

MODERN
CELTIC
LITERATURE

Paul Fahy

CONTENTS

Introduction

Part One: Background

- 1 A Brief Historical Overview of the Celts
- 2 A summary of historic Celtish Christianity in The British Isles

Part Two: An Analysis of the Current Teaching and Practice

- 1 Historical Inaccuracies
- 2 Doctrinal Aberrations
- 3 Dangerous Practices
- 4 Spiritual Dangers

Conclusion

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Introduction

Sadly we find ourselves in a time where gullibility is praised and use of critical faculties is condemned. It is fashionable to be open to everything, to believe that there is no objective, final truth, and that every wind of doctrine must have a chance, whatever its source. Conversely, one is ridiculed and condemned if one judges the latest fashion, making pronouncements against it.

This would be bad enough in the secular world, but today it is the atmosphere of the professing church. Almost weekly one hears of a new doctrine or practice which is unbiblical, yet many Christians seem happy to endorse it without question, especially if it shows 'supernatural' effects. The lack of that critical judgment, once praised by our forefathers, is staggering.

But now we see the sudden rise in popularity of things Celtic in the Church, particularly in certain New Churches. For some years, Celtic resources (images, books on legends and spirituality) have been increasingly available; these have grown alongside the development of New Age thinking and practices with which these items now have a close connection.

One has to be very careful to bring a balanced and sane perspective to a critique.

- Firstly, we must recognise that there was a truly apostolic move of God amongst the Celtic people in times past. The British Isles had a thriving church before the incursions of Romanism via Augustine of Canterbury. This nation had great Christian leaders in the Celts such as Patrick, Aidan, Cuthbert and so on. The church here was purer than on the continent. We must take care not to denigrate this in any criticism of Celtic spirituality today.
- Secondly, there is nothing wrong with a resurgence of interest in an art form or a time period, in fact the more research the better. I would much rather we saw a rise of interest in indigenous art forms and music than the suffer the constant outpouring from other cultures. In this connection, the band *Iona* is doing great work promoting what has been called *Celtic Rock*. Their material consists of excellent Christian songs from band members who are inspired by things Celtic and Gaelic as well as the Bible.

In other words, there is a genuine place for things Celtic which can legitimately occupy our interest. However, what is emerging is different. It is a sort of elitist, mystical experience of Christianity that has no Biblical roots and is, in fact, closely related to paganism and Druidism. It is much in line with the New Age spirit and dishonours the Lord Jesus Christ. It is this which I want to examine. In some areas the theme of the Celts is a major new thrust. Seminars can be

accompanied by music, dance and visuals to command attention of all the senses to help interpret the exposition. Artistic images and symbols are also closely connected.

The original draft of this paper was a reaction to a specific taped talk by a leader in a well known network. Several leaders in various streams were very disturbed by the content of this tape and urged me to prepare an examination. The seminar was analysed and critiqued severely. However, I felt that I should try to contact the speaker before I went into print.

I have now had a number of conversations with this brother, and also a long meeting where we discussed my critique at length. It is clear to me that he is not some extremist lunatic (although the tape might suggest otherwise) but someone who genuinely wants to glorify Jesus and evangelise the lost in an effective manner. He deeply regrets the way the tape can be interpreted and intends to rewrite his lecture for future engagements. Although we differ in some major points, part of the problem appears to be loose talk and poor theology rather than outright error. He does, however point out that the talk was to 'in house' leaders with whom he has relationship and who knew his personal perspective, and that the tape was not intended for general release. Consequently, I have agreed to withdraw his name from this critique (at my suggestion, not from pressure) but will refer to statements made as indicative of the general trend and use them as a foundation for refutation.

Since there is an emphasis on historical precursors (albeit legendary and erroneous), then I clearly need to start with an historical background and analysis of the development of the Celtic church.

Part one

background

1. A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Who were the Celts

The Celts never called themselves by this name and the definition of this tribal group is very vague as they were not a unified people. Generally it refers to a group of races who lived initially in central and western Europe from very early times to the early Middle Ages. The name is first seen in Greek documents (*Keltoi*), uniting peoples who spoke variations of the same tongue, an Indo-European language distinct from German and Latin which survives in Gaelic, Welsh and Breton¹. They are not unique to Britain and any ethnic link between the British and Irish with the Celts, despite the language connection, was ignored by medieval historians.

They were a tribe which once successfully occupied much of western Europe, from Turkey to the British Isles. They moved into France between 1200 and 700 BC giving it the name Gaul. In fact they once defeated Rome (390 BC) and were feared by the Roman armies. The Celts were established in the lower Danube when Alexander the Great met them and was furious when they told him that the only thing they feared was that the sky would fall on them or that the sea would overwhelm them. Fifty years later they destroyed Alexander's homeland of Macedonia and sacked many Greek cities including Delphi (in the raiding campaign of 279 BC).

Although known as Celtae by the Greeks and Romans, they were also called Galatae (by Greeks) and Galli (by Romans) and the concept of a Celtic race originated with the Greeks and the Romans who applied it to the nations known by them in Europe.

¹ The Celtic language in Britain is divided between *Goidel* (including Erse and Gaelic, *Goidelic* = *Gaelic*), and *Brythonic* (including Welsh, Cornish and Breton). *Keltoi* means, 'the hidden people'.

The most powerful Celtic centre was situated in Gallia which occupied the northern part of modern Italy through to the Pyrenees. Livy says that they first penetrated the Po valley around 600 BC; but there were eight other key centres situated in Spain (Celtiberi), Britain (ancient British inhabitants, called Britannia²), Belgic Celts, much mingled with Germans, Italian Celts, Celts in the Danube and Alps (Helvetii etc), Illyrian Celts, Macedonian and Thracian Celts who stayed there when the Celts invaded Greece, and the Asiatic Celts (Tolistobogi etc) who founded the kingdom of Galatia. The period of Celtic expansion and migration is known as the La Tène period (named from the rich archaeological discoveries at La Tène Switzerland) which took place from 500 BC onwards.

Some divide the Celts into two races:

- **Celts** proper occupying parts of Gaul (France), Spain and N. Italy
- **Gauls** based on the shores of the ocean and east as far as Scythia. The Cimbri belong to this race and are identified with the Cimmerii of Greece.

This division corresponds with the division in the British Isles between the Gaels (Ireland and North Scotland) and the Kymry (Welsh). However, the application of the word *Celt* to the British and Irish on linguistic grounds (ie speakers of Celtic languages) is relatively modern (16th century onwards). Evidence for this is weak, especially when native Irish speakers can be shown by their surnames to be of Scandinavian or English descent.³

What were they like?

The Celts were a warlike and heroic nation. They were fierce fighters on foot, on horseback or in chariots, using weapons of bronze and iron. Warriors took their armour to the grave with them, at great cost, and were supported in full-time service by society. The elderly, the women and children and the 'unfree' tended crops and animals (if Caesar is to be trusted). The central feature of social order for warriors was the feast, the greatest heroes sitting in the middle proclaiming rank. The bravest man took the thigh and if anyone disputed this, the matter was settled with a fight to the death.⁴ Often, pitched battles were settled by single combat.

² Quite when the Celts invaded Britain is disputed, but it was certainly by the Iron Age.

³ Gearóid MacEoin, Introduction to, *The Greatness and Decline of the Celts*, pXI

⁴ According to Athenaeus and Strabo quoted in Cunliffe, *Prehistory*, p361. Since there is no original documentary evidence related to European Celtic social life, we have to rely upon references in Greek and Roman writings and deduction from archaeological findings. The central European Celts maintained a culture without writing. See also Hubert, p271.

Raids were made on neighbouring settlements and provided the means for establishing social hierarchies and tribal territories. Sometimes their settlements were hill-forts guarded by earthworks.

Warfare was, therefore, endemic: it was an essential part of the social system. As Strabo said 'the whole race is madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle' ...

Their society is of a restless exuberance loosely contained within a social system based on warrior prowess.⁵

In contrast to this, modern research has shown that the Celts also made good farmers. Especially in Germany, they raised stock and tilled fields deriving much wealth from food production.⁶ This wealth led to the ability to produce decorated weapons and artefacts, particularly ornaments which they combined with a flair for dyeing and weaving of clothing materials. They also mined the local area and gained wealth from gold, tin, silver, lead, iron and salt. The oldest specimen of interlinked mail armour is from a 3rd century Celtic grave. Some say that they built roads before the Romans.⁷

They were good ship builders and seamen who loved exploration and adventure. As an artistic people they not only created decorative artefacts, including enamel work, but also were fond of dramatic poetry.

The Celtic Personality

Celts were fearsome in battle and legendary accounts survive that put Arnold Schwarzenegger in the shade. In a battle against the Greeks it is recorded that wounded Celts drew out from their wounds their opponents spears and threw them back.⁸ The *Tain Bo Cuailnge* epic tells of an Irish warlord preparing for battle. His battle cry causes demons to scream; as well as several weapons, his shield rim is so sharp it can cut a hair, then he works himself into a fury:

A spasm tore through his body it distorted him and made him a monstrous thing. Every bone and organ shook ... his insides made a twist within his skin. His shins filled with the bulging muscles of his calves ... dazzling lights and thick black smoke rose above his head.⁹

They were the best mercenary cavalry that Rome ever utilised and were

⁵ Cunliffe, Prehistory, p362, 363

⁶ Gearóid MacEoin, Introduction to, The Greatness and Decline of the Celts, pX

⁷ eg P B Ellis, p34.

⁸ Newark, p10

⁹ Newark, p37-38, the complete description is even more lurid.

virtually the only horsemen used by Caesar in his Gallic campaigns. The scythed chariot wheels, however, appear to be a myth.

They were a tall, ruddy and fair race, unable to unite, even against a common enemy:

Almost all of the Gauls are of tall stature, fair and ruddy, terrible for the fierceness of their eyes, fond of quarrelling and of overbearing insolence.¹⁰

They are said to have been childishly boastful and to love decoration and novelty. Their lack of literature did not mean that they were culturally poor; in fact they were recognised for their verbal eloquence. Also described as courteous and patriotic, they were faithful to their families. It is said that they discovered (and drank) mead and that drunkenness was a failing of the Celts. In technology they were equal to the Romans but they lived in villages of thatched, wattled cottages. Their breed of hunting dogs was justly famous.

They worshipped gods of war, weather, or local deities, and a Druid priestly class developed to officiate at dark pagan ceremonies in gloomy forests. Included in these rites was the practice of propitiating unseen gods by burning victims in giant wicker cages.¹¹ Some modern pro-Druid writers dispute this information from Caesar, but it is indisputable that Celts were bloodthirsty and were head hunters: rows of skulls adorn the gateway of Bredon Hill fort.

Druids were not pagan simpletons relying upon superstition, they were the Celtic scholars and the intelligentsia who also instructed children, moulding these pliant minds. The refusal to use books (and lack of a suitable written language) meant that attaining Druid status took up to 20 years of learning oral tradition.

The Druids (ruled by an elected chief) were arbiters of an oral law as well as priests and prophets. With no written law, they were the final authority. They can be seen to exercise great power over the people especially as they cultivated mystique and mystery in their rituals. An order of bards also existed to preserve the memory of great events in poetry.

¹⁰ Ammianus quoted in Cunliffe, Prehistory, p362. We do need to take care as some extant documents are written by enemies of the Celts and are hardly a balanced view.

¹¹ Evidence for this comes only from Roman sources and has been questioned eg P B Ellis p17

2. Celtic Christianity in The British Isles

In Roman provinces, Celtic chiefs continued to rule over their own tribes and territory. They fought alongside legionary armies but Roman imperialism did not destroy Celtic power. In fact, the Celts accepted a Roman lifestyle, with its material luxuries, Latin literature and Christianity. Remember that it was at the same time that Paul was chained to a Roman soldier that other legionaries were engaged in the conquest of Britain.

The British King Caradoc, known as Caractacus to the Romans, was captured at this time and released (51 AD); but several of his family were state prisoners at Caesar's court at the time when Paul was making many converts amongst it. Some say that Paul was friendly with the children of Caractacus, others that Paul even visited Britain itself.¹² The Roman influence and good communications in Britain paved the way for the spread of the Gospel subsequent to the end of warfare in 84 AD.

Various origins of the church in Britain have been suggested, including that of Joseph of Arimethea in Glastonbury, but we will never know the real answer. It is more likely to have stemmed from Christian soldiers and Roman traders. Some historians maintain that Druids had heard the Gospel by 40 AD.

Over the years, persecutions in the Empire led Christians to flee west so that by 193, the church father Tertullian, writing from Africa, could say that the Gospel had spread even to the parts inaccessible to the Romans¹³ (ie the Picts in Scotland). Origen, in 240, also testifies to the establishment of Christianity in Britain¹⁴. By the end of the 3rd century there are records of Christian martyrs like Alban (of St Albans fame) who was martyred during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian or

¹² Clement, Paul's friend and early Christian writer says that Paul travelled to *the furthest limits of the west*, a term which was understood to include Britain.

¹³ Adv. Iud. 7

¹⁴ Hom. 4 in Ezech.

Decius. Three British bishops were present at the council of Arles in 314 and all British bishops agreed to the proposals of the council of Nicea in writing in 325. The great evangelical champion, Athanasius, mentions British representatives who supported him at the council of Sardica in 343,¹⁵ while Hilary of Poitiers (a Celt) congratulated the 'bishops of the province of Britain' for being free from Arianism. We could go on.¹⁶

It was not till 597 AD that formal Roman Catholicism was brought to England by Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, with a mission to bring the Celts' version of Christianity into line with Rome. Pope Gregory provided all that Augustine required, drove him on when he was depressed and encouraged syncretism with heathen practices in order to win over the 'barbarians'¹⁷. The purpose was clearly to destroy Celtic Christianity which, by holding to apostolic principles, had developed on a different path to the practices of Rome. Even so, despite 'converting' certain princes (with political motives), the mission did not fare well for many years, so strong was the hold of indigenous Christianity.

In 613 the long process of invasion by Angles, Saxons and Jutes (Teutonic, ie German, Tribes) had resulted in a final conquest of Celtic culture. This has been described as a revolution:

The replacement of Celt by Teuton, Christian by heathen, a western culture by one mainly northern, and an old scheme of agriculture by a new.¹⁸

The point here is that Britain had a genuine Christianity with roots beyond direct links with the Pope and a culture that was ostensibly Christian in influence until the success of the Anglo-Saxon conquest.

There was, however, a flourishing and well organised Christian community here centuries before that (Saxon) invasion.¹⁹

Even the legendary King Arthur, whose 12 battles stemmed the tide of Saxon advance for a century (c,500 AD), went into battle with the cross as his insignia on his shoulders²⁰.

¹⁵ Ep. 56 to Jovian

¹⁶ eg: Jerome Ep. 46.10; the heretic Sabellius said that the '**first nation** that ... called itself Christian ... was Britain'; the British King Lucian (Llew) proclaims Christianity the national religion in 156 (Bede); Hippolytus states that Paul's colleague Aristobulus (Rm 16:10) visited Britain around 58 AD.

¹⁷ eg: warrior's helmets combined the cross with Odin's symbol of the tusked boar.

¹⁸ Feiling, p26

¹⁹ C. Arthur Lane, p1

²⁰ According to the Welsh Annals

The originality of Celtic Christianity which provides an example of faith independent from the continental institutions, arises from the following facts:

- Ireland was a vibrant source of Celtic mission activity and was never a Roman colony.
- The Romanised culture, which was the foundation for the flow of the Gospel, was overlaid on a strong Celtic cultural base in Britain.
- The withdrawal of the Roman legions (early 5th c.) initiated a revival of Celtic life, focused on withstanding the invasion of Jutes and Saxons.
- The rise of monasticism as the base for effective Christianity reached Britain at the same time.

The simplest way to summarise to progress of this apostolic move of Christianity is to give a short description of the work of its prime leaders.

Ninian

was the son of a north Briton chief (ie a Pict) but trained at Rome and was influenced by Martin of Tours. In c397 (before the Romans finally left) he founded a church at Whithorn in Galloway and from there planted monasteries in Cumbria and possibly in Ireland before Patrick.

Corantinus

laboured in West Wales (ie Cornwall and Devon) as its first apostle. By 401 it was said that almost all the inhabitants were Christian. His work was continued by Piranus, an Irishman from Ossory.

Germanus

was from Auxerre, Gaul, and was invited by British bishops to lead two missions to Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy in 429 and 447. He built and strengthened churches. Welsh monasticism derives from his work.

Patrick

was born about 389 in a Christian family of Roman citizens in the Welsh marches. After being taken to Ireland as a slave by pirates (405), he escaped but felt the need to evangelise the Irish. Returning in 432 to Wicklow after being taught in Tours, Auxerre and Lerins, and ordained by Germanus, he established churches which became centres of mission and education.

Contrary to popular belief, Patrick himself says that there were already Christian missionaries and churches in Ireland, and we know that Palladius was sent as a bishop before Patrick's mission. But Patrick had an enormous influence, converting thousands (including royal families who brought their tribes with them) and establishing the main centres. Patrick was not averse to giving expensive presents to chiefs to gain support,²¹ and organised a diocesan hierarchy based on the Roman system.²²

Post Patrick

After Patrick's death in 461 (or 493?), the incursions of pagan, superstitious Jutes (449 onwards), Saxons (477 onwards) and Angles (547 onwards, *Angles* is the origin of the word *English*²³) led to slaughter and destruction of Christians and churches. People were even too afraid to bury murdered priests. Many fled west. Christianity in Great Britain became superficial, legalistic and sank into native Celtic cults of sun-worship, holy wells and evil spirits. Priests became shamans and extreme asceticism was practised (like the Scottish monk who stood for hours reciting the Psalms in the icy Tweed, or others like Finnchu who suspended himself on sickles inserted in his armpits, Ultán who kept a stone in his mouth throughout Lent, and Ciaran who mixed bread with sand).

The good thing was that the close connection with the Gallican church²⁴ was severed which led to the preservation of a distinctive British Christianity amongst the remaining true believers in the west (Ireland and Wales) and north (Cumbria, Northumbria, Scotland) who were about to expand. These characteristics became intolerable to the Pope.²⁵

Prevented from evangelising the conquering tribes on pain of death, the Christians successfully witnessed in the lands they escaped to. In the spread of monasticism during the 6th century, the Roman diocesan organisation was abandoned in favour of monastic jurisdiction similar to

²¹ Lehane, p47

²² Lehane, p50

²³ The Teutonic tribes could not understand the Celtic language and called it *Welsh* ie unintelligible.

²⁴ That is the formal church in Gaul (France), and the source of continental information.

²⁵ A superficial example (though important at the time) of this distinction was the adoption of a Celtic priestly tonsure where the hair was cut from ear to ear. Monks on the continent had the familiar central shaved portion on the crown. Dates of feasts like Easter were also different. The Roman customs prevailed after the council of Whitby in 664. Some have stated that more serious differences included married priests and a Saturday Sabbath (eg Dr. L Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, SPCK, 1972).

that developed in Ireland outside Roman influence under the clan system. One scholastic community near Chester had 2000 members. Later Irish and Scottish missionaries were even to found monastic centres of learning in Western Europe where they developed their ecclesiastical differences right on the Pope's doorstep. Many suggest that the Irish monastic system was greatly influenced by eastern asceticism and the monastic ideal of Basil and others in Egypt, but it maintained its original purity unlike the monasteries on the Continent.

Columba

Born about 520 in Ireland of the Hy Neill royal house. From this time begins the line of great Christian leaders and scholars. He was a prince, a poet, a ruler and a missionary. Finian of Clonard (470-550) had established communities (monasteries) in Ireland where men were trained to be missionaries. Columba was educated at one. He had also studied under Finian of Moville.

In 563 he established Christianity in Iona after causing a violent disputation and being banished from Ireland. He was protected by his relative, the king of Dalraida (a kingdom of Irish Christian settlers in Argyllshire; *Argyll* = kingdom of *East Gaels*). Missionaries from this base secured Christianity in Scotland, two-thirds of England and even Iceland. Leaders from Iona include Aidan, Hilda and Cuthbert. Columba himself converted the Picts and even sent monks to the Orkneys before he died in 597. By 660, only the princedoms of Sussex and the Isle of Wight remained heathen. It should be mentioned that there is some dispute as to how far the conversion of the Picts was by Columba or Ninian 200 years before. Bede says that Ninian evangelised the southern and Columba the northern Picts. Examination of geographical sources shows that Columba's area was to the west of Drum Albyn. His achievement is possibly less than previously thought.²⁶

Post Columba

The monastic institutions developed by Finian, Columba and his followers, meant that bishops were under the authority of the abbot (eg Columba, although he called himself a presbyter). It tended to eradicate diocesan hierarchy but establish an authoritarian leader. In godly hands this authority may well have been beneficial, but the danger lay in less godly men attaining power.

²⁶ Lehane, p122

Columbanus (ie Columba the Younger, 543-615)

In the usual pattern, he set forth from the monastery in Bangor (Ireland) with 12 monastic companions, settling in Burgundy, Switzerland, and Italy establishing monasteries. The Irish on the Continent introduced private lay confession.

Aidan (died 651)

In 635 Aidan left Iona to evangelise Northumbria. In conjunction with its king, Oswald, he met with much success and established a new Iona on the Isle of Lindisfarne. It has been said that Aidan deserves to be called the 'apostle of the English' rather than Augustine. Ultimately in the south only Wessex, East Anglia and Kent followed the Roman tradition. The north and Midlands were under the influence of Iona.

Aidan appears to have been a very godly man who disdained the wealth given to him, passing it on to the poor. Even Bede, writing from the Roman viewpoint, could not help but show his admiration and recognise God's hand upon Aidan's life. Like all Irish abbots, he imposed a harsh, self denying routine on his flock. Aidan was truly concerned with the spiritual life of the poor and ordinary folk, travelling hundreds of miles, usually on foot, teaching and leading by example. Lindisfarne became justly famous as a centre for scholarly activity and Irish culture. As well as spiritual matters and exegesis of scripture, people were taught grammar, maths, physics, and the classics . Finan succeeded Aidan and promoted the missionary movement in the Midlands.

The Decline

By the second half of the 7th century, the Celtic church had begun to lose ground. It had no unified territorial system and missionaries became a law unto themselves. As such it became isolated. Wilfrid, a pupil of Lindisfarne, felt the need for reformation after visiting Rome and Lyons and determined to bring Britain under the sway of the Papacy. As Abbot of Ripon, he precipitated a crisis which led to the council of Whitby in 664 to decide which tradition would rule. Rome won. Northumbria became Catholic.

The rest of the nation gradually accepted the Papal rule:

- Southern Ireland in 632
- Northern Ireland in 695
- King Nectan of Scotland banished the brethren of Columba from Iona in 717
- West of England in 768 (but not Cornwall)

- Wales in 777.

However, the Celtic church did not totally perish just because the chiefs accepted the rule of the Pope. It clung on, especially in the west, to continue to receive condemnation for a long time to come.²⁷

By the 8th century the self-denying life of monks had given way to a comfortable one. Priests and monks had the stature of nobles and a widespread apostasy began.

The Celtic Christian Distinctives

Apart from the practical differences already noted (see footnotes), the Celtic church was grounded on a very clear New Testament, apostolic basis. Where the Continental churches and monasteries fell into spiritual decline for a variety of reasons, the Celtic, particularly Irish, church remained relatively pure. We can summarise these characteristics as:

- **A deep veneration for the Bible.** This was fundamental to Celtic spirituality. The primary sources show continual references to it. Patrick finds it easier to quote scripture than to express himself in writing (see his *Confession*).
- **A pure love for Jesus.** Again this is clear from their writings and their passion to serve him in obedience and godliness.
- **A passion for Mission.** But we must bear in mind that the ordinary believer lived a normal life. Not everyone was a missionary.²⁸ The 'questing' spirit only applies to specific missionaries at a particular time in Ireland for 200 years following Patrick's death, much as it has in any age of church expansion. (Compare the 19th century which was full of missionary heroes.)
- **Baptism by immersion.**
- **An honouring of the 10 Commandments.** But they were clear that keeping the law was a fruit of salvation, not the cause of it.
- **A clear message of salvation.** Despite the folk-lore of asceticism, the primary documents show that Celtish Christians taught that man is not saved by works, but by the grace of God through faith alone in Christ alone.²⁹

Indeed one writer has suggested that if the Roman church had learned

²⁷ Marshall, p27-28

²⁸ Lehane, p52

²⁹ Hardinge, The Celtic Church in Britain quoted by David Marshall.

from the Celtic church instead of trying to eradicate it, there would not have been the need for the Reformation.³⁰

Part two

An Analysis of the current teaching and practice

INTRODUCTION

Having set the scene with a look at the Celts as a people and the church that emerged from them we can now evaluate this current focus upon emulating Celtic spirituality.

New Age

It should be said at the outset that the recent flurry of New Age practices and teaching has looked to all sorts of esoteric religions to support its hotch-potch of ideas. Amongst these has been a rediscovering of the spirituality of the Celts with a particular emphasis upon pagan ritual and magic. Celtic pantheistic idol worship now takes place in rural areas. Recently, Meridian TV televised a typical Celtic Green Man ritual being performed near Chichester.

Celts are suddenly popular, as are all things pagan it seems. The Pagan Society records a doubling of numbers in the last ten years; these same years have seen a significant decline amongst many church

³⁰ Marshall op. cit..

congregations. Some historic denominations, like Methodism, are looking at extinction in the near future.

The secular world is embracing things Celtic in a fashionable heathen way. They are not looking to the morality of Aidan or the zeal of Patrick, they are espousing pagan rituals and a mystical pantheism. The church should, therefore, be wary and extremely careful of embracing Celtic matters.

One persistent problem in analysing various statements of the Celtic apologetic is the continual modulation between *the Celts* as a tribe of people and the practice of *Celtic saints*. There is no method or sense in this, one moment Brendan is placed before us, the next Boadicea. Celtic culture and art is a model for us, the next moment it is Celtic monasteries. Several statements are just plain misleading eg: 'the Celts were into discipleship'. Who? Celts or Celtic Christians? Some of these statements are, therefore, ambiguous and I can only treat them as I find them.

1. Historical Inaccuracies

We should listen to the wise advice of a sympathetic writer on the subject of Celtic Christianity:

For the researcher of this period, the guides are a tantalising mixture of the true, the dubious and the notably incredible.³¹

Most of the sources of the material we have were written long after the events took place,³² and some writers are clearly following a prepared agenda and are cavalier with the truth. Many were written from partisan viewpoints. The lives of great Christian leaders of the past may be encouraging but they are not infallible. We know very little about England and Ireland in the 5th century which has been described by eminent historians as: 'a lost century' or 'the most obscure in our recorded history'.³³

The life of Patrick provides a helpful example of this. The authentic *Confession* of Patricius gives us a clear picture of Patrick's character, if not a full biography. It was written in the middle of the 5th century and

³¹ Lehane, p4

³² There is hardly any Irish literature extant MSS before the 10th century. Those discovered are copied from 8th century models.

³³ Hopkin, p12

tells us of a simple believer with an ardent faith who considered himself a sinner and an unlearned man but who loved God. He is humble, self-deprecating, rustic man, living in daily fear of murder and captivity. His methods of evangelism include exploiting the social structure, ie convert the chief so that his people will follow.³⁴ However, he is intolerant of pagan practices - unlike some of his followers. He prayed often and received visions and obviously heard God very clearly. He also had some powerful answers to prayer, but we see nothing of the miracles and domineering character which fills the pages of later biographies. His *Letter to Coroticus* gives us a similar picture, taking into account its polemic nature. It is also now generally accepted that Patrick did not single-handedly convert Ireland to Christianity: Palladius was a bishop before him.

In contrast, the 'lives' of Patrick which grew up much later are full of the miraculous; they show him as a wonder-working Druid conquering opponents and sending earthquakes on his enemies. Signs of weakness and humanity are removed; instead he shows a fearsome temper and a proud dominating spirit who strikes dead as easily as he raises the dead. He even kills his sister for sinning by running her over in a chariot!

These works are not biography or history but hagiography, a glorification of a saint, usually for ulterior motives, commonly when one church faction 'needed to enhance the prestige of its patron saint in order to assert its supremacy over a rival faction'.³⁵ They take on the character of typical Celtic heroic sagas: Patrick exhibits the magical powers of a Druid, confronting and overpowering enemies with a miracle, he has authority over nature, he relates to animals. He can even transform himself, and others, into animals. The earliest of these, and the most fantastic, is that by Muirchú (pron. *Murra-hoo*, dated 665-80, 200 years after Patrick's death). They contain historical inaccuracies showing them to be false (eg. portraying Druids as having books). Unfortunately, many today seem keen to draw from this type of source.

The references to Brendan are similar. Many folk apparently accept that Brendan crossed the Atlantic in a coracle and discovered America and that his birth was surrounded by the miraculous.

In the tales, Brendan is a 'composite character with pagan threads woven into the Christian pattern'.³⁶ It is impossible to know what the

³⁴ Hopkin, p19

³⁵ Hopkin, p37

³⁶ Lehane, p71

historical facts of Brendan's life are. The different versions (Latin and Irish) of his life do not agree and certainly include re-workings of earlier mythology and epic tales. There are clear parallels with Homer's *Odyssey* for instance.

Much would certainly be accurate transcription of the old legends. But the habit of particularising, of picking a little detail and blowing it up to great and colourful proportions, seems to owe its influence more to the single-minded attentions of the early hermits and scribes.³⁷

Sometimes the stories are taken from scripture and re-done. Brendan's birth is a case in point with a light in the sky and the presence of cattle with people coming to pay respect. The monks who wrote the surviving manuscripts would certainly have had a detailed knowledge of classical literature in Latin as well as the Bible.

However, it seems, from the Icelandic sagas, that the Irish did sail far; certainly as far as Iceland and possibly Greenland too. The Irish did have much more sturdy boats than small currachs (coracles) at their disposal, but whether it was they or the Phoenicians or the Norse Vikings that first found America we will never know.

What we can piece together of Brendan's life is more down to earth. He appears to be a devout missionary who founded monasteries and met with many great Christian leaders, including Finian of Moville, Comgall (who founded the great monastery in Bangor, Ireland, in 558), Gildas the British writer and, apparently, the enigmatic David of the Welsh. He was justly famous for his journeys and energy, but we should take care before believing the interpolations of over-zealous scribes.

Credulity

Unfortunately, our modern Celtic apologists appear to take everything they read as true:³⁸

- the miraculous was normal
- They used power to demonstrate the power of God
- They would challenge Druids over the dead body
- Aidan ... poured oil and calmed the waters
- Patrick ... received healing as well as miraculous faith
- They experienced some very interesting miracles. Cuthbert fed by ravens ... Melrose having his feet warmed by sea otters.

³⁷ Lehane, p68

³⁸ Quotes are from the anonymous taped talk referred to in the introduction.

Not even historians sensitive to the Celtic cause would be this credulous. While not denying that God does work miracles in history, we must test what claims to be of God. Where do you draw the line? If we are to believe the above, why not also believe that Patrick turned his opponent Coroticus into a fox as his biographer claimed? The miraculous folk-lore grew up after the saints had died and was exaggerated by subsequent writers. New churches feel happy to use the supernatural stories to 'bolster ... charismatic priorities' and deny that we can really know what is accurate history. Undocumented folk-lore is totally insufficient basis to hold before the Lord's people and then inspire them to go and do likewise. It is extremely foolish to be this gullible.

Paul specifically warns us about this sort of behaviour:

As I urged you ... not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths (fables, legends) ... which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith. (1 Tim 1:3-4)

Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. (1 Tim 4:7)

Wrong Conclusions

The collapse of Celtic Christianity has been attributed to the 'dominating spirit of the Roman church'. We are then called to renounce this 'dominating Roman spirit' (presumably which we have because we are English!) and adopt the 'adventurous Celtic one'. In fact, the downfall of the Iona based churches was led by one of its own: Wilfrid, a student at Lindisfarne. It was also partly due to its lack of efficient organisation which led to inconsistencies.

The modern agenda of women leaders seeks Celtic support:

(Women) In the Celtic communities were phenomenally released into their identity ... the Celtic culture uplifted women ... they could be chiefs, they could be leaders, they could lead a tribe, they could lead a territory. A woman was considered an equal ... In the Celtic culture, a woman retained the rights to all her goods and all that she was. And within the Celtic church, the women were released into ministry and authority.

Whilst there were exceptions here and there³⁹, this is not the case at all. Celtic families followed the line of the father, Caesar talks of one wife being owned by 10-12 men (relatives)⁴⁰, 'the father was the master of the

³⁹ eg: Boadicea of the Iceni and Cartimandua of the Brigantes.

⁴⁰ Caesar, Gallic War, v, 14

house⁴¹, he had the power of life and death over his wife and children⁴². In noble families, the wife was under the control of the husband's relations should he die⁴³. If the death was suspicious, the wife could be tortured or killed. However, the survivor of a marriage kept all the property but a woman could not make a contract without her husband's consent.⁴⁴ Women were purchased for marriage and as concubines. We have already noted the place of women in Celtic society supporting the warrior.

It was an earlier society that maintained earth-mother worship and matriarchal customs. The culture of the Picts included pre-Celtic elements and, as such, had a matrilinear monarchy up to the mid-9th century AD.⁴⁵

Teachers extrapolate their own thesis mainly from the example of Boadicea (Celtic: *Boudiga* or *Boudicca* = Victoria, the victorious one), and rely upon the questionable statement by Tacitus that Britons were used to female war-leaders. Some even use her as a model for Christian women:

Boadicea was one of the great Celtic women ... we can be proud of.

This is more in keeping with the spirit of the age than the Bible and she was often used by supporters of the women's liberation movement. In any case, Boadicea's position was unusual and arose in extreme circumstances. She adopted her dead husband's position by default in a time of war and complex politics. Certainly she was a formidable and brave woman, but also full of hate, violence and bitterness as evidenced by the slaughter of non-combatants in Colchester (called: a 'bestial atrocity'),⁴⁶ and ritual sacrifice of innocent Londoners.⁴⁷ She is no model for Christians.

However, there were women Druids and the Druid order elevated women more than normal in Celtic society⁴⁸; hence support for women leaders comes more from a pagan religion than Celtic Church practice or even Celtic society. Celtic abbots and their disciples were often violently anti-women whom they saw as a means of temptation. Columbanus knocked

⁴¹ Hubert, p205

⁴² Welsh and Irish laws state this and Caesar also noted it. See Hubert, p205

⁴³ Hubert, *ibid*

⁴⁴ Hubert, p206

⁴⁵ Kightly, p38

⁴⁶ Dio Cassius in Kightly, p44

⁴⁷ Kightly, p46

⁴⁸ P B Ellis, p21

over his mother as he ran of the house to escape amorous local girls and never returned. Fiacra, in France, set up severe sanctions against women even approaching his land, those who did met bad ends.

Confused evidence

One talk begins by insisting that Celtic Christianity emerged out of totemism and animism:

They arose in an amazingly pagan culture ...Every form of totem pole and phallic symbol that you could ever imagine.

The speaker is somewhat mixed up here. Totemism existed before the invasion of the Celts, just as the megalithic structures did (eg Stonehenge). They progressed beyond totemism and animism. The Druid religion is more to do with divination and control than totemism. Celtic Christianity emerged much later, hundreds of years later.

Also Brigid is credited with the saying: 'a person without a soul-friend was like a body without a head', when in fact it was Comgall who said this.⁴⁹ Admittedly, these are minor points, but it reveals a poor level of research.

2. Doctrinal Aberrations

The authority of the Bible

There is often minimal direct reference of the word of God in the teaching on Celts. Not only is it not used as a foundation for the thesis at all, but there is sometimes an inference that Biblical doctrine has been superseded:

We're going to have to learn a new language. It is a language of symbols ... in the past, people were wanting to rightly divide the word of truth, now people are going to want to absorb the word of truth. The whole response to God is going to be different. (Immediately one is referred to the Celts for inspiration.)

... They were not in bondage to dogma.

Rightly dividing (handling, applying) God's word is not restricted to an outmoded past but is a Biblical instruction (2 Tim 2:15). Absorbing the word of truth sounds like a mystical notion of interacting with God on the

⁴⁹ Lehane, p107

level of feelings and experience instead of the Bible.

Doctrinal truth is further ridiculed in favour of symbolism:

We're going to have to learn a new language. It is a language of symbols. ...

Drawings were used (by the Celts) for kind of doctrinal statements. That would be great wouldn't it, if you went to speak at a CU and instead of 'let's see your doctrinal statement', they sent you a nice Celtic symbolism thing ... that would bless me no end.

What they presumably mean is that we must not be rigidly, legalistically and theologically hidebound; but here is a wrong emphasis against Biblical truth. Christianity is based upon propositional truth, Biblical doctrines; ie statements of truth laid down in propositional form. Jesus and the apostles taught this way, as did the Old Testament saints. Some prophets may have illustrated their message with object lessons, but no one replaced the message with something else. The gift of teaching and men who teach are gifts of Christ to his church for equipping the saints (Eph 4:11-12).

Paul's instruction for us is to:

Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me ... guard the truth which has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit. (2 Tim 1:13-14)

God speaks to us primarily with words. Christian ministry uses words. The Holy Spirit always works on the basis of propositional truth (he leads us into it and is the Spirit of truth) and inspired the writing of the Bible for this purpose. Doctrinal understanding is critical to our development in God and cannot be ignored without cost. There is no Biblical indication that this will ever be replaced by a better visual system. It is the world that uses visual teaching methods to meet the audience at the level it has been acclimatised to by television.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men. (2 Cor 5:11)

Emphasis on Tribalism

Frequently the name of Christ is only referred to in passing throughout these talks because the emphasis is on the Celts. There is no focus upon his person or his work. This in itself is a risky track to follow. Supposed blessings to follow the application of talks have been based upon receiving a 'Celtic spirit' not receiving grace from Christ.

Gather around this mass of people, for it is a time to honour them by imparting into them the new Celtic spirit.

Statements like this are dangerous and we will look into it later. At this point it is clear that a source of blessing is being pursued which is other than Christ.⁵⁰ Paul spoke of this in Galatians:

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different Gospel (1:6).
If any one is preaching to you a Gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed (1:8 and 9, twice mentioned).*

This Celtic spirit and attitude is supposed to work wonders. It is suggested that it is the answer to tribal rifts and national divisions:

I believe that the Celts may hold many keys to reconciling the divisions that have come in due to the persecution of Celtic tribes by the Saxons and the English (surely Saxons and English are synonymous terms? Does he mean Saxons and Angles?). Many of the divides that we see between the Irish and the Welsh (what divide?), between the Scots and the English.
... its the Celtic flow that will unlock the key (presumably door?).

The only key to unity is Jesus Christ. He breaks down walls of division (Eph 2:14-16). The only answer to national problems is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This continual focus away from Christ and onto a human tribe is totally dishonouring to our Saviour - and a hopeless enterprise anyway.

Just how is a rediscovery of the Celts going to heal tribal rifts? Are we supposed to feel that we're all Celts under the skin, therefore, modern tribal rivalry (ie Irish vs English etc) no longer matters since we've gone beyond the beginning of that division? That's what one is suggesting when he says:

A rediscovery of Celtic spirituality can tap us into something that proceeded all of that.

We're not all Celts by lineage, even in England. The idea of a mystical impartation of a Celtic character is superstitious nonsense. Apart from that, how does this help heal rifts between white and black, young and old, privileged and under-privileged. It sounds like a middle class pipe dream.

The irony is that the Celts were quarrelsome people by nature, who could not even unite to fight a common enemy, and raided one anothers

⁵⁰ Some would refute this and say that the term 'Celtic Spirit' is a synonym for the Holy Spirit, but we have no scriptural precedent to act this way or denominate God in British tribal terms.

lands;⁵¹ we cannot hold them up as the inspiration for modern unity! Ironically, the only unifying feature of the Celtic nations was Druidism!⁵² All the Celtic tribes had this priestly class and shared the common Druid based religion.

It is said that Celtic Christians had an agenda for reconciliation, but it seems to me that their message was the historic Gospel. Their focus was not healing tribal rifts as is suggested, but preaching Christ as Lord and saviour. Any healing resulted from uplifting Jesus. This is the point here, we are advised to focus on Celts, but Celtic Christians themselves focused on Christ. The saints of Celtic times preached the Gospel, not some romantic, idealistic heritage or other agenda.

The Trinity

Some state that, regarding the Holy Spirit, the Celts preferred the phrase: 'proceeding from the Father' rather than 'proceeding from the Father and the Son', and that they aligned with the position of the eastern church against that of Rome in this regard. The contention is that the Celts were totally Charismatic and did not want the Spirit subordinated to the Son.

Firstly, the *Filioque* clause of Augustine (Latin for: 'and the Son') developed in the fifth century (420). It was incorporated into the western version of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Toledo in 589 so it would not have been an issue for early Celts. The Roman endorsement of it came in 1017 and the break with the east followed in 1054.

The Bible clearly implies that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father in Jn16:12-14. Jesus says that *he will send* the Spirit in Jn 16:7. His function is to glorify Christ and speak of Jesus. The Holy Spirit does not focus upon his own ministry. We should consider this carefully in these days where he is receiving more attention than he would like. He glorifies Jesus not himself.

Emphasis on power not the Gospel

To the Celts, 'power evangelism' would have been a very common

⁵¹ 'The Celts were a touchy race ... easily exasperated in company. In addition, there were memories of old quarrels.' Hubert, p271. Also see Part One, p7 . 'Even a war-leader of the stature of Cassivellaunus could not hold together the disparate parts of the British resistance movement for long.' Cunliffe, Iron Age Communities, p308

⁵² 'the constitution of the priesthood of the Druids ... made the whole series of Celtic peoples into one cohesive people.' Hubert, p226 also p188.

and helpful term. 'Power evangelism' would have been something that they would have been very, very comfortable with ... the Celts were very, very comfortable with power ... the miraculous was normal.

This is a very subjective statement which has very little support. To assume that the legendary exploits of Celtic missionaries means that the average Celtic Christian was used to power encounters is weak in the extreme and is again reading a modern agenda into the past.

When the Celts encountered the culture around, there was always a mixture of exorcism and redemption ... they often saw the demonic physically ... they would have been very at ease with territorial spirits ... the Celts were happy with deliverance.

Where is the evidence for this? Other books have adequately tackled the question of territorial spirits so I will not enter into that here, suffice to say that there is no Biblical basis for the practice of evangelising an area by confronting demons first; neither is there indication that Celtic missionaries acted in this way and the apostles never had a strategy like this for taking the gospel to new areas.

Much of what is referred to here originates with Druidism rather than Celtic saints. Hubert says regarding Druids:

the power of the formula, the spell, even a mere poem uttered by a man of power, a Druid or a *file*, grew as time went on. The wizard plays a particularly large part in the religions of the Celts of the British Isles. Merlin and Taliesin are famous heroes. With them, religious power becomes magic.⁵³

The close contact with spiritual forces, as well as power encounters is a feature of Druidism. The cocktail that is being mixed is becoming a dangerous breeding ground for Druid practice.

Christian Warriors

A peripheral Celtic characteristic is the concept of the Christian warrior spirit, previously seen in Vineyard material, promoted by Paul Cain. Cain's doctrine is that of a *new breed* of Christian who will be an apostle and a *dread warrior*, able to inflict great damage to the enemy. They will also be invulnerable, and able to fly and walk through walls! This is derived mainly from the most fanciful and ridiculous interpretation of Joel 2.

There was a tremendous warrior spirit in the Celts ... the Celts

⁵³ Hubert, p245

embodied the warrior spirit and I believe that in these days God is restoring to men and women the warrior spirit. God has called us to war ... the challenge to the church is to raise up a generation of apostles ... generations of apostles ... we must prepare apostles for this nation.

We see no mention of a warrior spirit in the New Testament.⁵⁴ We are in a warfare, certainly, but the weapons of this warfare are spiritual and not earthly. We stand, having done all, not fight (Eph 6:10,13,14). Our attitude, methods and tactics are not according to the world. Jesus fought our salvation and triumphed over Satan for us but what did he do? He died on a cross. Paul talks of his suffering in warfare for the Gospel's sake in terms of a dying (2 Cor 1:8-10). This modern warrior spirit seems to embrace a belligerent, pugilistic attitude that is opposed to the Spirit of Christ. We do not need a warrior spirit, let alone that of the fierce Celts.

Pelagianism and Mysticism

They had great ... theologians like Pelagius, people like that, wonderful.

Pelagius was a British monk who taught at Rome and started the heresy named after him. This comprised of a denial of the effects of the fall and upholding the natural ability of man to be saved without grace. As such it totally dishonours the work of Christ. Pelagius was condemned by Augustine and Jerome and soundly rebutted. Some teachers say that he was rejected because of his views upholding women. Again the facts are sadly distorted. Celtic Christians condemned Pelagius themselves and called for Germanus to help eradicate the heresy.

From this come loose terms like *the divine spark* in unbelievers:

They looked to release the divine spark in the people that they were evangelising. They looked to fill out the life of the seeker.

What is meant by this spark is the image of God, but salvation is not releasing this image, it is a radical transformation by new life. This can be misinterpreted as the doctrine of mystics, currently much in vogue through New Age teachings and oriental religion; that is the releasing of what is 'divine in every man'. This is completely anti-Christian. The message of Christ is that man is lost in trespasses and sins and needs a

⁵⁴ Paul's injunction to 'fight the good fight' is literally: 'struggle the good struggle (or contest) of the faith'. The picture is not of a warrior fighting evil, not military, but of Greek athletic games, hence the NEB: 'run the great race'. The object is 'the faith' ie the struggle is for pure doctrine.

radical salvation from outside of himself. This salvation is provided by the atonement of Christ and is made effective in the individual when they turn right away from their previous lifestyle, believe on Christ and follow him as Lord. Man does not have a divine spark which only needs to be fanned into a flame. He is dead towards God and totally corrupt. A corpse cannot help himself.

3. Dangerous Practices

Ignoring the work of God

One speaker says that:

The point is that the Celts are a symbol that resonates around history ... the important thing is **not what God did through them.**

He is saying that the Celts are important to us because of what they did and what impact they can have for the church today; but it is dangerous to affirm that the important thing is *not what God did with them*. This leaves open the thought that it is really their culture that can benefit us, a thought that other statements encourage. Presumably he refers to their example as pioneers and missionaries. In which case that is exactly what God did through them. The danger is that modern Christians will follow a tradition identified as Celtic, and tap on a superficial resemblance without the power of God. We are warned to avoid such traditions (Col 2:8).

Yet this seems to be exactly what some churches have done. Supposed Celtic items like prayer-sticks⁵⁵, Celtic designs emblazoned on clothing and Celtic music appear to be encouraged. One tape refers to some of these items specifically:

- Celtic music is played throughout the talk, often a persistent drum beat leads to a hypnotic effect which is very dangerous. This is a pagan practice to assist production of an altered state of consciousness supposed to aid commune with God. Christians should reject all such heathen ideas as they have done for 2000 years.
- The leader says:

⁵⁵ Such items are clearly visible in the Meridian Focus TV programme. This is particularly worrying as it is not only a feature of pagan religions generally, but Celtic Druids cut sticks from oak trees to help their spiritual expertise. Hubert, p228. One of my fears in all this is that the way is being paved for the growing hold of paganism in the church in the most overt way. Some see a value in prayer-sticks as a visual aid to help prayer and meditation eg using thick sticks with feathers attached with symbolic meanings which are held aloft in worship times .

I believe God is calling us to again use the poetic and the visual. These shirts are a kind of a way of saying that. We need a new wave of fashion. Fashion statement, perhaps, being a prophetic word for this generation.

We are warned to shun all external and worldly ways of doing things (Col 2:20,8) and rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit bringing the grace of Christ to us to be effective. We have died to the world (Gal 6:14) and should not use its methods. We do not need a new (old) Christian fashion, we need to obey God. We need clear presentations of truth not symbols that can be misinterpreted.

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practise cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience. (2 Cor 4:2)

Legalistic superstition

We are presented with an admiration for a number of supposed Celtic practices. Many of these seem to derive from occult pagan Celtic spirituality, not godliness:

- they crossed themselves as they walked
- they symbolically drew circles around themselves to symbolise protection
- they had prayers that encompassed every area of life: prayers for getting up, prayers for preparing breakfast etc etc etc.
- they would go into the wildest places ... to encounter the wild wind of God
- there were many disciplines that they used to aid their prayer ... they used to go into the frost and pray in the snow so that God could keep them awake through the night.
- they would go and stand up to their waists in the sea ... interceding

These things are certainly not the norm in Celtic Christian life, some that I can trace belong to the period of decline after Patrick and before Columba. They are not models for us, but examples of dead, fleshly works.

Hermit or Community?

There is a wavering between advocating a hermit existence and extolling the virtues of community life.

- I believe the hermit instinct is present within this network
- Hermits are going to emerge ... the calling is there.
- As I looked to the Celts, I encountered an incredible challenge of community.
- God has encouraged us to build radical basic communities

Which is it? You can't encourage the average believer to buy into both.

The Biblical position is to build the church which is not a monastery (the communities the Celts established were monasteries), but believers sharing their lives as a family together in the body of Christ. In conversation with this speaker, I realise that what is meant is an encouragement for individuals to get alone with God for close fellowship with him, but within the framework of the church. Not well expressed.

Emphasis on symbolism

The Celts were full of symbolism ... very similar to the post-modern age. They had many symbols ... they communicated through symbols. We're in a post-modern society where some of these symbols are going to engage people ... God is calling us to again use the poetic and the visual.

While we should seek to communicate in the best ways possible, the message of the Gospel is a statement of truth, understood with the senses and acted upon in the heart. God speaks to us clearly and simply in terms we can understand; we should do the same. The Bible only records items in symbol for apocalyptic purposes in the New Testament. In the Old, symbols foreshadowed New Testament reality. We do not need new symbols to communicate God's truth. We do not need to utilise politically correct ideas on how to react to trendy ideas about post-modernism.

Worldly involvement with culture

We have already noted the encouragement to radiate a Gospel message by using fashion; Christians are also motivated to liberate culture, release it:

They were part of the culture, they didn't have to struggle to be a part - they were born in it, they flowed with it ... they saw the Gospel as liberation and emancipation for culture ... and God is calling us to get this thing right.

Let's no longer repress the culture and be fearful of the culture that we're in but let's go in and emancipate and release that culture ... they ... incorporated culture into their lives (sic).

The Celtic Christians did not make the radical inroads into society that is suggested. History is more replete with the image of Celtic Druids than Celtic Christians. Modern Celtic writers and apologists affirm this and deny any Celtic value attributed to Christianity. Whilst they may overstate this as unbelievers, it is clear that the reverse position is untenable.

What is it that culture is going to be released into? The New Testament motivates us to release *people* by preaching the Gospel. There is no mandate for changing society or culture, we have no goal set before us to release the world. Jesus' and Paul's comments about society were to accept it. God is sovereign and society, good or bad, is being ordered by God for his purposes.

We should not fail to influence that little part of culture which we interact with in our daily lives. We should not be afraid of culture and express our faith within our sphere of it. If we are musicians, we should use our music to affect those around us for the good in whatever we we can; but our goal is not releasing society, it is uplifting Jesus and sharing the good news. The only releasing of the world around in the New Testament is the deliverance of creation from bondage at the coming of the Lord (Rm 8:19-25).

The difference between the world and the professing church is growing slimmer every day. This message is unnecessary. One only has to go to a modern Restoration church to see this: the domination of rock music, often too loud and with an overbalance of drums, the slick presentation from the platform, the use of management psychology in leadership training, the structural principles of authority taken from world systems and not the Bible (where government of the church is by plural equal elders only) and so on. The current message that we need to hear is:

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor 1:20)

God chose what is foolish in the world (1 Cor 1:27)

Why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? (Col 2:20)

Do not be mismated with unbelievers ... what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? ... be separate from them says the Lord. (2 Cor 6:14,15,17)

Asceticism

There are repeated references to ascetic practices which are endorsed and even encouraged:

There were many disciplines that they used to aid their prayer life ... Patrick and Melrose, they used to go into the frost and pray in the snow ... other times they would go and stand up to their waists in the sea ... as they stood in the presence of God through the night.

...

I don't know how new Celtic hermits are going to emerge, but I believe that the calling is there. ...

Melrose, after a long cold night's prayer in the ocean having his

feet warmed by sea otters. Very interesting, I look forward to the day (ie when we will see such things). Mind you, I don't know whether we've got many otters left due to the way we've treated the creation who are going to be warming our feet sadly.

This sort of practice is not only discouraged but condemned in the New Testament as 'dead works'. It is by faith that we are to live out our Christian lives not by self-tormenting effort.

Let no one disqualify you insisting on self-abasement (Col 2:18)

Why do you submit to regulations, 'do not handle', 'do not taste' ... These have an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigour of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value. (Col 2:20-23)

Authoritarianism

It has been stated that: 'the Celtic model of the apostolic has much to release into us' and one is pointed to Columba and the monastic system as the example. We should be aware that the figure identified as 'apostolic' was the abbot who ruled with absolute power over all in his area, including ordained bishops. The similarities with the Restoration church structures with an apostolic figure having authority over many churches and leaders is clear.

The problem is that neither model has any Biblical warrant at all. The order of church government in the New Testament is that of plural, equal elders. There is no other rule. Gifted men are identified who may have input into the local body (like teachers and prophets) and others who may be sent out from the body (like evangelists and apostles), but the leadership is in the hands of elders, and even then the body itself has a high degree of say in affairs. The Bible is totally against one man dominating over the flock.

Monks were under the strict discipline of the abbot and the Celtic monasteries instilled a hard, ascetic lifestyle. Columba and Columbanus were not above pronouncing curses upon idle or sinful monks as well as enemies. There were many punishments, even for trivial offences: six strokes for not waiting for grace at meal times, six for speaking during the meal, fifty for contradicting another monk, even six strokes for coughing while singing a Psalm.

The abbot came to have a good deal of secular authority and was courted by the clan chiefs, and later by kings. This worldly relationship degenerated into chiefs placing sons into monasteries, who were

favoured and rose to the position of abbot thus consolidating the secular authority.⁵⁶ It was one reason for the later downfall of the Celtic system. Monks remained devoted to their martial expertise, just like clan members, and even went into battle with other monasteries. There are records of hundreds being slaughtered in these wars which enforced conscription on tenants and servants.⁵⁷

Wild Behaviour

I need to talk about the conduct which follows one particular talk and is captured on the audio tape. Some would be comfortable with this having been used to a Toronto type of meeting. The speaker of the Celtic seminar preceding the behaviour cannot be held fully responsible as the meeting was continued by another well known leader, not the speaker.

Although the parallel would be rejected, what concerns me is the similarity with pagan ceremonies and rituals. There are many points of contact: the whooping, shouting, crying, screaming, yelling, drumbeats, growling etc. The use of scratching⁵⁸ is also more in keeping with a night club than a church, in fact one Church was recently described in these terms.⁵⁹ There is no doubt that here is a meeting behaving out of control in contradiction to Paul's command for decency and order (1 Cor 14:40). Participants would see this as part of the freedom of the Spirit in today's Charismatic experience, but Paul's command is still our measure. The argument is just what is decent in today's culture?.

4. Spiritual Dangers

Encouragement to lose self-control

Some contrast the *Roman* spirit of control and the *Celtic* spirit of openness and adventure. What is meant is that we should not be manipulative but be humble and prepared to follow God. In this case the Celts are a strange example to use as they sought to dominate all of Europe and continually fought amongst themselves for power.

Leaving that aside, the danger in this emphasis is to suggest control

⁵⁶ Lehane, p103

⁵⁷ Lehane, p117

⁵⁸ Playing vinyl records backwards in jerky hand movements.

⁵⁹ Renewal Magazine Oct 1996

should be abandoned and releasing is a virtue:

We are going to have to renounce the spirit of control, the spirit that holds things in, the spirit of death that wants to impose power and to hold things. We are going to have to embrace the Celtic spirit that releases - it's the only way to avoid fossilisation ... we must resist the Roman spirit. We must renounce the Roman spirit.

What follows after this talk proves our concern in that this is what the audience actually did. They renounced self control and were released into hysteria. We hear whoops, cries, screams, chants and what sounds like a Native American War dance.

The Bible affirms that self-control is not only necessary in our behaviour, but it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. We are never to lose our hold on self-control. What progresses during this talk is actually very similar to pagan practices of all sorts, it is the building up of a passivity amongst the audience and a greater receptivity to hypnotic control. Now this may be unintentional by the leaders but it is clearly happening nonetheless. As a result, there occurs all sorts of uncontrolled behaviour, none of which is honouring to God who tells us that Christian meetings should be conducted 'decently and in order'.

As in occult practices, what the enemy is trying to do is gain control of people's minds by reducing their resistance. The deception is to do this in a seeming religious or spiritual way. The insistent drum beat, the enhancing of certain statements by crescendos of music, the encouragements to loose control and so on, are all pagan techniques. This working up of the flesh is necessary in religions that have no real contact with God and cannot commune with him in an instant like we can by the Spirit of Christ. All such working up of the flesh and lack of self-control must be condemned.

Impartation of a spirit

Throughout one talk some leaders invite the audience to receive a specific spirit which is variously named:

I want us to catch the spirit of Peregrinati ...

To catch the spirit of Peregrinati and the spirit of the wild goose ...

Gather round this mass of people for it is a time to honour them by imparting into them the new Celt spirit - the spirit of Peregrinati ...

A catching of this spiritual dynamic will heal us, and heal much of the sickness and the stagnation that we feel in our churches and in our spirituality.

This is defended as simply a reference to the Holy Spirit, just as much as

wind or oil. The danger is that there is an openness to something else. Although there are various symbols of the Holy Spirit, he is not addressed in these terms. He is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord or the Spirit of Christ. In fact, addressing God is always in the name of Jesus not the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

The danger is of impartation of unknown spiritual forces latching on to this loophole. It is common in occult movements, meditation techniques, pagan ceremonies (and recently there are documented cases throughout the Toronto phenomenon) for people to sincerely be open to what they think is God, but in fact, they receive a false spirit. Deluded people caught up in cults did not go forward to be demonised, but sought a better life, or contact with God. Nevertheless, Christians can clearly see that the result of the impartation is evil. Anything outside the name of Jesus is dangerous.

The *spirit of Peregrinati* is an allusion to the Celts coming from the Latin word for *wanderer*. It is a semantic reference to the adventurous nature of the Celts being derived from the same root as *peregrination*. Furthermore, people are also asked to receive the spirit of the wild goose⁶⁰. The same dangers apply. Yet further, people are having imparted into them a Celtic spirit; exactly what is this? We have seen the general character of Celts and such an ambiguous action is extremely dangerous.

Likewise, it is God who heals, not some spiritual motif, dynamic, or experience, no matter what it suggests. Our focus is to be upon Jesus, not some dynamic.

I have no doubt that this action can invite demonisation. There is no mention of Christ, no mention of the Spirit of God, the whole thing is extreme and hazardous.

⁶⁰ This is defended as a Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit, but this is not true. The main Biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit is a dove. Celtic Christians were aware of this and Columba means 'dove'. I understand that the Iona community have recently introduced the wild goose as a symbol of Christian Pilgrimage which is more fitting. Why ask for the impartation of the spirit of a goose if you can talk to God directly? Elsewhere some use the image of geese as symbols of a pioneer spirit when they fly off to another land. This isn't adventurous pioneering, it's simple migration just as our instinct is for heaven. The goose doesn't have an adventurous spirit, it has a migratory instinct; it is not the dynamic creature as suggested. We should never encourage folk to pursue a spirit other than the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

The inspiration of the Celts fits in with a modern determination to evangelise within a totally pagan cultural context which faces us all these days. We all want evangelism to be relevant. We must communicate or we will be ineffective. But how does adopting Celtic symbols and practice help communication today? People will interpret what they see in many different ways. A man waving a prayer-stick with feathers on is as likely to be understood as following the Red Indian Manitou as a Celtic god. It doesn't point to Christ. The symbols can only detract from a genuine message. Only clear presentation of the truth can be understood properly. The great danger in these methods is attracting people who are inclined to these pagan techniques and are not genuinely converted. Furthermore, Christ is our focus. Any deviation from him as the centre of our vision is dangerous and disobedient. He is the '*pioneer* and perfecter of our faith' (Heb 12:2; the RSV is more accurate here).

I have difficulty in accepting so much that is, in the end, superficial and belongs to the world - having the form but not the truth.

Some may feel that I have been unfair, after all I have subjected this new move to considerable scrutiny, could any of us stand up to deep analysis? Is this acting in love? Well I believe that it is. What is at stake here is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the truth of God's word. In defending this Paul was almost violent in his denunciation of heresy in the letter to the Galatians. We are called to *contend* for the faith (Jude 3). This is not an attack on the secular world, but a fight (that's what the word means) against those inside the church who are manipulating and deceiving people by altering truth (Jude 4); even if they do so unwittingly.

One talk continues, with support of others, for almost two hours. The listeners are subjected to droning music and hypnotic drumbeats and it ends in hysteria. All this time people are being pressurised to buy into the message with heavy sensual manipulation. Truth does not need this 'enhancement', or correctly, distraction. If a message is true, it needs no softening up of the audience. In any case, the Bible insists that we must use our rational faculties to test what we hear. 'Facts' with little historical basis are used to authenticate a spiritual message contrary to the Gospel. Yes, this analysis is necessary. Biblical truth must be the basis of our church experience.

We are told that this is the beginning of a new wave in the UK, the first taste from new wells. Already I hear of other churches having Celtic meetings of various sorts, and some are using outright pagan techniques. The emphasis on receiving a Celtic spirituality, a Celtic attitude, a Celtic cultural influence, including the artefacts and symbolism that go with it is completely unbiblical. Celtic culture contained a great deal that was occult, pagan and superstitious. Celtic art, jewellery and fashion represents this alongside some Christian symbolism. Adopting Celtic designs is dangerous unless you know its source and what it represents. The familiar Celtic designs come from a later period than the time of missionary expansion anyway (8th century) and were inspired by Syrian patterns. The true spiritual flowering was over by this time.

It is best to leave aside the elements of the world and focus on God's word. We are to have nothing to do with earthly forms and traditions. I have attempted to sound a warning with as balanced and informed a treatment as I can. The reaction to the new Celtic spirituality is now up to you.

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ. (Col 2:8)

Glossary

ARIANISM: Early Christian heresy which denied the divinity of Christ.

CORACLE: A small boat made of wicker work and covered with skins (Irish curragh). They could have sails as well as oars and carried between 1 and 30 men. A good light boat could travel up to 90 miles a day.

DIOCESAN: The system of church government based upon an area controlled by a bishop.

ODIN: The father and leader of the gods of Scandinavian myth.

MONASTICISM: A lifestyle practised by monks, meaning literally: *living alone*. They vowed chastity, poverty and obedience. As a movement, it spread from the East between the 4th-6th centuries. Latin monks lived in organised communes but Celtic monks travelled as missionaries or studied as hermits. Both were under the orders of a superior, called an Abbott. Celts, particularly in Ireland, shared the same spirit as the eastern ascetics (especially those in Syrian or Egyptian deserts) and upheld their values, and became key centres of learning.

PICTS: An ancient race, descended from Caledonian tribes, who spoke a Celtic dialect mixed with an older tongue. The word is Latin for '*painted people*' as a result of their practice of painting their bodies with woad.

SCOTS: Irish Celtic adventurers called *Scotti* from the Irish: '*to plunder*'.

TOTEMISM: Clan society in which kinship is constituted by a common origin involving participation in the nature of an animal or inanimate object.

British Tribes

There has been much confusion in the past about the derivation and meaning of words like Saxon, Angle etc. What is the current understanding?

Firstly, some names are interchangeable with reference to the people they represent during the historical period covered: British and Welsh, English and Saxon, Scot and Irish. Different names were given to the same people by different languages. *Scot* is the Latin name for the Irish, *Pict* is the Latin name for the British beyond the Forth, called *Cruithni* (British) by the Irish. The British, no longer Roman, called themselves *combrogii* (Lat. *cives*) ie 'fellow countrymen' (= the modern *cymry* in Welsh and *cumber* in English). The English (ie Saxon) knew both names and added *Welsh* (foreigner).

The continental invaders came from many different nations. In Britain they adopted a collective term: *Engle* or *Englisc* (Lat. *Angli*). *Angle* is a recent transliteration of the Latin word for English. Saxon became a collective national term but no one called himself that in his own language. In short, all the invading tribes (eg Frisians, Jutes, Saxons, Alamanni and Scandanavians) called themselves *English* after settling in Britain but were described as *Saxons* by their British neighbours. After a while, prevailing custom fixed upon their southern territories the name *Saxon* (ie western,

southern, eastern and middle). *English (Angle)* was restricted to the northern and midland territories. These terms do not refer to the original homeland of these people (eg Saxony or Angle in Schleswig). The term *Anglo-Saxon* was devised by 8th century writers to distinguish British Saxons from German ones. Later kings utilised the term but it was popularised in the 20th century to define the English before the Norman conquest. It is an inaccurate term gradually disappearing.

Secondly, the earliest name for Britain was *Albion*, known as such by the earliest Greek travellers. This was Albany, Albania or Alba to the Irish.

[See *The Age of Arthur*, John Morris.]

Concise Time Chart

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 312 | Constantine converted to Christianity |
| 395-430 | Augustine bishop of Hippo in North Africa |
| 400 | Pelagius at Rome |
| 405 | Patrick a slave in Mayo |
| 408 | Invasion of Italy by the Visigoths under Alaric |
| 410 | Romans leave Britain |
| 411 | Patrick escapes |
| 432 | Patrick sent to Ireland / death of Ninian |
| 447 | Germanus' second arrival in Britain |
| 440-50 | Start of Anglo-Saxon invasions |
| 455 | Vandals sack Rome |
| 461 | Death of Patrick? |
| 476-80 | End of the Western Roman Empire |
| 484 | Brendan born |
| 490? | Victory of Britons (under Arthur?) over the Anglo-Saxons at |
| Mt | Badon (Bath?) |
| 521 | Birth of Columba |
| 530 | Death of Arthur / Finian establishes Clonard |
| 540 | Birth of Columbanus |
| 558 | Brendan founds Clonfert / Comgall founds Bangor |
| 565 | Columba sets up Iona |
| 577 | Brendan dies |
| 591 | Columbanus leaves Ireland |
| 597 | Death of Columba / Augustine comes to Canterbury |
| 615 | Death of Columbanus |
| 626 | Conversion of Northumbria |
| 634 | Cuthbert and Wilfrid born |
| 635 | Aidan at Lindisfarne |
| 651 | Death of Aidan |
| 664 | Synod of Whitby |
| 673 | Birth of Bede |

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This is an update of a paper written in 1993 for a study group drawn from New Churches. It contains helpful background material as an introduction for people coming fresh to the subject. Some of his conclusions seem to be the basis for the subsequent interest in the New Churches and appears to be the original source for the term *peregrinatio* used for the concept of pilgrimage or 'the single minded search for God on this earth'. Chris is a co-leader in the Revelation Church which is led by Roger Ellis.

Meridian Focus Documentary, Meridian TV, 4 September 1996.

This programme is concerned with the demise of the institutional church in the UK, particularly South East. It's interest for this paper is that it contains scenes from a pagan 'Celtic' ritual and also several scenes from the Revelation Church in Chichester which endorses the New Church concept of Celtic Spirituality.

Anonymous Tape Talk given by a church leader in a well known British church network to a large group of leaders connected with this network in spring 1996. Many of the quotes on Celtic spirituality are from this source which is not named for the reasons given in the introduction.

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