Celtic Spirituality:
Just what does it mean?

Liam Tracey OSM

Ireland celebrates the Feast of St Patrick tomorrow (early, as it cannot be celebrated in Holy Week). But what would St Patrick - arguably the most famous Celtic saint - make of the practices and beliefs called 'Celtic Spirituality' today? Liam Tracey OSM examines whether the Celtic church was really anything like the romantic picture often painted of it.

In the week or so before Christmas 2007, Heritage Ireland, the body responsible for conserving and promoting Irish heritage, advertised that it would be possible to view the Winter solstice from New-grange on its webcam. This is where the rising sun over the Boyne Valley enters this famous passage tomb in Newgrange on the days of the solstice. Heritage Ireland expected thirty to forty thousand people to log onto its website to view the solstice. On the morning itself, the site crashed with the numbers who logged on, estimated to be well over one hundred thousand.

In many ways the public interest in Newgrange is emblematic of the ongoing interest indeed fascination with early Ireland and its peoples, not just in Ireland and among the Irish, but among people the world over. Allied to this interest is the booming business in 'Celtic spirituality,' from pilgrimages to holy sites to the latest utterances of contemporary wisdom figures. And then throw in the inevitable books, DVDs and CDs of alleged 'Celtic' music – it has become quite a player in the contemporary spirituality marketplace. What is so attractive about these long forgotten figures and cultures? Why has there been such a remarkable renaissance in interest in what ultimately is a small windswept island on the Western fringes of Europe? It's hard to know and one sometimes gets the impression in looking at the phenomenon that is called 'Celtic Spirituality,' that what you are encountering is a screen on which is projected many contemporary desires, anxieties and preoccupations, little to do with the past and more especially with the past of these islands. Of course, one of the major

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problems with many of these treatments of things 'Celtic' is the lack of historical awareness that groups all manner of practices and writings together, with little reference to the social, religious and political context of the past and a failure to note that the same thing, seen as 'Celtic' was happening right throughout Western Christianity.[i]

Much of what is found in these popular works is at odds with current scholarship on Early Ireland, the coming of Christianity and its development on this island, the growth and form of Church organisation and its models of pastoral care.[ii]

Two problematic words: Celtic and Spirituality

In any consideration of 'Celtic spirituality', one is immediately confronted by issues of terminology, in this case what is meant by the world 'Celtic' and the word 'spirituality'. The lack of agreement on what these words mean and signify is part of the wider confusion.

In terms of Celtic Christian Spirituality, one must be clear about its relationship with a concrete Christian community, i.e. the Church. The word 'Celtic' seems to appear ever more frequently in what used to be the religion section of bookshops but is now inevitably called New Age or Body, Mind, Spirit or even Lifestyle. These books offer wisdom on celebrating 'Celtic' ritual usually organised around the high days of a 'Celtic' calendar. 'Celtic' spirituality is presented in a very generic way but differentiated from Christianity especially in its Roman manifestations![iii]

So it is inclusive, earth-centred and therefore good, Christianity is exclusive, dualistic and therefore bad. Often this material is offered for those who wish to have a spiritual practice but do not desire a Church belonging.

The name 'Celtic' refers to an ancient people who settled in Europe between Asia Minor and the Atlantic. Indeed, the letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians is addressed to a Celtic group living in Asia Minor. These Celts were a warlike people with their own rich mythology. With the rise of the Germanic tribes in the North of Europe and the Romans in the Mediterranean world, the Celts were pushed further and further North.[iv] These people shared a family of languages usually divided by scholars into two groups: Irish-Gaelic, Scots-Gaelic and Manx on the one hand and on the other Welsh, Pictish, Cornish and Breton. That some of these languages have survived hints at their geographical location on the western fringes of Europe. Indeed, some scholars would see language as the only thing linking these diverse tribal groups that are sometimes charactised as 'Celtic.' Other common categories that link a culture are not found, e.g. a common creed, or a common king or even a common country.[v]

The Romans succeeded in conquering much of Western Europe and were also in Britain by the time of Jesus. While they never ruled the North of that island, nor Ireland, they succeeded in establishing a long-lasting presence in Britain; indeed, it was a colony from 43 AD to 410 AD. To this Roman society came the Gospel and later spread to Ireland. Perhaps, sometime in the fifth century, generations before the missionary activity of Patrick, there were already Christians in Ireland. In the aftermath of the Roman withdrawal from Britain in order to protect the centre of their Empire and the invasions of Saxons and Angles, the British Church survived and was able to evangelise Ireland. While many in Britain remained pagan and perhaps even the bulk of the population, the Church seems to have survived as the continuity of the Roman presence. These first missionaries to Ireland certainly were rooted in their Roman heritage but were no doubt also familiar with the new world in which they found themselves. Perhaps, there was a common substratum to their worldviews.[vi] The fact that these missionaries introduced Latin as the

language of the liturgy and of the Scriptures may well point to the Roman heritage of these missionaries. While little is known about these early missionaries they are certainly eclipsed later by the figure of Patrick, who comes to be seen as the national apostle. Indeed, the earlier missionary Palladius is later presented as a disciple of Patrick. It is difficult to say with any accuracy how long the evangelisation of Ireland took, or when we can say that Ireland was Christian. Certainly, contemporary historians note that the sixth century marks a radical turning point with a new religion, a new institution with the church; indeed the whole of the society seems to have radically changed. Some feel that the impetus for this radical change occurs with the introduction of new farming methods and a new technology that accompanied the Christianisation of Ireland.

Is the interest in Celtic spirituality today also based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Irish Church and the rest of the Christian world? Some see the isolation of the Irish Church as allowing it to develop a purer form of Christianity that in some ways reflects more accurately the early origins of the Church. This is seen to vanish when the Celtic Christians accepted, without much resistance it would have to be said, the authority of Rome at the Synod of Whitby in 664.

The 'Celtic' Church: what was it like?

Often one reads in popular accounts of early Ireland, that the church was monastic in organisation, had little or no contact with Rome, and was remarkable free from constraints that were to be found in other Churches of the time.[vii] Usually, allied to this idea is a notion of a confederation of Churches in these Islands, which form or make up the so-called 'Celtic' Churches.

> A common factor linking all these uses of the notion of a 'Celtic Church' is their emphasis on the distinctness and separation of the Celtic fringe from a 'mainland.' 'Out there ' things are different: times move more slowly, ideas take fantastic forms, and the learned activities are not those common to Franks, Italians and Germans, but of a race apart [...] However, this dream has had a pernicious effect on studies of the early Irish church, for it has turned that study into a search for the peculiar, the unique and the bizarre: what is common

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between that culture and the rest of Christendom becomes invisible, and what seems jarring becomes the norm.[viii]

In the past, great emphasis was placed on the monastic organisation and nature of the early Irish Church. The theory is that the earlier Roman organisation based around the figure of the bishop and some kind of what today would be called 'diocesan' structure was replaced in the sixth century by powerful abbots and abbesses. This monastic structure was also tied to the then political structure. This view has been considerably modified in the last number of years.[ix] While abbots may have set the agenda, bishops seem to have still held the power.[x] The pastoral care of the people seems to have been very much under the direction of the bishop assisted by his clergy.[xi] Monasticism was an important dimension to the life of the early Irish Church but it was not the global phenomenon that has sometime been presented. Indeed, monasticism was growing right across the Christian world, as Christianity was being introduced into Ireland. Patrick himself valued consecrated life and tells us so in his *Confessions*. But this monasticism was not the structured monasticism of later ages, largely based on the Rule of Saint Benedict. There was discipline in these monasteries and we have evidence of different kinds of monastic rules, but the abbot seems to have been free to mix and adapt these monastic ordinances for his own particular house. There is little in Irish monastic observance that can be considered unique. Certain elements are stressed, emphasis is laid on the ascetical life, at least when compared with the Rule of Saint Benedict. Irish monasteries became centre of learning and centres for the training of missionaries who went out to evangelise in Britain and on the European mainland. As is the constant repetition in this article, perhaps in the past these particular emphases on mortification have been sometimes exaggerated. Nor should the opposition between heroic Irish monasticism and the more moderate monasticism of the followers of Saint Benedict underscored by earlier historians be easily accepted today. Some monasteries seem to have mixed elements of Irish monastic rules with the rule of Saint Benedict. As Thomas Charles-Edwards has noted:

> [...] Columbanian monasteries were the principal agents

by which the Rule of St. Benedict was spread in Western Europe before the Carolingian period.[xii]

It simply cannot be held that all Irish monks were shining examples of heroic ascetical lifestyles. Many of the leading monks came from wealthy families and it would be a mistake to imagine that all of them renounced the privileges that came from their rank in society. Indeed, as has been pointed out by Kathleen Hughes, the remains of meat bones have been found in many monastic sites, which would have been at variance with the monastic rules.[xiii] By the seventh century Christianity is well established in Ireland and dominates the cultural landscape. This society was highly organised and within its hierarchy were many prominent ecclesiastics, who may well have owed their places in this societal ranking to their birth. It is presumed that Christianity did not disband the hierarchical structure of pre-Christian Ireland but rather inserted itself into the already existing structure and modified it for its own purposes.

> There never was a Celtic Church as such: there were great differences in development between Wales and Ireland but greater still was the awareness among Christians in Celtic-speaking countries that they all belonged to one Church.[xiv]

The saints

Key to understanding any Christian community, indeed any human community, is to explore who are the heroes of this group. Who do they look up to for guidance and inspiration, for example and direction in the business of living? While the saints too are pressed into service in the course of Irish history for various purposes, for example to bolster the invading Anglo Normans at the turn of the second millennium or to give honour to a particular Episcopal see,[xv] they remain heroes to the people.

Early Christian Ireland unlike other Christian communities did not have a large number of martyrs to venerate. The great monastic founders, Columcille (+597), Columbanus (+615) and Brigid took their places in popular imagination and piety. Storytellers told of their adventures and travels beyond the seas and their confrontations with wondrous and frightening beasts.

The emphasis on penance

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of the Irish Church to the Christian tradition is one that is usually ignored by most popular treatments of 'Celtic Spirituality'. That is the contribution made to the Sacrament of Penance and its codification in the genre of literature called the Penitentials, sometimes seen just as lists of sins and their appropriate penances, but perhaps more to be understood as part of the pastoral care of the Church. As Thomas O'Loughlin has noted:

> In stark contrast to this general avoidance of the penitentials is the fact that they are the most distinctive feature of the insular churches. They provide the one case where Irish and Welsh clergy were highly innovative, and actually shaped western Christian practice and theology.[xvi]

In the fifth and sixth centuries, right across Western Christianity, the normal modes of celebrating the Sacrament of Penance had broken down. The system of public penance that was normative for serious sinners, which was modelled on the system of the catechumenate and seen as a second baptism, was rarely practised. As this system was a once off, a singular second chance, many people delayed approaching the sacrament until the end of their lives. The realm of God's forgiving love and mercy was lost in practice. The Irish had their own particular way of dealing with this pastoral issue that brought them into conflict with other mainland Churches. The Irish drawing from their background in monasticism and the great monastic teacher, John Cassian, saw sin not so much as a crime but rather as something that impedes the development of a full Christian life. One's soul friend would enable one to root out such imperfection, very often by replacing a 'vice' with a 'virtue'. A soul friend is not just a relationship of friendship, it is much more one of mentor and disciple. Not unique to the Irish it became one of the most distinguishing features of their practice of monasticism. The goal of the Christian life is conversion, and to ever deepen one's conversion to Christ. The role of the soul friend is to help the Christian to remove what may be a block on that road. The penitentials began in this atmosphere and are an attempt to codify the teachings and insights of these spiritual guides. Yes, it does lead to an increasing individualistic sense of sin that has little contact with a concrete community. It moves penance into a more private setting but it does also see sin as less than a crime and more as a sickness that needs treatment and the intervention of a skilled person, the soul friend. Also important for the Irish practice is what seems to be an Irish tradition – that of reparation. This is where the offence to a person or a group is offset by the payment of a fine by the guilty party. Each offence has a particular price and it is easy to see how this notion could make its way into an already existing monastic practice. The clash between the Irish system of penance and the Continental ones may also be read as a clash between an older Roman world and a newer emerging North European one.

Place and its lure

One of the most striking things about some of these early Irish saints and writers is their attachment to their home place, be it their locality or more broadly the land of Ireland. For them to leave this place is to endure a kind of martyrdom, what in some texts will be called a white martyrdom. This influence of place is seen as key to the formation of identity, of making the person who they are and has recently become an important part of Christian reflection.

> Context, or place, shapes personal identity. Environment influences who people are and how they are in relationship to God, others, self, and the world. Place influences the things needed to be attended to in life for survival, work, or recreation (how food is found, how homes are heated or cooled, or how distances are negotiated to travel for work or play). But beyond these pragmatic circumstances of life that are dictated by place the imaginative dimension of human living and the construction of personal identity are also engaged.[xvii]

For many Irish Christians, the command of God to Abraham in the Book of Genesis to leave his own place and set out for the land that God would give him and his descendents (Gen 12:1), was a command they too were called to follow. Some went in search of a more solitarily life, others left to evangelise peoples who had not yet heard the Christian Gospel and some seem be searching for a promised land. It is hard to underestimate this important motif of pilgrimage for these early missionaries. It is Colombanus (+615)

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who perhaps most epitomised this figure of a missionary monk, part of the great movement of peregrini. Looking to the example of Patrick, they sought the salvation of many and a solitary spot of their own.

The lessons of the past for the people of today

Yes, there is much that we can learn from the prayers, the writings, the hymns and the stories of the Irish. But we must be careful to see that this tradition is rooted in a wider Christian tradition. Only by paying close attention to the world in which these people lived and the texts that they have left us, do we truly honour their memory and truly meet them and not a product of our own dreams. David Perrin notes that

> [...] in Christian Celtic spirituality, God, or perhaps, more accurately, the Divine presence, was recognized intensely in the workings of nature and was easily discerned in the landscapes of Ireland, Scotland, and England. For the Celts there was a sacredness to everyday place. The opposite is true in many cultures and settings today.[xviii]

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[i] Some credit this revival of interest in all things Celtic with the 1995 publication of Thomas Cahill's best seller, *How the Irish Saved Civilization.* In a helpful study Ian Bradley has traced at least six different Celtic Christian revivalist movements over the last fifteen hundred years, see Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

[ii] For a good introduction to contemporary scholarship see Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology. Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings,* (London: Continuum, 2000).

[iii]This is not a new thing as evidenced in a recent study, see Patrick Wormald, "Bede and the 'Church of the English'" in Stephen Baxter, ed, *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian,* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 223-224 n.1: 'It is difficult to resist the impression that what Protestant Confessionalism did for the idea of a 'Celtic' church until the 1960s is being done by 'new age' paganism, based on notions of some sort of "Celtic spirituality" supposedly distinguished by a unique 'closeness to nature.'

[iv] Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: The Enduring Tradition* = New Gill History of Ireland 1, (Dublin Gill and Macmillan rev. edit. 2005), 3: 'Exactly when groups of Celts settled in the British Isles is uncertain but it was mostly probably a complex process lasting several centuries. Groups of Celts came to Ireland both from Britain and directly from the Continent; this process was completed in the first century B.C., after which any disputes were confined to the islands. With the expansion of the Roman Empire in western Europe, Celtic culture became an insular culture.'

[v] Richter, *Medieval Ireland,* 3: 'There are no indications that the various Celtic peoples in the Middle Ages were aware of belonging to one family of languages, just as there was no sense of political or cultural unity.'

[vi] This point is made by Thomas Charles Edwards in his discussion of conversion techniques, see T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 202: 'It is worth remembering that the British missionaries in Ireland would have been familiar with a very similar array of gods and goddesses in their homeland; moreover, the latter were apparently given a treatment under the new Christian dispensation similar to that allowed to the Irish pantheon.'

[vii] This view is summarised well by Wendy Davies, "The Myth of the Celtic Church" in Nancy Edwards and Alan Lane, eds. *The Early Church in Wales and the West: Recent Work in Early Christian Archaeology, History and Place Names,* (Oxford: Oxbrow Books, 1992), 12: 'They imagine that there were common beliefs, common religious practices, and common religious institutions in Celtic countries, and that these were distinct from beliefs, practice and institutions in England and on the continent. They also imagine that the church in Celtic countries was distinctly saintly and monastic; moreover, it was individual, unorganised and the very opposite of Roman.'

[viii] O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology,* 20. Referring to a celebrated passage about the central role of the monastery of Iona in the Church found in Bede's, *Ecclesiastical History,* Thomas Charles-Edwards notes that this is often cited as proof that the early Irish Church was monastic in organisation, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* 241: 'Still more

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unreasonable would be the notion that Bede's description applied to the British Church as well as to the Irish, and that it constitutes a central piece of evidence for that entity-beloved of modern sectarians and romantics, but unknown to the early Middle Ages - 'the Celtic Church.'

[ix] A major impetus for this changing viewpoint is the work of the Oxford based scholar, Richard Sharpe, see Richard Sharpe, "Some Problems Concerning the Organisation of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland," in *Peritia* 3 (1984): 230-270. Also the important study, Colman Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth: Lagin Publications, 1999, reprinted 2002).

[x] What was different from other parts of the Church was membership of the synod, which was central to the authority of the Church in a particular region or province. Charles-Edwards has noted how the composition of Irish synods shows the complexity of Church organisation, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* 277: 'The composition of the Irish synods shows that the contrast between an episcopal and a monastic church is too simple. True, unlike its Frankish counterpart of the sixth and seventh centuries, the Irish synod was not confined to bishops. Yet neither was it confined to the heads of the great monastic churches. Instead, the synod shows us an Irish Church which allowed for several sources of authority.'

[xi] One model does not necessarily exclude the other as some scholars seem to believe, see Charles-Edwards *Early Christian Ireland,* 259: 'Good evidence exists, therefore, for two claims, apparently, opposed to each other: both that the Irish Church was episcopal and that it was peculiarly monastic in that the authority of abbots might override that of bishops.'

[xii] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland,* 384.

[xiii] Kathleen Hughes and Ann Hamlin, *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church,* 2d. ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 38-39.

[xiv] Richter, *Medieval Ireland,* 60.

[xv] This is particular true of the figure of Saint Patrick, see Richard Sharpe, "St. Patrick and the See of Armagh," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 4 (1982), 59: 'Notwithstanding the widespread cult of Patrick there is no trace of his connection with Armagh, still less of an Armagh primacy, until the seventh century. From that time, Patrician hagiography allows us to see the Patrick legend shift from a generalised cult to gain a focus on Armagh.'

[xvi] O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology,* 49.

[xvii] David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality, (*London: Routledge, 2007) 59.

[xviii] Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* 61. It is interesting to note, that Perrin does not give any indication of when and indeed where he is speaking about and how Ireland, Scotland and England are grouped together. It would seem that he is contrasting two different historical moments

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