular fashion for all things Celtic. It is not just a matter of artistic styles or musical genres, the word 'Celtic' has come to imply a sense of closeness to nature and a mystical frame mind, personal warmth and freedom of spirit. It has also found its way into religious culture, where the Celtic theme has found favour both with New Age neo-pagans – the crowds who gather at Stonehenge at the summer solstice, for example - and in various Christian circles, under the banner of 'Celtic spirituality'. Clearly it means different things in these different contexts, but there can be a surprising and concerning overlap between the two at times. For example, we find this in the introduction to *Kindling the Celtic Spirit* by Mara Freeman, one of the leading New Age texts on Celtic spirituality (Harper, San Francisco, 2001): "... whether or not we have Celtic ancestry, many of us today are finding ourselves deeply attracted to Celtic spirituality, living as we do at a time when the sacred seems so absent from our world... Adrift without a living tradition today as so many of us are. The many faceted jewel of Celtic spirituality sparkles like the sun on water, inviting us to set sail for those longed-for islands of the soul. To step ashore is to discover a world in which there is no separation between the visible and invisible, between Spirit and Nature, Heaven and Earth. Here we can embrace an awareness of the sacred in every moment and within all forms of life... Although they prayed to Christian saints and angels, these figures thinly veil the pagan gods and goddesses whose names they once bore... And if we follow them home, they may invite us into their houses and teach us how to kindle the flame of Spirit within our hearths and our hearts."

A Christian Fashion For Celtic Spirituality

And now compare this with the publisher's blurb for Fr John O'Donohue's *Anam Cara* (Harper Collins, New York, 1998), the most well known and influential Catholic take on Celtic spirituality: "With the publication of *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue introduced the world to the inspiring ancient wisdom of Celtic mysticism, a world that brings us closer to the magical and unobtrusive realm of our own divinity -where the soul and the eternal are one. O'Donohue guides readers through the enlivening and lyrical spiritual landscape of the Irish imagination, offering a treasure trove of Celtic insights, stories, and teachings on the universal themes of friendship, solitude, love, and death. The Celts had a refined and passionate sense of the divine. The Celtic imagination articulates an inner friendship that embraces nature, divinity, the underworld, and the human world as one. The Celts never separated the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, or the human from the divine. Surviving to this day, the Celtic reverence for the soul in all things is a vibrant spiritual heritage unique in the Western world, one that is capturing the imagination of people throughout the world as they rediscover the wisdom of the past and their own Celtic roots. Exploring such themes as the mystery of friendship, the spirituality of the senses, the brightness

within solitude, work as the poetics of growth, aging as the art of inner harvesting, and death as eternal homecoming, this book will envelop your heart with Celtic benediction.” Behind the poesy of these passages, there are clearly important theological and philosophical perspectives which may explain the close link between what is taken for Celtic Christianity and what purports to be the modern revival of ancient paganism. We will return to these theological issues at the end of this editorial, but first it is worth asking just how true to history are the modern interpretations of Celticness - first in its pagan manifestation and then the Christian version.

Neo-Paganism: A Very Modern Fantasy

The modern day neo-pagans - ‘druids’, ‘wiccan’s and other groups - claim to represent a return to the ‘old religion’, a revival of the pre-Christian cults, which are often termed Celtic in a vague and generic way. The word is being used merely to indicate something ancient and therefore deemed to be somehow authentic. In fact many things that are romanticised as ‘Celtic’ – like prehistoric monuments in the landscape - often pre-date the real historic Celts by thousands of years. And by way of further confusion, the rituals and festivals of so called Celtic neo-paganism are largely the invention of twentieth century occultists. Their New Age beliefs - sun and nature worship, environmentalism, honouring the ‘goddess’ - owe far more to contemporary California than to ancient Britain. It would seem that the Celtic fad is more about contemporary spiritual yearnings and theological fashions than it is about historical accuracy. The notion that the ancient Celts were a race of nature loving, free-spirited mystics will frankly not stand up to scrutiny. In the first place they were hardly a single race, and certainly never a nation. The name was a generic Greek term for the tribes of middle Europe in the fifth century BC, who later migrated to East and West, reaching as far afield as Ireland and Turkey . By early modern times there was probably very little genetic connection between these scattered groups and it is unlikely that anyone among them ever called themselves a ‘Celt’ until relatively recently in any case.

Ancient Celts And Real Paganism

What little we know about the religious outlook of these peoples points to the common features of pre-Christian paganism, including a pantheon of gods and frequent human sacrifice to appease them. Like all pagan cultures they will have had deeper streams of philosophical reflection too, much like the Vedic gurus of India . In fact Hindu culture is probably closely related to the prehistoric Celtic outlook, since both are part of the broad Indo-European family of nations. We hear of ‘druids’ and other priestly castes among the ancient Gauls and Britons, who do appear to have been carriers of astronomical and metaphysical as well as magical traditions. But far from being tree hugging hippies, the Roman historian Tacitus remarks that the druids were never happier than when their sacred groves were running with human gore. St. Boniface later fell foul of this same pagan brutality when his guts were wound round a tree by the Celto-Germans of middle Europe , as a punishment for denouncing just such practices.

The druids of Britain also had seven different ways of putting a victim to death, depending on which god was being honoured with their pain and suffering. In fact the equally pagan Romans were so horrified and disgusted by druidism that they sent a legion to destroy their off-shore training school on the island of Anglesea. The ancient Gauls were also known as brutal fighters who kept the heads of their executed prisoners as prized possessions, displaying them on the doorways to their houses. None of this means that these tribes were any worse or better than other pagan cultures in the pre-Christian world. The point is really that they were no different from their neighbours in cultural glory or in spiritual degradation. But the facts certainly do not match contemporary, New-Age fantasies about the old Celts. But, as with many popular cults, facts hardly seem to matter. Neo-paganism has picked up on the dominant philosophical fashion for pantheism and syncretism. And these groups are drawing in large numbers of young people, offering an alternative to organised religion with their do-it-yourself doctrine, mixed with magic and myth, all wrapped in a Celtic mist.

Christian Celtic Spirituality

When we now turn to consider the Christian version of Celtic spirituality - where it has generated a widespread literature, as well as retreats and workshops - naturally we find ourselves in a very different world, because the starting point is Christian belief. It does not make appeal to the prehistoric Celts for authority and inspiration, but to the early saints of Christian Britain and Ireland. Nonetheless there are similarities of philosophical tone and spiritual romanticism, which are said to come from the same Celtic tradition and spirit, but are more likely to derive from shared modern concerns. These local British and Irish saints are regarded as representatives of the heyday of a peculiarly Celtic version of Christianity, which is said to have emphasised an approach to God through nature, belief in the essential goodness of the body and to have supported informal forms of prayer and liturgical expression. There may be merit in some of these things, but again we may question whether this is what the pre-Saxon saints stood for.

The Myth Of The Celtic Church

Some even paint a picture of a native Celtic Church, independent of Rome, loosely structured, creative in doctrine and individualistic in moral and spiritual outlook. This Celtic Church is seen to embody a model of ecclesial life and discipline which was separate from and opposed to the authority, and implied authoritarianism, of Rome. Again we may suspect a rather modern agenda at work here, and again the picture hardly accords with historical facts. The British Isles were home to many hundreds of saints between the Roman colonisation and the Anglo-Saxon immigration. St. Patrick, St. David and St. Columba are among the most famous. To say that they were members of a separate Celtic Church is completely bogus. Each of these men made a point of seeking validation for their missionary activity from Rome and emphasised their communion with the Pope through the exchange of gifts. There never was an ecclesial body which can be called The Celtic Church, except, arguably, for a few

decades in the late sixth century. It is worth briefly exploring that history in order to dispel some widely held misunderstandings.

Catholic Roman Britain And The Saxon Mission

Christianity came to Britain during the height of the Roman Empire , and the Church in Britain was an active and vibrant part of the Catholic world for almost three centuries. It produced local martyrs like St. Alban, and its bishops attended the great Ecumenical Councils of the Church. But as the Western Empire crumbled in the fifth century, Catholic Britain was cut off from easy contact with the rest of Roman world by pagan settlers who occupied its eastern territories and much of continental Europe . The communication blackout was never total, but inevitably local traditions developed which were at variance with the wider Church. For example, the local clergy maintained a style of tonsure which involved shaving the whole front of the head, leaving long locks at the back, a hair style said to have derived from the druids. But a more substantial difference arose accidentally. Because of their isolation at the time, Britain and Ireland did not hear about the Gregorian reform of the calendar, which, among other things, rationalised the notoriously complex method of calculating the date of Easter. So by the time St. Augustine of Canterbury was sent from Rome by St. Gregory the Great to convert the Angles and Saxons, he found a group of native Christians in the West of the country who appeared to follow some outlandish and unreformed practices. They, in their turn, soon resented his arrival, since he upbraided them for their failure to convert their pagan neighbours. As is the way with human nature, little things like the tonsure, became symbolic of bigger issues like the date of Easter. Tragically, there was a standoff and bitter denunciations between the two parties for some sixty years, until the Synod Whitby resolved things in favour of the Roman discipline. Was there a Celtic Church during that brief period? Not in any institutional sense like the Church of England or the Patriotic Church of China. There was just a brief hiatus in ecclesiastical relationships between bishops across the island, and some mishandling of diplomacy on both sides.

The Celtic Saints, No New Age Romantics

But what was the character and spirituality of these insular Christians? Were they people who celebrated nature and the body, fun loving and open minded in matters of doctrine, even incorporating elements of pagan ritual into their liturgy? Were they instinctively opposed to the spirituality of penitential discipline and ecclesiastical obedience brought by missionaries from Rome , as is often suggested in the modern pro-Celtic propaganda. On the contrary, we find that the early British and Irish saints were extremely rigorous in their bodily disciplines. St. David stood up to his neck in a freezing river for three days as a penance for someone else's sin, and St. Patrick is famous for his long fasts and heavy penances. St. Columba saw the lovely landscape of Scotland not with the eyes of a New-Age dreamer, but as inhabited by malevolent demons, which he exorcised whenever he arrived in a new glen. The Irish missionaries were uncompromising in their emphasis on chastity, radical poverty and total conversion from

paganism. They were not romantic wanderers through wild and lovely nature, but men who embraced voluntary exile as a penance, travelling on foot through lands as dangerous and unwelcoming as parts of modern central Africa . None of this should surprise us, since the primary spiritual influence on these native monks was the desert fathers of Egypt , not the environmentalists and creation theologians of the twentieth century.

The Blessings Of Union With Rome

In the matter of ecclesiastical discipline too, the British churchmen were no less strict than their Roman counterparts. But there was a difference of organisation. In Ireland , which had remained outside the Roman Empire , there were no cities. It was the civic infrastructure of city-centred life that allowed the Latin Church to establish metropolitan bishops, who oversaw outlying parishes within a given 'diocese' - originally a secular Roman term. Irish society, by contrast was tribal, based around the encampments of heroic chieftans, who exercised control over widely scattered homesteads and farms, all bound together by blood ties, military alliances and cultic loyalties. Evangelical activity in this setting would have been more akin to our modern Bishopric to the Forces or the mission to the travelling community. Consequently the Church in these regions radiated out from monastic centres of excellence. There were bishops, usually based at royal households, but it was the abbots of the monasteries who directed Church life on a daily basis. On mainland Britain there had been cities and dioceses during the Roman Empire , but the subsequent break-down of civil life made the monastic model brought by Irish monks somewhat more effective for a while. All St. Augustine of Canterbury (who was himself a monk) and the Anglo-Saxon mission did in England , Wales and southern Scotland was to restore urban life and with it the role of the bishop in his diocese, much to the good of both the Church and society. Of course, a monk is as much bound in obedience to his Abbot as a priest is to his bishop; perhaps more so. So it is quite wrong to suggest that the Roman mission brought an alien authoritarianism into a loose-knit and consensual native Church. This suggestion can be found in much of the pro-Celtic literature of recent times. It has even been pedalled in a series of parish news-sheets published by the Redemptorists, with St. Wilfrid being held up as the arch enemy of local autonomy and initiative, because he promoted Episcopal governance and communion with the Pope in eighth century England .

Modernist Agendas Under A Cloak Of History

It is obvious that there is a very modern, indeed a modernist agenda being pursued here. The pro-Celtic slant can be just a cover for modern anti-Romanism. Actually it was St. Augustine's mission - with its special instruction from Pope St. Gregory to preserve all that was worthy in pagan worship and tradition, correcting and adapting where necessary – which was more open to finding goodness and truth in natural things and in other religions. We do need to be wary of subtle slanders against Rome by the selective reinterpretation of history. It is true that the practice of regular, private, auricular confession and spiritual direction finds its roots in these Irish and Welsh monastic pioneers - a

great blessing for the Church indeed – although the penances laid out in the Penitential of St. Columbanus might bring many of us up short today! This is a genuine aspect of Celtic spirituality which it would do no harm for the modern Church to rediscover on a wider scale.

A Confusion Of Matter And Spirit

But whatever the historical realities, beneath the vagueries of Celtic spirituality lie the tensions of a familiar theological debate. The quotes given above from Mara Freeman's *Kindling the Celtic Spirit* is quite revealing. It suggests that the attraction of Celtic spirituality for many people is fuelled by a desire for a renewed vision of the sacred in a secular age. There is a hunger for a holistic and synthetic theology which holds together nature and supernature, creation and grace, matter and spirit, indeed one could say, science and religion. This, in itself, is a positive aspiration. But the answer put forward, or more often simply presumed by much that passes for Celtic spirituality is to identify matter and spirit as twin aspects of one fundamental cosmic energy: "...a world in which there is no separation between the visible and invisible, between Spirit and Nature, Heaven and Earth." To make a distinction between matter and spirit is felt to be an unacceptable dualism that somehow de-sacralises nature and ordinary life, confining the realm of the holy to those things which are explicitly religious. But the problem with thinking this way is that, once you make all matter spiritual and all spirits material, it is inevitable that you end up with pantheism. Creator and creation are ultimately thought of as one supra-cosmic entity, so that everything is the emanation of godhead and 'God' is simply the sum of all things. This is how the Christian and pagan versions of so called Celtic spirituality begin to merge with one another. Not that all fans of Celtic spirituality are pantheists, but confusions and ambiguities abound in the literature which can be dangerous to sound faith. However there is another way in which we can achieve the desired goal of a sacral vision of nature without dipping over into pantheism. We need to understand that matter is that which is controlled and directed by spirit, and spirit is that which controls and directs. In other words spirit transcends matter, but this does not mean that the material and the spiritual are distanced from or alien to each other. Rather it means that the material depends directly upon the spiritual for creative meaning and purpose.

A True Vision Of Transcendence

We can present a vision in which the entire physical cosmos only makes sense because it is constantly in the presence of absolute and transcendent Spirit. God transcends creation, which means that He is personal, eternal and self-defining as utterly necessary. But creation is not eternal, and is utterly unnecessary and contingent, which means that it is dependent for very existence on the choice of the Father who knows and loves all things in Christ. It is this that gives all creatures their value and their loveliness, and all men their inalienable dignity. We must not blur this infinite difference between God and creation. However transcendence does not imply distance and alienation, but presence and intimacy. God is not in the tree, the rock and the river, but the tree, the rock and

the river are indeed in God. It is an important distinction. All the laws and functions, all the beauty and powers of material things form an interlocking unity which points beyond itself and is referred directly to the Mind of God. And we can show this without appeal to questionable myths or specious history. We can do it on the solid foundation of science and philosophy.

The Christ Centred Cosmos

And we can go further. The Unity Law which expresses the relationship between matter and spirit in creation, and which is the summation of the laws of nature, is not a static one. It is a relationship of purpose or direction, as well as one of meaning or control. Matter unfolds in a definite direction as the laws of Nature build from the pre-atomic energies of the Big Bang to the brain of Man. At this point the physical is necessarily integrated into the created spirit which is the human soul. And so the history of creation sweeps onwards towards the communion of all men in Christ, who comes as the crowning glory and fulfilment of all orders of creation, spiritual and physical. So ultimately we would say that all material things, from their very foundations, are orientated towards the Incarnation. This means that all matter is indeed sacred, but not because it is infused with immanent spirituality or godhead in some animistic way, rather because it is destined to form the Body of Christ. Therefore we rightly respond to God with joy and wonder when we look at the sunshine and the shower, the wild mountain and the swell of the sea. But our contemplation should lead us beyond nature to the spiritual communion of prayer in the depths of our own soul. And it should also lead us to know him in the Eucharist, which is the goal of nature itself. We find him and recognise him there as my Lord and My God, transcendent but incarnate, the King of Kings living on earth among men at the heart of his Church with plenary divine authority and full of redeeming grace. We do not need to search for him in myths and legends when we have the living reality of him, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, in the Bread of Heaven.

Orthodoxy: Something Old And Something New

Thus we arrive at an orthodox and sacramental vision of creation; a truly Catholic vision, both ancient and modern. It has been argued many times in Faith and can be found spelled out in detail in other literature we publish. It is capable of poetic and spiritual, as well as strictly rational elaboration. In essence it is a rediscovery and modern development of the vision of the early Greek Fathers such as St. Irenaeus and St. John Chrysostom. As such it is likely to be much closer to the actual theology of men like Ss. Patrick, Columba, David, and others.

Whether we call these people and their preaching Celtic or not hardly matters. What mattered to them and what should matter to us is the preaching of Christ to the nations in all his Catholic fullness, and in communion with our Holy Father the Pope. There is room for many temperaments and spiritualities in the Church. But we must always be on our guard against error masquerading under the cloak of historical authenticity – 'Celtic' or otherwise.

